

## Constructing views on students labeled with autism in inclusive classrooms: A comparison of teachers' perspectives between Korea and the United States

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### 《 Abstract 》

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This article is a cross-cultural qualitative study of educators in selected inclusive education classrooms in South Korea and the United States. It examines how educators construct the meaning of autism. The teachers' interpretations of students labeled with autism are similar in some ways but differ in others. The study is based on interviews with educators who have experience with students labeled with autism in inclusive classrooms at preschool and elementary levels in both countries. The data analysis uses the constant comparative method; derived major themes consist of constructed meanings related to inclusive education. Many of the American teachers interviewed viewed students labeled with autism as having different types of learning styles, whereas many of the Korean teachers interviewed indicated students labeled with autism come to be like other students through their participation in classroom groups. This study shows two different constructions of autism based on two different cultural backgrounds.

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**Key Words:** Inclusive education, students labeled with autism, learning styles, qualitative research, social construction, disability studies

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## I. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand how autism is socially constructed by teachers in inclusive classrooms in two different national and educational cultures—in the United States and in South Korea. The article addresses how teachers reconstruct the social meanings of autism and what kinds of experiences lead them to do so, in a context that includes students labeled with autism and students who are not categorized as disabled.

In general, as global awareness of autism grows, there is a need for more comparative studies. Meanings of autism vary across cultures and across time and, thanks to global communications, most countries are aware of practices in other countries. A cross-cultural base of knowledge is needed to set more globally minded policies to deal with disabilities. One reason for studying autism in a cross-cultural context is that cultures learn from each other's models. Biklen (2005) indicates the importance of exploring different understandings of autism in different cultural settings:

Qualitative researchers speak of seeking multiple truths. That is, I can study what autism means at this time, to particular people, in given contexts, knowing that my understanding may change as I become aware of other perspectives and I am affected by new experiences and contexts. I am obliged to welcome complexity, even contradictions, as they arise (Biklen, 2005, p. 3).

Understanding other cultures' constructions of disability helps demonstrate that the meaning of autism is socially constructed. Therefore, the ways in which an individual expresses himself or herself can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the cultural setting. How a person communicates or interacts with other people may be considered problematic in one context but not in another. This leads people to see that behaviors are differently viewed as special needs according to the prevalent social values or social ideologies.

Furthermore, according to social or cultural ideology, the weights of expected social or communicative behaviors differ. In educational settings,

which are culturally bounded, teachers' concepts of autism are socially constructed and "may be associated with their beliefs on the effectiveness of special education and the instructional goals of their practice" (Mavropoulou & Padelidau, 2000, p. 174). Purposes and goals in educational settings differ from culture to culture, and teachers' beliefs and practices are informed by their own cultures. However, these beliefs and practices are continually negotiated through their own understandings of students labeled with autism and mediated by interactions with them. Regarding the cultural construction of acts of communication, teachers' experiences with different students labeled with autism might extend over several years, their conceptions continuing to develop while they fulfill one of their tasks by teaching these students how to acquire the skills to communicate effectively in social settings.

This article raises two research questions: (1) How do educators at certain American and Korean sites construct the meaning of autism through their interactions with students labeled with autism? (2) What are their experiences with students labeled with autism in inclusive educational contexts? Rather than comparing generalized cultural differences, this article focuses on how teachers construct meaning in different cultural contexts. The concept of disability is arbitrary and differs based on culture. The understanding of autism in two countries will enrich our understanding of autism.

## II. Method

The overall methodological framework of this study is qualitative research and involves social construction theory and disability studies. We delineate below details about the participants in the study, the data collection strategies, and methods of analysis, as well as some limitations encountered over the course of the study.

### 1. Social Construction

The analysis in this study is rooted in social construction theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1969). Studies in the social construction of autism have shown that the conceptualization of autism differs among different groups of people such as doctors, parents, and people labeled with autism in the United States (Grandin & Scariano, 1986; Jackson, 2002; Shore, 2001; Stacey, 2003; Williams, 1992, 1996). These realities are constructed through interactions with the social environments around an individual. This implies that, according to an individual's interaction, his or her reality is created in different ways. Berger and Luckmann (1966) state, "What is 'real' to a Tibetan monk may not be 'real' to an American businessman. The 'knowledge' of the criminal differs from the 'knowledge' of the criminologist. It follows that specific agglomerations of 'reality' and 'knowledge' pertain to specific social contexts" (p. 3).

As we understand how teachers' interactions with students labeled with autism influence their perspectives on autism, we must analyze how their interpretations of autism are related to their cultural contexts, which include social ideologies. Berger and Luckmann write, "[T]he relationship between the individual and the objective social world is like an ongoing balancing act" (p. 134). With the passage of time, teachers' interpretations of autism, which are the result of a process affected by social and cultural ideologies, are reconstructed through interactions with students labeled with autism.

