

Research Article

The Process of Constructing an Inter-Korean Identity Reflective of the Two Koreas: North Korean Refugee Students' Hybrid Identity in South Korea

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Abstract

As of March 2024, 34,121 North Korean refugees reside in South Korea, with 12% enrolled in schools. Despite being automatically granted South Korean citizenship upon arrival, these refugees face social exclusion and marginalization, effectively forming a second class within South Korean society. The 70-year division between the two Koreas has resulted in vastly different lifestyle, making it challenging for North Korean refugees to adapt. This difficulty is compounded by a prejudiced social reception and discrimination toward their North Korean identity. The study aims to explore the daily experiences of North Korean refugees with their newfound South Korean citizenship, employing Straussian grounded theory and semi-structured interviews. The study recruited 17 North Korean refugees, including five with experience in elementary, middle and high schools, and five parents with school-going children. The findings reveal that academic deficits, exacerbated by discrimination and stereotypes linked to their North Korean identity, result in a disparity between their legal citizenship and school participation. In response, North Korean refugee students adopt a strategy of 'being one of them,' leveraging ethnic homogeneity to facilitate interactions with their South Korean peers. These interactions enable the formation of supportive networks and foster the development of an inter-Korean identity reflective of both Koreas. The study underscores the critical role of multicultural education in achieving educational equality for North Korean refugee students and advocates for social bridging programs that acknowledge and embrace the differences of refugees. Despite being granted citizenship, they continue to be treated as outsiders within South Korean society.

Keywords

Citizenship, Multicultural Education, North Korean Refugee Students, Social Bridging Programs, South Korea, Straussian Grounded Theory

1. Introduction

In today's era, immigration is a global phenomenon, making "ethnic homogeneity is a thing of the past" [40]. These demographic shifts transform classroom cultural and linguistic composition, necessitating inclusive school reforms [3].

Multicultural education aims to achieve educational equality for all students regardless of their origins [33]. However, racial conflicts and institutional inequalities persist [34], exacerbated by inadequate school readiness [19], hindering the

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Received: 23 July 2024; **Accepted:** 20 August 2024; **Published:** 6 September 2024



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academic success of students from diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds.

The study explores the experiences of North Korean refugees in South Korea. Despite the citizenship automatically granted by the South Korean Constitution [46] and their aspirations for socio-economic improvement [37], many North Korean refugees face social exclusion and marginalization due to pervasive stereotypes and discrimination against their North Korean identity [25, 68]. This paper examines their experiences of settling in South Korea, with a particular focus on the educational experiences of North Korean refugee students.

This paper begins with a discussion on the role of multicultural education in an ethnically diverse society and investigates the experiences of North Korean refugee students in South Korea. It then delves into Straussian grounded theory, explaining the methods of data collection and analysis. Findings are presented under the concept ‘Constructing an inter-Korean identity through a process of being one of them,’ which highlights the integration processes of North Korean refugee students into South Korean society and captures their identity aspirations. Finally, the benefits of multicultural education in promoting educational equality are considered, while suggesting social bridging programs to embrace the differences of refugee students.

2. Literature Review

Emerging during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, multicultural education initially responded to the segregation of Black and White students in schools [3]. Despite conceptual ambiguities [31], multicultural education has since evolved to encompass inclusive school reforms advocating for the universal right to education [4]. This evolution is rooted in the principle that “education is a treasure every child earns simply by being born” [1]. Banks [2] describe multicultural education as an educational reform aimed at transforming the structure of educational institutions to ensure equal academic opportunities for students from diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds.

To achieve educational equality for multicultural students, multicultural education advocates for school reforms in five dimensions; 1) content integration: incorporating information from various cultures to explain key concepts and principles, 2) knowledge construction process: helping students understand the subjectivity of knowledge within the context of individuals’ racial and socio-political positions, 3) prejudice reduction: fostering more democratic racial attitudes and values among students, 4) equity pedagogy: emphasising the cultural and linguistic strengths of multicultural students in teaching methods, and 5) empowering school culture and social structure: implementing school reforms to promote diversity [2, 3].

Accordingly, multicultural education holds two interrelated approaches: particularist and universalistic [17]. The partic-

ularist approach addresses the specific educational needs of multicultural students and aims to eliminate educational disparities. In contrast, the universalistic approach encourages all students to become familiar with each other’s cultures and learn how to interact. These pedagogical strategies operate at both micro and macro levels, addressing multicultural students’ academic challenges while fostering an inclusive environment that promotes positive attitudes towards cultural diversity [36].

Since its inception in the 1960s, multicultural education has sought to achieve educational equality for multicultural students [2], guided by principles of “democracy, equality, human rights and social justice” [39]. It serves as an educational reform that not only promotes academic achievement for multicultural students but also helps all students appreciate cultural diversity [4, 17, 31]. Given ongoing demographic changes in society, this mutual process of multicultural education is likely “a continuing process that never ends” [3].

