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North Korean refugee students' strategy of school engagement and its impact on identity in South Korea: "aspration towards an inter-Korean identity through a process of being one of them."

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ABSTRACT

As of December 2023, 34078 North Korean refugees live in South Korea, raising concerns about social exclusion and marginalization. A Straussian grounded theory study analysed the experiences of 17 female North Korean refugees in South Korea, highlighting a disparity between their legal rights and everyday participation, especially in education. Educational inequality for North Korean refugee students persists, stemming from academic deficits and institutional barriers. To cope, they employ a strategy of 'being one of them', aiming to blend in as South Korean peers while concealing their heritage. This approach fosters confidence and supportive relationships, aspiring the development of an inter-Korean identity that values their North Korean heritage and embraces a sense of belonging in South Korea. The study sheds light on the necessity of adopting a social perspective in multicultural education, emphasizing the importance of intergroup dialogue in promoting inclusive representation of North Korean refugee students within the educational setting.

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In today's globalized world, an increasing number of people reside in a country other than their country of origins. According to the World Migration Report, as of 2020, there were approximately 281 million alongside 26 million refugees globally (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). This demographic shift has changed cultural and linguistic composition in classrooms, while challenging schools to be inclusive for all students (Benediktsson, 2022). However, race-related inequality persists in education (Kaplowitz et al., 2023), highlighting the importance of multicultural education in ensuring educational equality for students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Banks, 1993).

This study investigates the experiences of North Korean refugees in South Korea, where, in 2023, 34078 North Korean refugees resided (Ministry of Unification of ROK, n. d.). Despite being granted citizenship upon arrival (Lankov, 2006), concerns persist about

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their social exclusion and marginalization, stemming from cultural differences (Jo & Ha, 2018) and anti-North Korean sentiments (Hough & Bell, 2020). Notably, approximately 12% of them are school-aged (Y. Kim et al., 2015), facing challenges in adapting to the South Korean educational system due to academic deficits (Choi, 2011), insufficient parental support (H. Kim & Hocking, 2018), and institutional barriers (Lee, 2014). While existing studies on North Korean refugees primarily focus on acculturation process and associated health disorders (Emery et al., 2015; K. Park, 2010; Song, 2015), the exploration of North Korean refugee students in South Korea remains largely uncharted. Using a symbolic interactionism lens, which posits that individuals construct their identity through social interaction (Blumer, 1969), this study aims to examine how these students engage in school and its impact on their identity within the host society.

The paper explores the experiences of North Korean refugees in South Korea, specifically examining their experiences in schools. It begins by discussing multicultural education in South Korea and investigates the educational experiences of North Korean refugee students within this framework. Next, this paper presents symbolic interactionism that theoretically guides this study. The methods used for data collection and analysis are explained, followed by presentation of the findings titled 'aspiration towards an inter-Korean identity through a process of being one of them.' This concept encapsulates the strategy employed by North Korean refugee to integrate into schools and captures the life meaning in the host society. Finally, the benefits of intergroup dialogue in promoting educational equality are considered.

Multicultural Education in South Korea

In today's era, where 'ethnic homogeneity is a thing of the past' (J. Kim, 2021, p. 326), it is imperative for schools to cultivate inclusivity for all students, regardless of their backgrounds (Banks, 1995). This imperative calls for multicultural education, which asserts 'the right to equal opportunity in education' (S. Kang, 2010, p. 288), rooted in the belief that 'education is … a treasure every child earns simply by being born' (Ayers, 2015, p. 249). Since its emergence during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, despite some ambiguity surrounding its concepts and objectives (Eldering, 1996; Kahn, 2008), the primary goal of multicultural education is to achieve educational equality among students, irrespective of their racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Banks and Banks (2001, cited in Kahn, 2008) describe multicultural education as:

> An educational reform movement … whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that … students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic, language, and cultural groups will have an equal chance to achieve academically in school. (p. 529)

Multicultural education aims for the universal right to education for all students (Banks, 1993), guided by 'the principles of democracy, equality, human rights and social justice' (J. Kim, 2014, p. 403). It serves as an educational reform that promotes the academic achievement of multicultural students and, simultaneously, helps all students appreciate cultural diversity (Eldering, 1996; Kahn, 2008). In this sense, given the ongoing demographic changes in society, the role of multicultural education is paramount for educational equality in South Korea, a nation that was once known as a racially homogenous

society (S. Kang, 2010), but has witnessed significant changes in its ethnic landscape in recent decades due to the influx of foreign brides and workers.

As of 2022, nearly 2.2 million people born overseas resided in South Korea (Ministry of Justice of ROK, n.d.), and this number is expected to keep growing since the government considers immigration to address its dire population crisis resulting from low birth rates (Y. Kang, 2023). In line with this demographic change in society, a group of *'Damunhwa'* students emerged in South Korea in the 2000s, referring to multicultural students (Jang, 2023). According to the 2022 national educational data, 168,645 multicultural students attended schools, comprising 3.2% of the student population in South Korea (Ministry of Education of ROK, 2022). This figure illustrates the changing ethnic composition in classrooms, where the principle of pure-blood has historically dominated (Choo, 2006).

In response to this demographic change, multicultural education has been implemented since the 2000s, seeking a culturally relevant pedagogy (J. Kim, 2021), with a slogan stating, 'understanding of cultural diversity and respecting for differences … are core competencies that every student should acquire' (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2012, p. 6). Since the 2000s, South Korean schools have made various efforts to improve the academic achievement of multicultural students while fostering positive attitudes related to cultural diversity. Currently, South Korea classifies multicultural students into three groups: 'foreign workers', 'marriage immigrants' (foreigners marrying Koreans), and 'North Korean refugees' (Ministry of Education of ROK, 2022). Some students are 'ethnically Korean and linguistically hybrid', or 'ethnically hybrid and linguistically Korean', while others are 'ethnically and linguistically Korean' (Jang, 2023), justifying their respective needs in schools.