### 3. Disability Studies

Disability studies is an academic field based on inquiry into the meaning of disability and on a critical understanding of disability in social, political, and cultural contexts (Linton, 1998). The ultimate goal of disability studies is "to formulate the epistemological foundation for viewing disability as a critical category of analysis, the absence of which weakens the knowledge base" (p. 120). This viewpoint challenges the "medicalization of disability" and regards disabled people as members of a minority group

(Linton, 1998, p. 2). Disability Studies is about people with disabilities taking back the power to define and describe their own experiences and resisting discrimination on the part of the dominant, non-disabled culture.

According to Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare (2003), the social model of disability is the “central inspiration” for disability theory (p. 67). This model criticizes the naturalized view of disability as a physical or mental condition by showing how social environments create disability. It views disabled people as “an oppressed social group,” a minority group which has a collective identity and which experiences discrimination like other social groups. Disability is not an intrinsically negative personal characteristic *per se*, but rather, beliefs, structures, and practices in society create conditions that exclude or limit people with disabilities (Oliver, 1990). Barnes (1999) states that, regarding the social model, “any meaningful solution must be directed at societal change rather than individual adjustment and rehabilitation” (p. 27).

The social model is a new trend in disability studies that addresses the issue of physical barriers. It considers social environments to be of decisive power that can create disability. Social exclusion comes, according to this model, not from individual characteristics, but from external factors. Barnes et al. (1999) observe that the social model argues that externally established “obstacles” limit individuals’ possibilities of participating in society. Based on this logic, they argue, “measures of disability should provide a way of monitoring the effects of physical, social and economic disabling barriers experienced by disabled people— their social exclusion—and the impact of anti-discrimination policies” (p. 30). The external environment divides a population into two groups in a binary opposition based on fitting into a strict structure. A flexible environment—a possibility this idea presents us with, namely an environment that provides appropriate communicative circumstances and strategies for people labeled with autism —allows for the nullification of the concept of disability, or of deficits of communication. This compelling argument, which our study corroborates, reverses the equation of disability and finds the problem with, and hence the answer in, the social environment.

The dichotomy *disabled/abled* is rooted in social conditions, not only physical conditions, but also social norms. Physical environments in society

create barriers for some people; social norms or social expectations create invisible barriers for others. Buildings with stairs can exclude people who cannot negotiate stairs; likewise, social norms or social expectations exclude people who do not fit them. Schools follow social ideologies in order to educate individuals to fit into society, and educators of students labeled with autism reflect the ideologies of their cultural context. I am interested in knowing how teachers negotiate social ideologies in inclusive classrooms. It is important to know what kinds of educational environments or materials cause students labeled with autism to be set aside as disabled by medical professionals. The teachers' interpretations that inform this work reject the concept of deficiency in autism.

## 2. Qualitative Research

This study uses qualitative research methods. Stern (1980, cited in Strauss & Corbin [1996]), states that qualitative methods "can be used to explore substantive areas about which little is known or about which much is known to gain novel understandings" (p. 11). This study also uses some of the methods of data collection and analysis found in grounded theory research, which involves an inductive process of drawing themes from data gathered in transcripts, field notes, and memos. Strauss and Corbin (1998) state:

[T]heory derived from data is more likely to resemble the 'reality' than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation (how one thinks things ought to work). Grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action (p. 12).

There are few qualitative studies of teachers' perspectives on students labeled with autism. Through grounded theory, it is beneficial to know that teachers construct the meaning of autism, as well as know what they feel and what sorts of experiences they have.

#### 4. Participants

For this project, only educators who had experience with students labeled with autism at inclusive preschool and elementary school levels in the United States and in South Korea were recruited. In the United States, 37 educators were interviewed from one preschool and three elementary schools. In South Korea, 33 Korean educators were interviewed, and observations were conducted in two preschools and seven elementary schools. Participant observations were conducted in preschools in South Korea and preschool and elementary schools in the United States.

##### 1) Sites

###### (1) The United States

The research in the United States was conducted at one preschool and three elementary schools (E, L, and M) over the course of three years. The P Preschool, the E Elementary School, the L Elementary School, and the M Elementary School are urban elementary schools in Central New York. The P Preschool, established in 1969 by a group of parents seeking an alternative to public school education, is also located in a city in Central New York. This is a not-for-profit school serving children from birth to five years of age with a wide range of abilities, both in home and school-based programs. The school focuses on equal educational opportunities for young children with a variety of racial and ethnic differences and for children labeled with disabilities. It is well known for its inclusive classrooms. The school provides children with a full range of services, including physical, occupational, and speech therapies, as well as family support.