2.1. Multicultural Education in South Korea

South Korea, once a racially homogenous society [33], has experienced significant changes in its ethnic landscape due to the influx of foreign brides and workers. As of 2022, nearly 2.2 million people born overseas resided in South Korea [56], a number expected to rise as the government considers immigration to address its population crisis.

In 2022, there were 181,178 multicultural students [58], known as ‘다문화 [Damunhwa]’ students [26], attending schools in South Korea, comprising 3.5% of the student population [54]. South Korea classifies multicultural students into three groups: ‘foreign workers’, ‘marriage immigrants’ (foreigners marrying Koreans), and ‘North Korean refugees’ [54]. These students have diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds [26], necessitating varied educational approaches.

To accommodate their educational needs, multicultural education has been implemented since the 2000s [40], with the slogan, “understanding of cultural diversity and respecting for differences in a multicultural society are core competencies that every student should acquire” [55]. The vision is for multicultural students to learn and grow together in a culturally diverse and harmonious school environment. The mission is to ensure educational opportunities, address educational disparities, and create an environment where diverse cultures coexist [58]. Accordingly, South Korea has enacted policies at both micro and macro levels. Micro-level policies address cultural and linguistic deficits, while macro-level policies foster positive attitudes towards cultural diversity [33, 40].

However, South Korea’s multicultural education remains largely top-down [26], hindered by schools’ limited multicultural acceptability and readiness [41], resulting in superficial implementation [43]. Moreover, the primary focus is on accelerating the assimilation of multicultural students [40], often perceiving cultural and linguistic differences as deficits [39] and viewing these students as sources of dysfunctions

[26]. South Korean education also emphasizes national homogeneity [6], as the principle of pure-blood has historically dominated [12], often producing stereotyped images of other cultures [41], leading to the dehumanization of multicultural students [24].

Since the 2000s, South Korean schools have aimed to enhance multicultural students' academic success and promote cultural diversity, aligning with global trends in multicultural education [17]. However, concerns persist that these efforts may unintentionally perpetuate social inequality and cultural hierarchy [39]. This suggests that while "intensity and volume of multicultural programs [in Korea] are impressive" [39], they must be "critically reshaped ... within the framework of social equity and integration" [41].

2.2. North Korean Refugees' Experiences in South Korea

Over the past three decades, the population of North Korean refugees in South Korea has steadily increased, with an annual influx of approximately 1,500 individuals since the 1990s. These refugees flee North Korea due to food insecurity, economic hardship, political repression, and limited opportunities [42, 61, 62]. Upon arrival, they are granted automatic citizenship [46]. Terminology for these refugees has evolved in tandem with inter-Korean relations [65], including terms such as '탈북민 (Defector)', '새터민 (New settler)', or '북한 이탈주민 (Escapee).' The term 'refugee' is used here to acknowledge the severity of persecution they may face if repatriated [70].

As of March 2024, 34,121 North Korean refugees lived in South Korea, with 72% being female. Most were in their 20s (28.3%) and 30s (28.7%), while 11.2% were in their teens and 17.7% in their 40s [57]. Only 2.2% had high-skilled employment before arriving, and 84.4% were unemployed or engaged in low-class work in North Korea. Educational levels varied: 69.3% attended secondary school, 6.8% only primary school, 17.4% had tertiary education, and 2.5% never attended school. This portrays them as predominantly impoverished, undereducated, unemployed, and mostly female [62], often arriving with little capital and starting from scratch [35].

Integration into South Korean society is crucial, and the South Korean government promotes their success as part of broader reunification efforts [11]. Programs include a three-month orientation at Hanawon, resettlement benefits, state housing, weekly allowances, medical care, and vocational and educational support [57]. These programs aim to promote self-sufficiency [48] and successful transition [38], with the belief that their success is "a critical barometer of reconciliation between two countries" [11].

Despite these efforts, integration remains challenging due to socio-economic demands and cultural differences. Over the past 70 years, the two Koreas have developed distinct lifestyles [50]. This divergence often leaves North Korean refugees exhausted as they adapt to South Korean customs and

norms [42]. Their distinct accent and physical features contribute to an outgroup identity, exposing them to discrimination and stereotypes [23]. Evidence highlights anti-North Korean sentiment in South Korea, resulting in discriminatory practices, unfair treatment, and marginalization [25, 63], which contribute to their low quality of life [45] and limited social mobility [37]. This indicates that their citizenship and state-sponsored programs are not effectively supporting their integration without addressing the social reception they encounter [35].

North Korean refugee students' experiences in schools in South Korea

In 2022, 2,061 North Korean refugee students were enrolled in South Korean schools, constituting 12% of the total North Korean refugee population. This group includes 522 elementary, 659 middle, 725 high school, and 155 alternative school students [54]. Ethnically and linguistically Korean [26], these students, shaped by experiences in North Korea's black market, are more market-friendly and individualistic compared to adult refugees [61].