However, despite government efforts towards achieving educational equality for multicultural students, reports suggest that South Korea's multicultural education remains at a superficial level (J. Kim, 2021). It is primarily practiced through top-down approaches (Jang, 2023), hindered by educators' limited multicultural acceptability (J. Kim & Jeon, 2017) and readiness (S. Kim & Kim, 2012). J. Kim (2014) acknowledges that 'intensity and volume of multicultural programs [in Korea] are impressive' (p. 401) but pointed out the gap between intentions and realities, as government actions surpass the reality of multicultural society. Furthermore, the primary focus of multicultural education in South Korea is to accelerate the assimilation of these students (J. Kim, 2021). This concern is closely related to schools' perceiving cultural and linguistic differences as deficits (J. Kim, 2014) and considering multicultural students as sources of dysfunctions (Jang, 2023). South Korean education also emphasizes strong national homogeneity (Chang, 2017), often portraying distorted images of other cultures (J. Kim & Jeon, 2017), leading to the dehumanization of multicultural students (Hong, 2010). S. Kim and Kim (2012) argue that;

> Attempts at multicultural education [Korea] are aimed in only one direction: to better assimilate multicultural families and biracial children to Korean culture … What is lacking is a broader curriculum that aims to teach all Koreans to better understand and appreciate cultural differences. (p. 249)

In the discourse on multicultural education, persistent concerns revolve around racial conflicts and institutional inequalities (Kaplowitz et al., 2023), issues further compounded by the inadequate preparation of schools (Gay, 2002). South Korea is not exempt from

these concerns, as a combination of factors, such as insufficient proficiency in the Korean language, teacher's lack of readiness, and discriminatory practices (Jang, 2023; S. Kang, 2010; J. Kim, 2021), collectively erect educational barriers for multicultural students. This situation often results in lower academic success for many of these students (S. Kim & Kim, 2012), contributing to psychological distress, higher drop-out rates, feelings of alienation from society, and frustration about their future (Hong, 2010; S. Kang, 2010). There is an argument that multicultural education in South Korea unintentionally perpetuates social inequality and cultural hierarchy (J. Kim, 2014), underscoring the necessity for a critical reshaping and establishment within the framework of social equity and integration (J. Kim & Jeon, 2017).

North Korean Refugee students' Experiences in South Korea

Due to the strong stance on the reunification of the two Koreas, the South Korean Constitution designates North Korea as illegally occupied territory by its regime (Hough, 2022). Consequently, any North Korean individuals automatically receive South Korean citizenship upon arrival, making South Korea an attractive destination for many North Korean refugees, who face human trafficking, exploitation, and fear repatriation to North Korea, particularly due to China's denial of their refugee status (Emery et al., 2015; Nam et al., 2021; Sung & Go, 2014).

As of December 2023, 34078 North Korean refugees lived in South Korea, with 72% being female (Ministry of Unification of ROK, n.d.). The reasons for leaving North Korea have evolved over time, with initial waves driven by food insecurity in the 1990s (Y. Kim et al., 2015). Nowadays, the desire for social advancement largely influences their decision (M. Park, 2022). Consequently, the North Korean refugee community in South Korea exhibits diverse characteristics, ranging from impoverished and undereducated individuals in the late 1990s (K. Park, 2010) to middle-class individuals seeking a better quality of life in recent years (H. Kim & Hocking, 2018).

To support the transition of North Korean refugees, the South Korean government offers various assistance programmes. Upon arrival, they undergo a three-month programme at Hanawon, a state-run facility, to learn about life in South Korea (J. Kim et al., 2016). Afterwards, they receive state-housing, a weekly allowance, and assistance from NGO volunteers to reconnect with local resources. Continuous support is available through 25 local Hana centres, including regular meetings with social workers and educational/vocational support (Ministry of Unification of ROK, n.d.). These measures aim to bridge cultural differences (M. Park, 2022) and promote economic independence (H. Kim & Hocking, 2018) for North Korean refugees in South Korea.

Approximately 12% of North Korean refugees in South Korea are school-aged (Y. Kim et al., 2015), presenting challenges for the educational system. These challenges include academic deficits during the asylum period, differences in the curriculum between the two Koreas, and insufficient proficiency in South Korean dialects (Choi, 2011; M. Park, 2022). As of 2022, there were 2,061 North Korean refugee students enrolled in schools, including elementary (522), middle (659), high school (725), and alternative schools (155) (Ministry of Education of ROK, 2022). These students receive various forms of supports to facilitate their educational transition and enhance their academic success.

During their stay at Hanawon, primary school-aged refugees participate in after-school programmes at public schools, while middle/high school-aged refugees attend separate schools to become acquainted with the South Korean curriculum. Hanawon also provides instruction in standard South Korean pronunciation and basic English (M. Park, 2022). After this, they have two educational options: enrolling in public schools that prioritize academic adaptation through additional tutoring or choosing alternative schools that offer customized support specific to defection experiences (Jones et al., 2023). For higher education, North Korean refugee students receive preferential admission to universities on a non-competitive basis (Sung & Go, 2014).

While school serves as a platform for integration for North Korean refugee students (Lee, 2014), fostering confidence as members of South Korean society, many often encounter challenges in adjusting to the South Korean educational system, leading to frustration and stress. These difficulties arise from structural differences in the curriculum between the two Koreas' educational systems (Choi, 2011). Additional factors contributing to these challenges include post-traumatic stress disorders (Jue & Kim, 2014), cultural and linguistic differences (M. Park, 2022), disparities in the South Korean educational curriculum (Jones et al., 2023), insufficient parental support and social isolation (H. Kim & Hocking, 2018), stereotypes and discrimination (Emery et al., 2015), academic deficits during their asylum period (Choi, 2011), and teachers' inability to address their specific needs (Lee, 2014).

Under such difficulties, many North Korean refugee students demonstrate low academic achievement (Y. Kim et al., 2015) and reduced self-esteem (Jones et al., 2023). As a result, their dropout rate is 12 times higher than that of the South Korean students (Lee, 2014), limiting their opportunities for social mobility (Jeong & Kim, 2016) and increasing the likelihood of ending up in lower social and economic classes (Jue & Kim, 2014). This situation leads to feelings of marginalization (H. Kim & Hocking, 2018), alienation (Choi, 2011), and frustration about their future prospects in South Korea (S. Kang, 2010). Concerns persist regarding the participation of North Korean refugee students in South Korean society, contributing to their social exclusion and subsequent low life satisfaction in South Korea.