###### (2) Korea

The research in South Korea was conducted in two preschools and seven elementary schools in the summer of 2004 and the winter of 2005. The Oaksan Preschool, built in 2003, is located in an urban city in south eastern Korea and serves the children of nearby residents. There are 66 students, of whom 35 are labeled with disabilities and five are labeled with

autism or Asperger's. The staff consists of eight special education teachers, one speech therapist, and one general education teacher.

The Anjeon Preschool, built in 2000, is located in a middle-sized town near Seoul, the capital of Korea. This preschool also serves the children of nearby residents. Its student body consists of 182 students, of which a total of 30 are labeled with disabilities, five of whom are labeled with autism. There are 18 teachers, including general education teachers and special education teachers, and nine special education aides.

The Moona school district, where interviews were conducted, contains 11 elementary schools, located close to one another. They fall within the same educational system, because the Moona Office of Education supervises all the elementary and secondary schools in the district. A general educator usually teaches 40 to 50 students by herself in a classroom, including students labeled with autism. Each school has one or two special education teachers. Depending on the general education teacher's preference, a special education teacher may assist with students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Otherwise, most of the time, special education teachers teach students labeled with autism two to three hours per day in their own classrooms.

## 5. Data analysis

Interview data were analyzed inductively, focusing on what the data indicated with an eye to discerning patterns and dominant themes relating to relevant research questions. As field notes, memos, and interview transcripts were analyzed, attention was paid to matching and contrasting themes from teachers in both countries. Specific attention was also paid to examples that effectively represent these themes.

The transcripts were read over and over and coded sentence-by-sentence, noting patterns and themes, alternating between reading the American and South Korean transcripts. The data were entered into a computer application, N-Vivo, which found particular teachers' statements and matched them to the larger categories. My data were analyzed based on the constant comparative method (Stainback & Stainback, 1998; Taylor



& Bogdan, 1998), which allowed me to crystallize a few categories and to discover coherence in the interview data.

This study focused on how teachers describe autism and how they describe their interactions with children labeled with autism in order to understand the construction of autism. This study paid careful attention to nuances in the respondents' speech as well as to what they said. We drawn two major categories under the theme of the teachers' construction of autism: (1) Disability disappears (2) Confirming views on autism in inclusive education. These two themes are distinctively noticed as patterns for our question of how teachers think of autism. Even though We interviewed 33 teachers in South Korea and 37 teachers in the United States, their answers were very patterned as above based on the each country.

### III. Findings

This study is about how to interpret autism. The main themes that emerged from data are as follows: (1) most of the Korean teachers interviewed believed that the concept of autism appears/disappears given (a) an individual's interpretation, and (b) experiences with students labeled with autism, and (2) most of the American teachers interviewed agreed that students labeled with autism have different needs because they have different types of learning styles, and that they need appropriate educational strategies and materials. They are different in terms of learning styles. Teachers in both countries agreed that the differences in students labeled with autism lie in learning styles and in their specific learning and curricular needs.

Because many of the Korean teachers interviewed witnessed their students change their perspectives and attitudes, they realized that their own perspectives were also changing. In the interviews, they revealed that they originally shared the dominant, deficit model perspective in autism—but they changed their preconceived notions after interacting with students

labeled with autism and with students who are not classified as disabled in inclusive classrooms. On the other hand, most of the American teachers interviewed said that the perspectives they developed during their training remained constant, even after they started working in inclusive classrooms. They learned in their education that students labeled with autism have competencies, and they confirmed this through their experiences with, and observations of, students labeled with autism.

## 1. Reconstructing views on autism in inclusive education

### 1) Disability disappears through sharing experiences over time

Many of the Korean teachers interviewed made the point that students labeled with disabilities are like all the other students, which means that the concept of disability disappears, depending on how these students are viewed. For example, Lyu, an Oaksan Preschool teacher in South Korea, illustrates how she changed her perspective:

At first, I categorized my students into typical students and disabled students; however, now I look at them without any preconceived notions about disabled and non-disabled students. ... Now, I see all students in the same way. When I first started teaching in the inclusive classroom, I consciously categorized students according to their differences and placed them into two groups: disabled students and non-disabled students. ... I thought that students labeled with disabilities were different. However, as I spent time with them, I came to realize that students labeled with disabilities are like typical students. ... I don't know how my perspectives changed; it just happened (Lyu, 2004).

It was hard for Lyu to explain how her perspective shifted. In her mind, observing at the same time students with and without labeling broke down her dichotomous idea regarding disability. Lyu started her career as a teacher at a general education preschool. It was at Oaksan Preschool where she first experienced an inclusive classroom. When she was interviewed, she had already taught general education to students labeled with autism, and to students who are not categorized as disabled, for nine months in an inclusive preschool. She was working with a special education teacher in

her classroom. Probably, society had a key role in forming Lyu's preconceived notions of the disabled and the non-disabled. However, without any effort on her part, these notions vanished: "I don't know how my perspectives changed; it just happened." Lyu's sentiments shed light on how inclusive education helped her form her own perspectives on disabilities. By working closely with all students together, she was free to develop her own perspectives without interference from the prevailing ideas about disabilities that pervade society.

## 2) Disability disappears: They have their own capabilities

Another preschool teacher explained how her perspective on disabilities changed when she saw the abilities of students labeled with autism. Tak, an Oaksan Preschool teacher in South Korea, worked for seven years in non-inclusive general preschools before working at the Oaksan Preschool. Her concept of disability disappeared when she realized that students labeled with autism have their own strengths.

Before I started to teach students labeled with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, I pitied them. Before, whenever I would see them with my own eyes, I would think, "How can they have those kinds of disabilities?"... However, the perception disappeared after almost one year of working in this inclusive school. He [a child labeled with autism] was just one of the members of my class. ... I realized that a student labeled with disabilities is just one of my classroom members. That feeling became very strong. I no longer feel pity for him because he has his own capabilities, even though he cannot complete his work as well as his peers can. My perception has been changing. My perspectives on students labeled with disabilities changed a lot. My perspectives! (Tak, 2005).

Tak explained that interacting with disabled students for a year helped her reconstruct her ideas about autism. She sees all her students as belonging to the same group, which means that she believes that they should all be treated fairly and that none of them need special attention. By saying that "a student labeled with disabilities is just one of my classroom members," she implies that she could educate students labeled with autism in the same manner she would teach non-disabled students. The changes

in Tak's perspective are a consequence of working in an inclusive classroom. Observing students who do not have labels and students labeled with disabilities in the same context for a long period of time gave her the opportunity to see their competencies as well as their similarities.

While Tak's case is that of a general education teacher changing her perspective, teachers like Min, a special education teacher in the Oakson Preschool, also find themselves changing their perspective in the inclusive classroom. Before Min interacted with students who do not have labels, she thought that it was only students labeled with autism who had problems developing their skills. However, Min found out that students who do not have labels also face the challenges that students labeled with disabilities confront. "I thought that they [students labeled with disabilities] were not good at many things, such as using their chopsticks; however, when I saw other students in this context, I realized that some other students who do not have any labeling of disabilities also cannot do that. ...Students labeled with disabilities are like other students." Although Min is a trained special education teacher, she had preconceived notions about students who are not classified as disabled and students labeled with disabilities. When she was working exclusively with students labeled with disabilities, she was exposed to the various challenges they face. She did not realize that not all other students use chopsticks properly, which means that all students can encounter this problem. Not having worked with students who do not have any labels, she was not exposed to the myriad problems that students who do not have labels encounter. She idealized the skills of students who do not have labels and underestimated those of students labeled with disabilities. All this changed when she worked with both types of students in an inclusive classroom. Having seen the problems students who do not have labels face, she stopped idealizing them, which in turn elevated students labeled with disabilities in her view. This realization leveled the playing field, and now she sees them as alike.

Unlike segregated environments, where the group is homogeneous, in the inclusive classroom setting, the group is heterogeneous. This gives the Korean teachers interviewed the opportunity to perceive students labeled with and without autism in a critical way, because they can compare their preconceived notions with their new perspectives. In Min's case, when she

was working in a special education school, she worked with a homogeneous group. She had no other group with which she could compare her students. When she moved to the Oaksan Preschool, she had a chance to work with a heterogeneous group that gave her a more critical view of the students whom she idealized. Thus, one's "reality" is sustained until it conflicts with a different one.

### 3) Disability disappears through different educational approaches

While most of the Korean teachers interviewed carried with them some preconceived notions about autism when they began working in inclusive classrooms, these vanished over time. Another way many of the Korean teachers interviewed were able to shift their perspective was by changing their educational approaches. Jung, a vice-principal in the Oaksan Preschool, shared her experiences:

People say that students labeled with autism only talk about the one topic they are interested in. But that is not true. At first, the boy labeled with autism had that tendency. At first, he often said, "We have a Grandeur car [a brand of Korean car]..." Because he likes cars very much, he said, "[T]here are Grandeurs, the Grandeur is red ... I blah blah." He spoke only about cars ... whenever I came to him, he only talked about cars to me. He did not answer my questions. But one day, in his class, when he was called on, he answered appropriately according to the situation. This surprised me because I thought that he could not answer the questions correctly. ... [I think that this is because] during the second half of the semester, when his teacher did a roll call, she let her students make a quick presentation on a topic. In the past, he would talk to himself, but now he plays with his friends and does not often stray from the topic, even though he still talks to himself (Jung, 2005).

Jung implies that before she observed this change in the child labeled with autism, she believed that autistic characteristics were static. Initially, she associated the boy's characteristics—his tendency to talk to himself, his tendency to talk about only one topic, and his tendency to stray from the topic—as signs of autism. She believes that the teacher's educational approach could account for the change in the student's behavior. Jung talks about the possible shift in autistic characteristics as the result of an

educational approach.