The maladaptation experienced by many North Korean refugee students is deeply embedded within social contexts. It is crucial to understand their school experiences not only from a health perspective, such as their traumatic experiences during the defection process, anxiety, depression, and identity crisis (Jue & Kim, 2014; Y. Kim, 2016; Y. Kim et al., 2015; Noh et al., 2018) but also from a social perspective. This involves acknowledging their unequal citizenship (Hough, 2022) within the framework of anti-North Korean sentiments (Hough & Bell, 2020). Accordingly, the primary questions of this study are as follows:

(1) Activities engaged in by North Korean refugee students to interact with peers in school
(2) Challenges encountered during the performance of these activities
(3) Strategies employed by these students to deal with these challenges
(4) The significance and meaning attached to these activities

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism provides the theoretical foundation for this study, positing that 'objects are not inherently meaningful' (Marvasti, 2006, p. 529). Meaning is attributed to objects as individuals interpret them through interactions with others, facilitated by shared symbols (Blumer, 1969). In this context, the self, viewed as an object, is also constructed through social interactions (Charon, 2010). This concept aligns with the idea that refugees shape their own destiny (Ludwig, 2013), particularly evident in school environments for refugee students' sense of self (Apple, 2012). Grounded in this perspective, this study delves into North Korean refugee students, exploring the meanings derived from interactions with peers and their self-development in the host society.

Symbolic interactionism highlights a process in which individuals construct their experiential worlds (Denzin, 1992). Importantly, meaning emerges through individuals' interpretations cultivated by social interaction, particularly when habitual responses fail (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This perspective justifies the selection of grounded theory, broadly defined as a methodology for examining human actions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in this study.

Methodology

This study employs grounded theory, theoretically rooted in symbolic interactionism (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory suggests that individuals actively respond to situations based on the interpretation they construct through social interaction (Strauss, 1987). Thus, action is central to understanding human life (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Analysis focuses on understanding actions, their causes, consequences, one's own perception of actions, and the perception of other's actions from the actor's perspective (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this way, grounded theory helps to understand individuals' experiences, as they are grounded in reality.

Straussian grounded theory, in particular, guides the data analysis by incorporating the larger context of people's actions (Corbin et al., 2009). It highlights the ongoing interactions between individuals and society (Strauss, 1987) since individuals' reality is socially constructed within a context (Marvasti, 2006). Considering that refugees' experiences inevitably unfold within specific contexts (H. Kim & Hocking, 2018), including societal factors in the analysis is relevant to this study. Straussian grounded theory helps capturing how refugees navigate everyday life at individual and societal levels in new settings. The study received ethically approval from Massey University, New Zealand in 2022 (ref. SOB 22/8).

Recruitment

Participants were initially sought using purposive sampling (Victor, 2006). The authors approached the 'Mulmangcho' Foundation, which supports North Korean refugees in South Korea, given the close-knit nature of the community. Study information was circulated through the Foundation's networks, and potential participants contacted the authors. Four participants, representing the characteristics of North Korean refugees in South Korea, were recruited from this pool.

Table 1. Participants' demographic characteristics.

Name	Age	Arrival in South Korea	Marital status	Family or relatives already living in South Korea	Employment status	Experience in public schools (P/M/High school)	City or province in South Korea
Yungsook	23	2013	Single	Y	University student	Y (Student)	Gyeonggi-do
Yongja	54	2011	Widow	Y	Employed (part time)	Y (Parent)	Seoul
Misook	37	2014	Divorced	Y	University student	Y (Parent)	Seoul
Sookhee	46	2010	Divorced	Y	Employed (part time)	Y (Parent)	Seoul
Jungja	20	2016	Single	Y	University Student	Y (Student)	Seoul
Sunja	38	2013	Single	N	Employed (full time)	N	Seoul
Chunhee	58	2014	Married	N	Housewife	N	Seoul
Oakhee	31	2012	Single	N	University student	N	Seoul
Miyung	50	2010	Divorced	N	Self-employed	Y (Parent)	Seoul
Hyunjung	22	2018	Single	Y	University student	Y (Student)	Gyeonggi-do
Sooyang	57	2016	Married	N	University student	N	Seoul
Minji	36	2018	Single	N	University student	Y (Parent)	Seoul
Yonghee	26	2019	Single	Y	University student	N	Seoul
Yoojin	26	2011	Single	N	University student	Y (Student)	Seoul
Eunjung	36	2014	Married	N	University student	N	Seoul
Mija	26	2019	Single	Y	University student	N	Seoul
Soojin	23	2013	Single	Y	University student	Y (Student)	Gyeonggi-do

All names are pseudonyms.

Theoretical sampling, based on concepts (Charmaz, 2014), guided the recruitment of an additional 13 participants. Theoretical relevance to concepts determined participant selection because, in this study, the focus of data collection is not on persons per se but on concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Analysis began on the first day of data collection, generating preliminary concepts that guided subsequent data collection. This iterative and reflective process continued until theoretical saturation, where all significant concepts were sufficiently defined (Thai et al., 2012).

A total of 17 female North Korean refugees, aged 20 to 58, who arrived in South Korea after 2010, were interviewed. Their residence in South Korea ranged from 3 years to 12 years, with an average of 7.5 years. Nine participants had family members who fled to South Korea in the 2000s. 14 participants lived in Seoul, with the remaining in Gyeonggi-do. Regarding their school experiences in South Korea, five enrolled in elementary, middle, and high schools, and five were parents with school-going children. Findings are based specifically on their narratives, and pseudonyms were used to protect identities. Table 1 presents their demographic characteristics.

Data Collection

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to express their views in their own voice while maintaining control over the interview (Postmus, 2013). Indicative questions, such as 'what do you do these days?' and 'how do you manage your North Korean identity?', were used to explore settlement experiences. These indicative questions probed for more information and clarification of answers. Open-ended questions were also employed, enabling participants to decide topics and details they wished to share from their point of view.

During the initial interview, the first author shared his family's roots in North Korea to establish rapport. All participants spoke Korean in the interviews, the native language of the authors. Interviews lasted approximately 80 minutes and were recorded for transcription. Participants were offered the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy. Additionally, the authors conducted four field observations, including workshops and choir practice, where participants' experiences took place. Various resources, such as TV documentary reports, North Korean refugees' memoirs, and their online networks (e.g. Woorion), were sought to gain an insider's understanding of the studied world (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Data Analysis

This study employed the Straussian three stages of coding: 'open', 'axial', and 'selective', to develop abstract concepts grounded in reality (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This coding process is iterative, moving through the stages of data analysis until theoretical saturation is reached, where 'additional new data will not add new understanding to the question at hand' (Thai et al., 2012, p. 5).

In open coding, the authors thoroughly read transcripts, analysing them line by line and sentence by sentence. We sought significant events, particularly in problematic situations, and identified participants' actions. This stage allowed the conceptualization of participants' behavioural patterns, leading to the development of preliminary concepts. For example, the authors interpreted participants' struggles in adapting to South Korean norms as 'being puzzled with new settings', their incremental strategies for seeking assistance as 'knocking on the door for information,' and named their encounters with a cold reception and resultant feelings as 'being treated as others' and 'experiencing half of citizenship,' respectively. These preliminary concepts later served as the foundation for more abstract concepts that were not immediately apparent from this stage alone (Corbin et al., 2009).

Axial coding connects preliminary concepts from open coding, identifying similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The authors related preliminary concepts from open coding to each other, subsuming some under more abstract concepts while remaining open to all possible theoretical direction. We related preliminary concepts, such as participants' experiences of 'being treated as others' and 'facing discrimination,' to their responses of 'eliminating their accent,' 'hiding their North Korean identity,' and 'behaving like South Korean.' This effort later helped establish the more abstract concept of 'being one of them,' elucidating participants' strategy of interacting with others and addressing

questions of why, how and with what consequences North Korean refugee students encountered peer's prejudiced reception in school.

Selective coding is a stage to yield a central concept that meaningfully links all major concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The authors constantly compared all significant concepts from axial coding, such as participants' gradual process of 'being familiar with new surroundings,' with the resulting stage of 'behaving like South Koreans,' through which they reached the point of 'building supportive relationships.' At this juncture, participants expressed their desire to 'value their heritage' rather than 'hiding their North Korean identity' any longer. The authors termed this process as 'aspiration towards an inter-Korean identity through a process of being one of them.' Through continuous verification of hypotheses against incoming data (Stanley & Cheek, 2003), we developed this central concept that abstractly explains the life meaning that participants attach to their daily experiences in the host society.

Storyline strategy and memoing were used to preserve emerging ideas during the analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). These endeavours helped to gain insight into the experiences of North Korean refugee students in school, as grounded in their narratives. To present findings, quotes were translated into English by the first author and then verified through consultation with the second author.

Findings

In this study, discrimination, compounded by academic deficits and curriculum differences, greatly hindered North Korean refugee students' school participation. In response, they adopted a 'being one of them' approach to interact with peers, eventually fostering supportive relationships that inspired them to construct an inter-Korean identity. This identity embraces both Koreas, valuing their North Korean heritage while appreciating their South Korean citizenship. Emphasising the inseparable relationship between individuals and societal context (Strauss, 1987), the study primarily explores participants' responses to life challenges through which they construct life-meaning (Blumer, 1969) and engage in self-development (Charon, 2010). Accordingly, the findings highlight the significant conditions, strategies, and aspiration of North Korean refugee students in South Korea. Due to limited research on North Korean refugees (Emery et al., 2015), the authors frequently used 'in-vivo codes', direct quotes from participants (Charmaz, 2014), to vividly depict their experiences.

A New Wave of North Korean Refugees in South Korea

Despite North Korean refugees often being portrayed as impoverished individuals, this study highlights the emergence of two distinct groups of North Korean refugees since the 2010s. The first group includes individuals whose family members relocated to South Korea in the 1990s, and over the years, they have established covert networks to communicate with their relatives in the North, *'I had a cousin in South Korea, and we occasionally communicated'* (Yongja). Their trip to South Korea was arranged in advance by their South Korea-based relatives, *'My mother already lived in Seoul and later arranged our trip'* (Soojin). The second group comprises individuals who were clandestinely exposed to South Korean culture, despite it being prohibited in the North, *'I watched*

lots of South Korean dramas' (Oakhee). This exposure fuelled their aspiration for a life in South Korea. Sooyang disclosed, *'My sister watched many South Korean dramas and always said that she will go to South Korea for her children.'*

Compared to North Korean refugees who fled the country in the 1990s due to starvation, the group arriving in South Korea from the 2010s onward primarily came from socially and economically stable backgrounds, with some even belonging to privileged classes, *'My father was a civil servant. I didn't experience any financial difficulties'* (Yoojin). They were relatively affluent in the North, *'My family was affluent then. There was no problem getting something I wanted to buy'* (Mija). Through family networks or exposure to South Korean media, such as *'I often watched KBS 1'* (Miyung), they began to recognize the freedom and social mobility available in South Korea, *'While I watched South Korean dramas, I was curious about the society people freely live in'* (Yonghee), leading to a growing dissatisfaction with the lifestyle in the North. Living within a caste-like system, Misook decided to leave the country in pursuit of social mobility in South Korea.

> I have little chance to thrive in the North because of my social status (Seungbun). Discrimination against Seungbun exists there … Here in South Korea, at least there is a chance for success depending on personal effort and, that was why I left North Korea.

Recently, the departure of North Korean refugees from their country has been driven by aspirations for a better life in South Korea. This has resulted in heightened expectations among them upon arrival, as Yonghee expressed, *'Before coming to South Korea, I thought everyone in South Korea lives in a second-story house with a garden.'* These expectations also extend to their children's education that, *'My children should graduate from university'* (Yongja), and consequently, influence their desired location for settling in South Korea, *'I want to live in Seoul. I believe a bigger city would provide better educational opportunities for my children'* (Sookhee).

Motives for leaving North Korea have changed over time. In the 1990s, individuals fled the North primarily due to the extreme hardships, *'It was too hard to live in the North. I crossed the border to survive'* (Eunjung). However, in recent years, North Korean refugees appear to be leaving in pursuit of a better quality of life. This shift in motivation has resulted in a diverse range of characteristics among North Korean refugees in South Korea, ranging from individuals who are impoverished and undereducated to those seeking family reunification and social mobility. There are even upper middle-class individuals who aspire to embrace the South Korean lifestyle.