4) Disability disappears through appropriate educational materials

Han, a special education teacher in the Chang Elementary School in South Korea, asserts that students labeled with autism can learn better, depending on the use of appropriate educational materials. Many people do not realize the necessity of using different types of educational models that are adapted to an individual's abilities. She found that students labeled with autism have their own abilities:

In my opinion, most people think that it is impossible for a student labeled with autism to learn in certain areas of education; however, I started with the belief that educational environments or materials determine whether or not students learn. Most people focus too much on a general educational model, and they do not think about how to provide educational materials to students labeled with autism and how to support them. When I observe students labeled with autism, even though I am not sure if I can tell this, because this just comes from my observations, I realize that they have their own abilities. Then, it is important to develop those skills(Han, 2005).

Han points out that how students labeled with autism learn hinges on whether or not appropriate educational materials are used. She implies that students should not be held liable for failing to learn lessons, because it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that learning is maximized, by providing suitable educational materials. People focus too much on the general educational model, and this is why most people think that students labeled with autism cannot learn in certain areas. She brings up the stereotypical ideas about learning difficulties that students labeled with autism face in the general educational model. She also mentions that students labeled with autism have their own unique abilities that can be developed, although the degree of development of their abilities might differ from that of other people. This means that many people measure the learning ability of students labeled with autism by the framework of the general education model, without considering different learning styles or different educational models. She thinks that students labeled with autism

have their own abilities, which the general education model does not fully recognize. Consequently, the failure of education comes from the use of unsuitable educational materials.

5) Disability disappears through changing the framework of understanding of different behaviors

Yan, a San Elementary School teacher in South Korea, talks about how the communicative behavior of students labeled with autism could be interpreted differently than in the deficit model. She points out that the categories of what counts as normal and abnormal are a matter of the interpretation of behavior.

Even though he [a boy labeled with autism] did not answer my questions and did not express what he likes or dislikes as much as other students did, the fact that he came to my classroom once in a while, opened and then shut the door - kwang! [in Korean, the sound of a door shutting] - and ran away, demonstrates that he is able to drive his point across. Other people might say that he doesn't understand what other people say or isn't able to communicate, make eye contact, and answer questions during class. People might say he learns slowly, et cetera, push him into the frame of autism, but I think of his behaviors in a different way. There are different perspectives. Some teachers heard a lot about autistic characteristics; they tried to match student's behaviors with autistic characteristics; ... they said to me, "Because he has autism, he often tapped on the table during the class." But I do not think that that is caused by autism. For example, when teachers go to teachers' training workshops and the courses are boring, teachers doodle. Nobody says that the teacher has autism, but when the boy doodles, teachers say that it is because he has autism (Yan, 2004).

Yan mentions that other people might say that the boy labeled with autism "isn't able to communicate." However, she interprets the boy's constant trips to her classroom as a sign of his affection toward her. She believes that by constantly checking on her, he was telling her—in his own unique way—that he liked her. She believed that the boy's reticence was not a disability on his part; but was, instead, an indirect way by which he conveyed his message. According to Yan, this should be interpreted as an

ability on his part to express himself. Although the boy demonstrated his communication skills through non-conventional means, Yan recognized this ability as functional, in that she understood what the boy was trying to convey. As Yan said, the idea that the boy was not able to communicate would not exist if the basis for interpreting the student's communicative behavior were not the prevalent one used by society.

The communication skills of a child labeled with autism can be judged in two opposing ways. A person who has little or no experience interacting with students with autism may apply conventional standards or norms. He or she may not understand the child's means of expression and may think that the child's communication skills are insufficient. On the other hand, a person who has known the child for some time will be able to understand the child's communication style, because he or she is already familiar with how the child communicates.

It is also interesting to note that Yan thought that most teachers who have heard about autistic characteristics explain a student's undesirable behavior as characteristic of the deficit model of autism. This idea can explain how a person's frame of understanding can limit or expand his or her interpretation of the undesirable behavior.

Yan talked at length about how the framework of characteristics of autism limits the understanding of students labeled with autism and ignores their unique capabilities. For her, autism is a term coined by people whose criteria for judging behavior exclude people whose behaviors are different from theirs. They interpret different behaviors as deficient and inappropriate. This is manifested in the classroom setting when teachers make negative assumptions about students labeled with disabilities. "Tapping on the table" is considered a sign of boredom, but once it is attached to any labeling of disability, teachers overlook the setting, and the labeling attached to students is perceived as the root cause of all their "problems." Yan implies that other possible interpretations of that behavior may not be considered, because of the dominant societal consensus surrounding what is appropriate behavior and what is not. This can interfere with teachers' abilities to genuinely understand and empathize with a student labeled with autism. In this regard, some teachers perceive students labeled with disabilities in a narrow and biased way. Conversely,



when students who do not have any labels misbehave, their behavior will be interpreted as a mistake that can be corrected. Yan does not agree with the deficit model of autism and labeling, because for her, autism almost always becomes an automatic answer when explaining the undesirable behaviors of a student labeled with disabilities. Rather than exploring other possible causes for the student's unconventional behavior, the label is almost always taken to be the reason, and all other explanations are ruled out. Yan believes that the concept of disability and non-disability boils down to interpretation.