Becoming Others with South Korean Citizenship

Upon arrival, North Korean refugees were granted South Korean citizenship, offering them a sense of security, *'When I landed at Incheon airport, the first thing on my mind was I am safe now'* (Oakhee). To assist their transition, participants resided at Hanawon for three months, received training on life in South Korea, '*I think programmes at Hanawon are vital for us to settle well here'* (Yungsook). After leaving this facility, they received state housing, educational or vocational support, and were assigned a dedicated assistant from the local Hana centre or NGOs to aid in their integration into the community, *'The volunteer from the Red Cross helped me connect power, open a bank account and purchase necessary appliances'* (Sookhee).

With the training from Hanawon and support from NGOs, coupled with a belief in self-actualization, participants were dedicated to rebuilding their lives in their new community, *'If I do my best, I will strive and receive a relevant reward'* (Miyung). However, the long-standing division between the two Koreas resulted in distinct lifestyles, causing anxiety and challenges in adapting to their new surroundings, *'I was worried whether I could live here because so many things are different'* (Misook). To overcome these difficulties, participants sought support from various sources, including their relatives, *'My brother lived here. I asked him for help'* (Yongja), North Korean refugee networks, *'I sought useful information from other North Korean refugees'* (Chunhee), and the local Hana centre, *'I frequently visited the local Hana centre'* (Sooyang).

Participants, in particular, deeply appreciated their protection officer's support in various aspects of their lives, *'I have received support from my protection officer. He assisted me with a car accident or job search'* (Eunjung). The ethnic homogeneity was also beneficial for participants in navigating their new community, as Yonghee explained, *'Basically, we speak the same language.'* With the advantage of ethnic homogeneity and the assistance from various organizations, *'There are lots of NGOs helping us'* (Minji), North Korean refugees adopted an incremental approach to adapting to their new surroundings, *'I learnt about my community day by day'* (Sookhee), and over time, they gradually gained a sense of mastery, *'After five years, I felt comfortable living in my community'* (Misook).

However, despite their sense of mastery in new environments and South Korean citizenship, *'I am now a South Korean'* (Sookhee), participants found societal participation challenging. The combination of a lack of local qualification, skills, and noticeable accents, *'People easily noticed my accent'* (Yongja), negatively impacted their employment opportunities, *'There was nothing I could do here but work part-time jobs at local restaurants'* (Minji). Chunhee also recalled her struggle in finding employment due to her North Korean accent, *'When people heard my accent, they hesitated to hire me.'* Moreover, prejudiced social reception towards North Korean identity was prevalent, *'When people noticed my identity, they kept their distance from me'* (Misook). These instances highlight the difficulties participants faced while striving to integrate into South Korean society, often experiencing discrimination based on their North Korean identity.

The noticeable differences related to North Korean identity constantly questioned their membership and categorized them as outsiders in society, *'When I said hello to the bus driver, his first question was where I came from'* (Yoojin). Despite confidence in their new surroundings, participants' North Korean identity remained a significant barrier to acceptance in society, *'They were okay with me but suddenly changed their tones after they knew I came from North Korea'* (Hyunjung). This led to social exclusion, *'I don't have any close friends . . . We say good morning to each other, but those are the only words I exchanged with others at the University'* (Minji), with anxiety and low self-esteem, *'Whenever I said something, I was always worrying how others would react to my accent. I gradually became an introverted person with lower self-esteem'* (Yonghee).

Despite undergoing a three-month training at Hanawon, holding South Korean citizenship and receiving community assistance, participants struggled to integrate into South Korean society due to the inherent differences between the two Koreas, *'Social systems between North and South are quite different'* (Sookhee), limiting their participation in South Korea. Discrimination was another hurdle, as Mija expressed, *'There are different reactions when people notice my accent often looking down on me.'* This concern extended to North

Korean refugee students in schools, where they learn the host society's values and knowledge while interacting with local peers.

Feeling Rejected in Classroom

This concept particularly represents the experiences of North Korean refugee students in school. Upon arrival in South Korea, school-aged North Korean refugees, like adult refugees, resided at Hanawon. Within the facility, middle and high school students attended separate schools, while primary students enrolled in local schools with separate afternoon programmes to aid their adjustment to the South Korean educational system. As Yungsook explained, they appeared to be effective, *'We had schools at Hanawon where I wore a South Korean uniform, learned their textbooks and followed the South Korean school curriculum. This experience was crucial for me to settle in school.'*

When leaving Hanawon, refugee students had two options: enrolling in public schools or attending alternative schools designed for North Korean refugees. In this study, all participants, who were of school-age at the time, opted for public schools despite their parents' concerns, *'My parents worried about how I would settle into a local school'* (Yungsook). They desired to meet local peers, as Hyunjung expressed, *'I wanted to play with local students as soon as possible'*, and to learn South Korean culture, *'I insisted on attending a local school. I thought that by doing so, I could quickly learn the local culture'* (Yoojin). Perhaps, their willingness to attend public schools may be attributed to their positive exposure to South Korean culture and their stable social class in the North, which instilled confidence in their ability to adapt to public schools, *'I was confident at that time, wondering why I had to choose an alternative school. I came here by my choice. I wasn't a fugitive, so I didn't have any reason to avoid locals'* (Hyunjung).