As many of the teachers interviewed interacted with students labeled with autism and students who are not classified as disabled, they developed new viewpoints toward autism and different, less medical, ways of interpreting their students' behaviors. Many of the American teachers interviewed did not encounter a conflict between what they thought of autism before and after they worked with students labeled with autism, but they built upon what they knew about students labeled with autism. In their view, students labeled with autism have competencies, but they have different learning styles.

## 2. Confirming views on autism in inclusive education:

### Different types of learning styles

Many of the American teachers interviewed also saw appropriate educational approaches as an important component in making students labeled with autism active learners. Carrol, a P Preschool teacher in the United States, said that she did not realize one girl was able to read until she gave her harder tasks:

She was definitely reading them [new reading materials]. Then she could communicate with us, and we realized we were just boring her. We were giving her repetitive, basic little tasks to do because she had never shown she could do those [the readings]. But when we took those away and started giving her much harder things, well, she was awake and excited. ...We thought, well, hmm. And then we apologized to her all over the place, "I'm sorry we just bored you to tears, we didn't mean to."... We talked to her

about why we had given her the other tasks, and once we finally broke through and she was able to communicate, we didn't know. We didn't have any way to know. And she was a very sweet little girl, but that was a huge breakthrough. It was really big.

Carrol perceived the excitement the student showed and her willingness to communicate as educational breakthroughs. She believes that students labeled with autism can show competence and a willingness to learn when appropriate educational materials are given.

But who knew? We didn't know she could do that. We didn't know what she could do. But that really gave us a clue. When we have an autistic child who's really struggling or is frustrated or seems to not be paying attention at all, instead of making the work easier, often we take the work up a notch and make it harder. ... And see whether that works. And often it does (Carrol, 2006).

Carol suggests a different interpretation regarding the frustration of students labeled with autism. That is, frustration might occur because the task might not be challenging enough for the student labeled with autism, rather than being too difficult. The attempt to provide different types of educational materials can reveal the student's competencies. Carol's perspective is that whether or not students labeled with autism show the level of their abilities may depend on whether they are given educational materials which are appropriate and interesting enough for them.

In this case, the teacher's initiative to give the student much harder tasks was unconventional and serendipitous. It shows that she was willing to explore other strategies to understand how the student learned. This demonstrates that different educational approaches can reveal other abilities of students labeled with autism. The appropriate material helped teachers reshape their perceptions of the student. Rather than as a helpless learner, they now regard the student as an active learner.

This example contains ideas that are similar to Yan's experience in the San Korean elementary school. Yan said that she had a third grade boy in her class who had autism. In his IEP (Individualized Education Plan), teachers recorded that for three years he did not know the basic Korean alphabet, such as "Kiyouk, Niwon ...etc."; however, one day, when the

teacher requested him to write words instead of the Korean alphabet, the third grade teacher noticed that he was able to do it, even though the boy had not responded to teachers' requests in the past to write the Korean alphabet. Because he could not express himself, the teacher did not know he could write until that point. Appropriate educational situations or materials can reveal a student's abilities. Furthermore, it is possible for students not to follow the sequence of learning that other students follow; in this case, the boy could write words without demonstrating his knowledge of the alphabet.

In addition to an emphasis on finding out their individual needs, a teacher's understanding of students labeled with autism should avoid relying on stereotypical ideas of autism. Nelson, a P Preschool teacher in America, said that being able to identify and address the unique needs of students labeled with autism is the key to educating them.

Many times I have students that are considered typical in my classroom that are much more challenging to me than my students with autism. ...Having autism doesn't mean that you're difficult to teach. It means that you have unique needs that hopefully your teacher will understand(Nelson, 2006).