However, shortly after starting public schools, participants encountered two significant barriers hindering their engagement in school. The first barrier was the stark difference in curriculum between the two Koreas. The division of the two Koreas for half a century has resulted in their educational systems being markedly different, *'The subjects taught in schools are different between the two countries'* (Eunjung), while in North Korea, students often focused on 'Juche Sasang' (Kimilsungism), *'At school, we mostly learned excellent stories of the Supreme leader'* (Hyunjung). These curriculum differences resulted in learning difficulties and subsequently lower academic achievement, as Soojin shared, *'I didn't understand the subjects at all. Despite carefully listening to the teachers, I couldn't follow what was being said in class.'*

Moreover, while struggling to grasp the subjects in school, *'I didn't have any foundational knowledge for studying the middle school subjects'* (Hyunjung), North Korean refugee students received limited support from both their parents, *'I was too busy to work for a living. I didn't have time to support my daughter's study'* (Yongja) and the school, *'I was the first North Korean refugee at my school, so my teacher was unable to offer much guidance'* (Jungja). Misook, a parent, expressed difficulty in supporting her children's studies due to her lack of knowledge about the education system, *'Nothing I could help my children' school activities, as I didn't understand school systems.'* Consequently, many school-aged refugees felt alone in managing their studies, preparing their studies by themselves, as Hyunjung explained, *'My parents were always busy and didn't know what I need to prepare for class . . . I prepared for class by myself. It sometimes made me feel upset.'*

The second obstacle to their school engagement was closely related to the reception from South Korean students. Despite the country's increased cultural diversity, an ethnocentric attitude persisted among students, influenced by the fact that *'South Koreans have limited experiences with different races and cultures'* (Yoojin). North Korean refugee students appeared different from their South Korean peers in various ways, including their accents, looks, behaviours, and attitudes, *'My son told me that his classmates didn't understand what he said to them'* (Minji). This led to the perception of refugee students as outsiders, drawing unwanted attention from other students, *'When a teacher introduced me as a student from North Korea, I became a stranger to the entire school. Even students from other classes came to see me'* (Soojin).

While their differences might initially spark curiosity among other students, as Yungsook stated, *'Maybe for them, my North Korean background was interesting.'* In fact, this curiosity alone was insufficient to establish meaningful and lasting relationships. Students often kept their distance or rejected interactions with North Korean refugee students, *'Whenever I asked them to play together, they rejected me'* (Hyunjung). This experience led to the exclusion of North Korean refugee students in school, *'I wasn't overtly bullied but was covertly excluded from their conversations'* (Yoojin), and later made them realize their outsider status in school, as Junga explained, *'As time went by, I realised they had their own inner-circle, and I wasn't a part of it. I didn't have any friends until I graduated from middle school.'*

In addition to academic challenges, many North Korean refugee students faced a cold reception and discrimination due to their North Korean identity. These experiences have resulted in feelings of anxiety and depression, *'I didn't tell my mother, but I was disappointed and depressed'* (Yoojin). It has also led to low self-esteem, *'I was always cautious about others' reactions to my presence'* (Junga), and the sense of exclusion, *'I was alone and invisible in school'* (Yungsook). Hyunjung described her struggle with her North Korean identity, which eventually led her to transfer to another school.

> I often had lunch or played alone, which made me miserable at school. Despite repeatedly signalling my desperation to the teachers, they didn't notice it. Even one day in class, when we were learning about North Korea, my teacher asked me if tigers still lived at Mount Bakdu. I was bullied because of my North Korean background, but he reminded the class of where I came from. It deeply hurt me … I eventually transferred to another school where nobody knew about my North Korean background.

Being One of Them

No matter how hopeful North Korean refugee students were before starting school, their engagement was hindered by academic deficits and a cold reception towards their North Korean identity. To address academic challenges, participants downgraded their entry level upon enrolling in schools, with all five participants opting for lower levels than their intended grade, *'I started with year 1 of middle school instead of the year 2 I was supposed to enrol in'* (Junga). They also sought government and NGO assistance for private tutoring to bridge their academic gaps, *'I received the government allowance for private tutoring in Mathematics'* (Yungsook) and *'People at my church taught me English'* (Yoojin). These efforts helped them acquire foundational knowledge and better understand their teachers' lessons.

Soojin explained her academic progress through this approach, *'I attended a private academy after school to acquire foundational knowledge in subjects I learn. This gradually helped my understand of my teachers' lessons.'*

Discrimination based on their North Korean identity also played a crucial role in hindering their engagement in school, as Yungsook expressed, *'Once they knew where I came from, students suddenly showed their judgmental attitude and kept their distance from me*.' In response, participants employed a 'being one of them' strategy, concealing their North Korean identity, and tried to behave like South Koreans. They feared that their North Korean identity became the subject of unwanted attention and rejection, *'If students know my North Korean identity, I would be the gossip for their conversations. I didn't want to draw their attention'* (Junga). This strategy represents a common behavioural pattern observed among North Korean refugee students in this study, aiming to minimize discrimination and maximize interaction with their peers.

Perhaps, the feasibility of a 'being one of them' strategy was only possible for North Korean refugee students, largely due to the ethnic homogeneity. Initially, these students made efforts to eliminate their dialect, *'I even asked my parents not to speak to me because they spoke with North Korean accent'* (Hyunjung). They adopted various methods to learn the South Korean dialect, such as *'I bought textbooks and practice the South Korean dialect'* (Jungja) and *'I watched lots of Korean dramas and repeated the dialogue'* (Yoojin). They also immersed themselves in K-pop culture, aiming to engage in conversations on the same topics as their peers, *'I learned about K-pop idols and dramas, so that I could engage in other students' conversations'* (Yungsook). These efforts allowed North Korean refugee students to behave like South Koreans and hide their North Korean identity, *'When I entered high school, I didn't tell my North Korean background, and no one questioned where I came from'* (Soojin).

The strategy of 'being one of them' proved challenging and stressful, requiring constant efforts to learn how to speak, look and behave like their South Korean peers while cautiously concealing their North Korean identity. However, this strategy enabled these students to interact freely with their peers without fear of discrimination, allowing them to form supportive relationships and subsequently boosting their confidence in school engagement, *'Since I could behave like them [South Korean] at school, I made many friends and often took the lead in conversations. Mostly importantly, our friendships were equal'* (Hyunjung). This approach led to satisfactory performance in school, as Jungja recalled, '*I really enjoyed high school and joined many clubs. I was even elected as the head girl of my school.'*

Aspiration Towards an Inter-Korean Identity

The strategy of 'being one of them' greatly served as a pathway to successful integration into the school environment. Through this strategy, North Korean refugee students gradually accepted new social norms and formed supportive relationships with South Korean peers, allowing them to embrace their South Korean identity, *'I am South Korean now'* (Hyunjung), while some distanced themselves from their North Korean roots, as Soojin noted,

> Sometimes, I forget my North Korean background. When I watch news about the harsh reality of North Korean people, I realise that I watch it just like other South Koreans. Those news stories sound sad, but I don't feel empathy.