Nelson says that some students who do not have any labeling gave her a more difficult time than students labeled with autism. This goes along with the idea that students who do not have labels also have difficulties with learning in some ways. Kang, a Korean teacher, shared similar observations. There was a point when Kang idealized the learning capacities of unlabeled students; however, she dismissed this notion when she saw that students who do not have labels also face the same challenges as students labeled with disabilities. An elementary school teacher echoed the same sentiments: "The boy does not have any labels, but it is hard to teach him." This implies that labels of disabilities connote tough teaching challenges for teachers, but three teachers in this study are of the same opinion -that students who do not have labels also have certain types of learning difficulties. Nelson believes that having a label of autism is not a hindrance to learning. Her ideas resonate with what other teachers have said about the importance of uncovering the unique needs of students

labeled with disabilities. Moreover, she says that her students' ability to learn relies not on their nature, but on the teacher's ability to identify their unique needs and to tailor teaching methods to the students. Students who do not have labels may very well have needs that are overlooked because, even within the population of students who do not have labels, differences in learning style, pace, and capabilities occur, which calls for a greater need to tailor teaching methods. Students labeled with autism sometimes are not even afforded the same attention as students who do not have labels, because some teachers cannot get past the labels; these labels dictate how people with disabilities will be perceived. The point the three teachers are trying to make is that students who do not have labels also pose some teaching difficulties. Reasons for the difficulties vary -from students who do not have labels having behavioral or academic issues to student labeled with autism communicating differently-but the key to educating them is to realize that the categorizations of disability/non-disability and learning competence/learning incompetence are independent of each other.

#### IV. Conclusion and Discussion

Many Korean teachers interviewed were interested in the idea of dismissing the concept of disability. Many Korean teachers imply that the concept of disability in autism disappears through sharing experiences over time, finding students' competencies, using different educational approaches and changing the framework of understanding different behaviors. They said that they do not find significant differences between students who are not classified as disabled and students labeled with autism. As teachers discover the strengths of students labeled with autism and changes the framework for viewing different behaviors of students labeled with autism, the binary ideas of ability/disability are dismissed. Many of the Korean teachers interviewed indicated that the meaning of autism depended on interpretation, which means when many teachers see strengths in students

labeled with autism and weakness in students who are not categorized as disabled, they view students labeled with autism like other students.

During the initial stages of teaching in inclusive classrooms, many of the Korean teachers interviewed found that their long-standing preconceived notions of ability and disability quickly surfaced, but these teachers were able to rework and reconstruct these notions by working simultaneously with all students. Initially, they perceived that students labeled with autism showed traits very different from those of the rest of the class. However, as they all spent more time together, without making a conscious comparison, the teachers juxtaposed characteristics of students labeled with autism with those of students who do not have labels, and at that point, it became evident that all the students shared their own strength and weakness.

Many of the American teachers interviewed, on the other hand, did not talk much about their conceptualization of autism when they were asked about how they see students labeled with autism; rather, they focused on the necessity of identifying the different types of learning styles of students labeled with autism. Most American teachers in the sample said that they believe that all students, students labeled with autism and students who are not categorized as disabled have competencies and that the key to developing these is to uncover learning styles and learning needs, because students labeled with autism demonstrate their learning abilities best when teachers use appropriate learning materials. In other words, they do not believe that differences should be seen as inequalities. American teachers recognize the fact that differences are natural, and that they should be respectfully taken into consideration when teaching students.

Most of the teachers interviewed from both countries claimed that students labeled with autism represent their own competencies, or different types of learning styles, though this idea is more dominant in the American teachers. None of the teachers mentioned Gardner's different types of learning styles. Therefore, it is assumed that the interviewees just noticed different types of abilities in students labeled with autism. Unlike positivists, who see differences as deficiencies, none of these teachers said that the differences they perceived were related to deficiency and inferiority. Many of the American teachers interviewed saw the differences

as natural, just like the differences that exist between individuals. Many Korean teachers in our study noticed the differences as well, but believed these differences to be characteristics of individual students. Some Korean teachers kept telling me, “Other students also behave that way,” or “Other people also behave in that manner,” when they described the behavior of students labeled with autism.

Many teachers in both countries stated that it is important to provide students labeled with autism appropriate educational approaches that can meet their current level and needs. Most teachers in the study discovered a compelling reason to tailor their teaching strategies to the unique needs of students labeled with autism. They aim to realize that they have to implement a different educational model that makes use of suitable educational materials. This, they believe, is the key to educating their students, regardless of ability/disability.

Most of the American teachers interviewed believed that students labeled with autism can learn better when given concrete tools for learning or demonstrating learning, whereas most Korean teachers saw students labeled with autism as more active learners in an appropriate social environment. Cultural perspectives seem to intertwine with the ideas of most teachers regarding supporting the learning of students labeled with autism. The approaches differ, but each involves teachers learning to reframe students labeled with autism from being seen as less competent learners to being understood as more competent learners.

Understanding underlying social values is crucial to sympathizing with people’s cultural perspectives. Many of the opinions of the Korean and American teachers we interviewed seem to be very much shaped by their cultural values of collectivism and individualism, respectively. It is dangerous to assume that all Korean and American teachers embrace their own cultural values to the same degree. However, the dominant cultural values that each country subscribes to can explain some tendencies in individual teachers’ interpretations. An individual is likely to be identified as having the same characteristics or preferences as those of the group to which he or she belongs.

The remarks made by many of the American teachers interviewed reflect the social ideology of individualism. Individualism emphasizes an

individual's uniqueness, goals, values, behaviors, and self-expression rather than the collective characteristics of groups. Individual understands himself or herself based on his or her own abilities, attributes, characteristics, or individual goals as opposed to the thoughts, feelings, or actions of others" (Mortenson, 2002; Yang, 2003). Because the uniqueness of each individual is encouraged, there is no need for individuals to adjust their characteristics and attitudes to fit the mold of the group to which they belong.

As Biklen and Kliever(2006) mentioned, this study demonstrates that autism is socially and culturally constructed based on teachers' cultural values. Their interpretation of autism differ how they see students' competences. Also, several comments by teachers in our study from both countries are in accord with the tenets of disability studies, specifically the disappearance of disability In certain contexts and the tailoring of educational materials. This shows disability is arbitrary. Whereas the medical perspective is concerned with correcting individuals' behaviors, the disability studies perspective aims to analyze barriers for students labeled with autism.

The disability studies perspective demands that society and the school environment adapt to the needs of students labeled with autism. The specialized knowledge of experts, such as doctors and psychologists, about people labeled with autism has led to attempts to make them fit social norms. The positivist perspective interprets the skills of students labeled with autism and deems them limited, impaired, or deficient. This perspective on autism has spread and has come to prevail over all other perspectives. An individual labeled with disabilities has the responsibility of "fixing" himself or herself to have opportunities like other people. However, disability studies theorists and activists disagree. They argue that disabilities, rather than being viewed as the problems of individuals, are now being seen as problems of politics and the social environment. They assert that social exclusion comes not from individual characteristics but from external factors. In this study, inappropriate educational materials or environments exclude students labeled with autism.

This study indicates that teachers interviewed in each country perceived autism in their own way based on their cultural frameworks. This

lead to the idea of cultural and social construction of autism.

## V. Final Comments

The inclusive classroom setting played an important role in providing opportunities to the Korean teachers interviewed to change their understanding of autism; for most American teachers in the sample, it helped uncover students' learning styles. For many of the Korean teachers interviewed, with appropriate opportunities given to students labeled with autism and their teachers, the concept of difference faded. This transforming of the dichotomous idea is consistent with the claim by Bogdan and Taylor (1994) that "mental retardation exists in the minds of those who use it as a term to describe the cognitive states of other people" (p. 7). Once many Korean teachers interviewed did away with the binary concept, the categorization of "disabled" and "abled" faded away. The construction of the meaning of autism is crucially dependent on the opportunities provided, and the dynamic combination of time and context allows teachers to reconstruct their own meaning of autism. It is, therefore, important to create dynamic opportunities to observe students labeled with autism in order to understand them better.

A helpful strategy for reconstructing one's perspective on autism is related to time and familiarity. Many doctors and psychologists construct the meaning of autism in a limited context and over a short time period, which is not consistent with what teachers observe. In order to understand autism and the multifaceted nature of the concept, how students labeled with autism communicate, and their specific educational needs, teachers or educators should interact with them in different contexts for a longer time period rather than relying on brief encounters.

It is also important to observe students labeled with autism over a long period of time. Many of the Korean teachers interviewed stated that they learned to recognize the competence of students labeled with autism as time went by. From many teachers' experience, we can surmise that



people should not draw quick conclusions regarding students' performances, as students labeled with autism may take longer to display educational outcomes.

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## 통합교육 현장에서 자폐아동에 대한 인식 재구성: 한국과 미국 교사인식의 비교

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### <초 록>

본 연구는 유치원과 초등학교에서 자폐로 진단된 아동들을 통합교육 현장에서 지도해 본 경험이 있는 한국과 미국의 교사들을 인터뷰한 자료에 기초한 질적연구이다. 연구자들은 이를 근거로 하여 각 나라 교사들이 자폐로 진단된 아동들에 대한 인식을 어떻게 구성하는지 알아보고자 하였다. 연구결과 한국과 미국의 교사들은 자폐진단을 해석하는 방식이나 자폐아동의 능력에 대한 관점에서 차이점과 유사점을 보여주었다. 주요 차이점은 많은 미국 교사들은 자폐로 진단된 아동들을 다른 학습 스타일을 가지고 있는 아동으로 이해한 반면 한국 교사들은 그들을 장애를 가진 것으로 진단받지 않은 아동들과 많은 점에서 유사점을 가진 아동들로 인식한다는 사실이었다. 이 결과는 자폐라는 정의가 특정 사회적 상황에서 일어나는 사회적 상호작용을 통해 형성되는 상대적인 개념이라는 사회구성주의 이론을 입증한다고 할 수 있다.

**주제어 :** 통합교육, 자폐로 진단된 아동, 학습스타일, 질적 연구, 사회구성주의 이론, 장애학

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