However, even when participants desired assimilation into the host society, '*I'd like to be absorbed into the host society, so no one knows where I came from*' (Mija), and hid their North Korean identity, *'Many of my North Korean friends hide their background'* (Yungsook), there were moments when these students felt the need to disclose their North Korean heritage, such as *'I normally tell my background if I have a boyfriend. I must do it, otherwise I deceive him'* (Yoojin) and *'I disclosed my North Korean background to get special admission to university'* (Soojin). For most North Korean refugee students, despite being sufficiently able to behave like South Koreans, revealing their North Korean identity posed challenges in maintaining long-lasting relationships with South Korean peers, as Hyunjung mentioned, '*I wrote a letter to my close friend saying that I have a secret. I can't tell you now but one day I will.*' This emotional turmoil was echoed by Yungsook, '*I don't know why my heart is pounding, but when I reveal my North Korean identity to my friends, I couldn't stop crying.*'

This internal pressure was further compounded in domestic settings, as their parents often urged them to reveal their heritage in long-lasting relationships. Yongja stated, *'I always advise my daughter to tell where we came from when she has a boyfriend.'* At this stage, some participants began to realize that their South Korean citizenship did not fully represent who they are in South Korea, leading them to question their identity, as Jungja described this struggle, *'When I wrote a cover letter for University admission, I questioned myself, am I South Korean or North Korean?'* Yungsook's narrative also highlighted North Korean refugee students' dilemma in navigating their identity between the two Koreas, *'If I call myself South Korean, it is just one side of me. Also, if people call me North Korean, it also represents one side of me.'*

Within this context, North Korean refugee students aspired to seek an identity that would provide a sense of belonging in South Korea while simultaneously embracing their North Korean roots. They expressed sentiments such as, *'How can I forget my hometown in the North'* (Mija) and *'I had joyful memories with my friends in the North'* (Yoojin). It was evident that the participants did not use the strategy of 'being one of them' merely to become South Korean and abandon their North Korean heritage. Instead of accepting just one aspect of their Korean identity, North Korean refugee students aspired to construct a new identity that embraces both states of Korea, as Jungja explained, *'I am South Korean from the North. In this sense, I am both South and North Korean. That is my identity here.'*

Their aspiration towards an inter-Korean identity was greatly influenced by their peers' reaction to North Korean identity. In this study, supportive relationships with peers played a crucial role in this process. Soojin unveiled how her friends helped her aspire to have an inter-Korean identity.

> Before I revealed my North Korean background to some friends, I was scared of their reaction. But they reacted coolly to my North Korean background, saying they already knew it but it didn't bother them. To them, I was just a friend from another town in Korea . . . They reminded me of who I am here. I didn't need to be afraid of sharing my North Korean heritage.

For North Korean refugee students, their inter-Korean identity represented the two cultural dimensions of the Koreas. Yungsook explained, '*I am a person who knows both cultures because I came from the North but grew up in the South.*' This identity, navigating

two cultural spheres, inspired their dream of bridging the two Koreas, *'I can bridge the two Koreas because I am both South and North Korean'* (Jungja). This motivation propelled them to engage in distinct but related activities, from facilitating the success of other North Korean refugees in South Korea, *'I am mentoring North Korean refugee students'* (Jungja), to advocating for human rights issues in North Korea, *'I have joined many human rights activities for North Korean people in the North'* (Hyunjung). Their inter-Korean identity also guided their future career aspirations, particularly in areas of reunifying the two Koreas, *'I want to be a researcher studying North Korea to prepare the reunification'* (Mija).

The concept of 'aspiration towards an inter-Korean identity' holds significant explanatory relevance in understanding the life meaning that North Korean refugee students attach to their daily repertoires in South Korea. This emerging identity frequently serves as a source of inspiration, encouraging North Korean refugee students to find purpose and direction in their lives in South Korea, as articulated by Jungja.

> I am South Korean with a North Korean background. Why must I choose just one. If you ask me who I am, I am a South Korean with a hometown in the North. This identity gives me a sense of life direction, that I will find something to bridge the two countries.

Discussion

In an era of globalization, the inevitable shift in the ethnic composition of classrooms underscores the necessity of multicultural education in ensuring educational equality, irrespective of students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Banks, 1995). South Korea is not exempt from this global phenomenon, with 168,645 multicultural students attending schools, comprising 3.2% of the student population (Ministry of Education of ROK, 2022). Among them, 2,061 are North Korean refugee students, and their numbers are expected to grow due to North Korea's ongoing challenges with food insecurity and economic hardship (Ministry of Unification of ROK, n.d.).

To ensure educational equality for all students, multicultural education in South Korea adopts two related but distinct approaches: particularist and universalistic (Eldering, 1996). The particularist approach addresses the educational needs of multicultural students, eliminating educational disparity they may face. The universalistic approach, on the other hand, encourages all students to familiarize themselves with each other's cultures and learn how to interact. Consequently, multicultural education in South Korea employs pedagogical strategies at both the micro and macro levels. At the micro level, it ensures the academic success of multicultural students, while at the macro level, it fosters an inclusive environment that promotes students' positive reception towards cultural diversity (J. Kim, 2021). In essence, multicultural education in South Korea is a mutual process that requires the commitment of multicultural students to overcome academic deficits, inspiring all students to embrace cultural diversity (S. Kim & Kim, 2012).

However, replicated reports indicate that many multicultural students face denial of educational opportunities due to their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, along with institutional barriers, leading to uncertainty for improved circumstances in the host society (Chang, 2017; Hong, 2010; Jang, 2023; J. Kim & Jeon, 2017; S. Kim & Kim, 2012; J. Kim et al., 2016). In this study, North Korean refugee students identify several circumstances that hinder the realization of the anticipated educational benefits. They enter

school with significant academic deficits, *'My son didn't even master the Korean alphabet when he started school'* (Sookhee). Moreover, they often experience insufficient parental support, *'My mother wishes she were born here, so she could help with my schoolwork'* (Hyunjung). The existence of different curricula between the two Koreas, combined with limited parental support, greatly hampers their academic performance, *'When I started school, I didn't understand a single word the teacher taught in class'* (Soojin).

The unpreparedness of schools to address the needs of North Korean refugee students, along with ethnocentrism in the school environment, exacerbates the situation (H. Kim & Hocking, 2018; S. Kim & Kim, 2012). There is a knowledge gap, with teachers being ill-prepared to work with this population, *'I wish teachers knew about available government supports for us. Compared to students in alternative schools, I had to prepare my university application alone'* (Jungja). South Korean multicultural education policies specifically target students facing linguistic barriers (Chang, 2017). Additionally, textbooks dehumanize other cultures (Hong, 2010) while emphasizing the purity of its members' bloodline (Choo, 2006), limiting North Korean refugee students' opportunities to envision a collective future together, *'Students didn't have many opportunities to meet people from different culture. To them, I was just a strange person'* (Yoojin).

When the North Korean refugee students' status became known to other students, their reactions varied, ranging from curiosity to instances of discrimination and mistreatment. This raises questions about whether schools serve as places of integration (Choi, 2011) or marginalization for these students (H. Kim & Hocking, 2018). The significant disparity between their educational rights and actual participation in school negatively impacts their quality of life and sense of belonging, as articulated by Hyunjung, *'The cruelty I had to endure at my school and the ignorance of the teachers were overwhelming.'* This situation calls for the reduction of discriminatory discourses in schools and an increase in teachers' multicultural competence from a social perspective, as it is essential to address discrimination and prejudice in the classroom.

Multicultural education requires reforms in five dimensions: 'content integration', 'knowledge construction process', 'prejudice reduction', 'equity pedagogy', and 'empowering school culture and social structure' (Banks, 1993, 1995). While at the micro-level, multicultural education primarily pertains to pedagogical strategies to ensure the academic success of multicultural students, the authors emphasize the significance of 'prejudice reduction' and 'empowering school culture and social structure', as they directly impact the reception North Korean refugee students receive and their academic achievements. We argue that the reception these students encounter in school inevitably influence their participation. Therefore, the scope of multicultural education in South Korea should encompass all students rather than being limited to assimilation of multicultural students (J. Kim, 2021). This highlights the need for teachers to establish inclusive representations of North Korean refugee students in the classroom, going beyond mere awareness of 'the cultural particularities of specific ethnic groups' (Gay, 2002, p. 107).

To this end, the authors suggest intergroup dialogue as a means to address North Korean refugee students' educational inequality. By anticipating the benefits of understanding each other' cultural differences, intergroup dialogue fosters sustained communication among students of diverse identities, *'Our club has an equal membership of North and South Koreans. We meet weekly to discuss our differences, hoping that one day we will accept and embrace each other's differences'* (Oakhee).

Through this experience, students cultivate improved intercultural relations and develop critical consciousness about racial and ethnic inequity (Kaplowitz et al., 2023). However, in this study, most opportunities linking intergroup dialogue occurred in higher education, highlighting the urgent need to establish similar programmes in schools where students can collaborate across various differences and develop an inclusive vision of society.

Additionally, since humans construct their sense of self through interaction with others (Blumer, 1969), intergroup dialogue in schools can serve as a platform for North Korean refugee students to develop a sense of self that reflects the world they belong to, since it helps them overcome their outsider status (Choi, 2011). In this sense, education encompasses their being (Apple, 2012), as they construct a sense of self through their interactions with peers in school.

> At a camp, we shared stories with an equal number of South Korean students for five days. Through this camp, I realised I am a person who knows both cultures because I came from the North but grew up in the South. This truly represents who I am here. (Yungsook)

In formulating intergroup dialogue initiatives, schools must consider prevailing prejudiced social reception towards North Korean refugee students, anticipating a hesitancy to engage in such programmes, as expressed by Junga, *'If they invite me to afterschool programmes saying it is for North Korean refugee students, hell no, I won't go'* (Junga). The research findings underscore situations wherein the disclosure of North Korean heritage exacerbated the challenges faced by these students. Hyunjung recounted an incident where a teacher's naive intervention intensified her predicament.

> One day in class, when we learnt about North Korea, my teacher asked me if tigers still lived at Mount Bakdu. I was bullied because of my North Korean background, but he reminded the class of where I came from. It deeply hurt me.

This narrative accentuates an ethical quandary inherent in the development of intergroup dialogue. It highlights the necessity for meticulous consideration of voluntary participation and the preservation of anonymity until they are ready to disclose their North Korean heritage. Such caution is imperative, given that many North Korean refugee students continue to conceal their background, *'Many of my North Korean friends hide their background'* (Yungsook).

Limitations

Interpretive data analysis involves subjective inferences (Crotty, 1998). To mitigate this, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability have been emphasized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), with ongoing co-author consultation. Despite back translation, misinterpretation between the original text and translation is possible. Findings are limited to 17 interviews with urban North Korean female refugees and cannot be generalized. Further research is needed to explore different genders and geographical backgrounds, including children born in China (Emery et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Despite the implementation of multicultural education over the past decades, academic inequality persists for multicultural students in South Korea. This study delves into the school experiences of North Korean refugee students, revealing a disparity in legal citizenship and school participation, compounded by academic deficits, limited parental support, a cold reception towards their North Korean identity, and unpreparedness of schools. These factors collectively contribute to the diminished school participation, low academic achievement, and exclusion experienced by North Korean refugee students.

To facilitate their engagement in school, North Korean refugee students employ a 'being one of them' strategy, made possible due to the ethnic homogeneity. This strategy involves concerted efforts to behave like South Koreans while concealing their North Korean background. Through this approach, they enhance interactions with peers, leading to the development of supportive relationships and an aspiration for an inter-Korean identity. This identity not only embraces a sense of belonging in South Korea but also value their North Korean heritage, providing inspiration and direction for their future.

The study underscores the intricate interplay of legal, social, and academic factors contributing to the marginalized status of North Korean refugee students within the educational framework. This emphasizes the importance of adopting a social perspective in multicultural education, moving beyond academic-focused pedagogical strategies. Instead, the goal should encompass school reforms related to promoting diversity and establishing an inclusive environment that recognizes their representation. To achieve this, intergroup dialogue is recommended as a means for students to collectively envision a more inclusive future. Such initiatives will create an inclusive portrayal of North Korean refugee students in education, while inspiring all students to embrace cultural diversity in society.

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