Upon arrival, various supportive measures are implemented to facilitate their educational transition. During their three-month stay at Hanawon, elementary-aged refugees participate in after-school programs at public schools, while middle and high school-aged students attend separate schools to follow the South Korean curriculum [63]. Afterwards, they can enroll in public schools with additional tutoring or opt for alternative schools offering support tailored to their defection experiences [28]. For higher education, these students benefit from preferential, non-competitive university admissions [68].

Schools play a pivotal role in integrating North Korean refugee students, fostering their confidence as members of South Korean society [49]. However, many encounter challenges adjusting to the South Korean educational system. These challenges include curriculum differences [10], resource limitations [61], post-traumatic stress disorders [29], cultural and linguistic differences [63], social isolation [35], stereotypes and discrimination [18], academic deficits during their asylum period [10], and schools' inadequacies in meeting their specific needs [49].

Under such difficulties, many North Korean refugee students exhibit diminished academic performance [44], psychological distress [24] and reduced self-esteem [28], with a dropout rate 12 times higher than that of the South Korean students [49]. Moreover, the notion of "one nation, two countries" is no longer valid in South Korea [23]. Differences in accent, appearance, and behavior categorize North Korean refugee students as outsiders in class [63]. Such experiences are distressing and hinder their participation in school, limiting their social mobility [27] and increasing the likelihood of ending up in lower socio-economic classes [29], posing significant issues for the South Korean educational system [10].

Despite receiving automatic citizenship, North Korean refugee students face formidable challenges in adapting to new

school systems, compounded by pervasive discrimination and stereotypes. There is concern that they often feel alienated, marginalized, and frustrated about their future [10, 33, 37]. A critical question in this research is whether individuals granted citizenship have equal opportunities to participate in various social spheres, despite citizenship theoretically symbolizing equality within states [16]. Many studies highlight the disparity between refugees' legal citizenship and their daily participation, as citizenship does not always guarantee equal societal participation [7, 23, 32, 36].

This study aims to explore the settlement journey of North Korean refugees within their newfound South Korean citizenship and its impact on their identity experiences. The main questions are:

- 1) How do North Korean refugees settle their lives in South Korea?
- 2) What challenges do they face while settling in South Korea?
- 3) What strategies do they employ to deal with those challenges?
- 4) What meaning do they attach to those experiences?

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically grounded in symbolic interactionism, which posits that humans construct their experiential worlds through social interaction [5]. From this perspective, objects do not possess inherent meaning; rather, individuals ascribe meaning in general, and identify in particular, through interaction [52]. This interpretive process results in varied experiences, as each person constructs meaning differently, even in relation to the same phenomenon.

According to symbolic interactionists, human behavior is not mechanically determined but based on meanings that arise when a person's consciousness engages with objects through a process of adopting others' perspectives [9]. This perspective highlights humans as active agents who interpret objects and make decisions about their significance. Consequently, symbolic interactionism positions humans as doer, actor, and self-director, emphasizing the importance of action in understanding human life [67]. This aligns with the study's belief that refugees are autonomous agents [51] who strategically navigate their environments for survival and reproduction [65].

4. Methodology

This study employs grounded theory, rooted in symbolic interactionism [8]. Mirroring the way humans interpret the world through interaction [5], grounded theorists immerse themselves in the world of their research subjects, closely aligning with their experiences [14]. This methodology plac-

es action at the center, emphasizing the understanding of actions, their causes, and consequences from the actor's perspective [21], thereby discovering individuals' experiences grounded in reality [20].

In particular, Straussian grounded theory guides this analysis by examining human activities in context [14]. Straussian grounded theorists posit that the meanings of social actions depend on their context [59]. Considering the inseparability of ongoing interaction between individuals and society [13], incorporating contexts into the analysis is essential for understanding a person's experience. By contextualizing social processes [67], Straussian grounded theory explains what is happening and why [69]. This approach suits this study, as refugees' experiences inherently unfold within a context, examining participants' actions within their relevant contexts. This study received ethical approval from Massey University in 2022 (ref. SOB 22/08).

4.1. Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit four participants with specific attributes [71], offering preliminary insights into the experiences of North Korean refugees in South Korea. From New Zealand, the researcher collaborated with the Mulmangcho Foundation [물망초재단], an organization supporting North Korean refugees in South Korea, to facilitate participant recruitment. The Foundation circulated study information through its networks based on the participant criteria. Interested individuals received an information sheet in Korean, highlighting voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time.

Subsequently, theoretical sampling was employed to recruit an additional 13 participants, focusing on those whose experiences were theoretically relevant to concepts emerging from previous interviews [8]. Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently, allowing preliminary concepts to shape further data collection [14]. This iterative process continued until theoretical saturation was reached, a point at which all significant concepts were sufficiently defined and explained [20].

In total, 17 North Korean refugees, aged 20-58, were interviewed. All participants were female and had arrived in South Korea post-2010, with settlement durations ranging from 3 to 12 years, averaging 7.5 years. Geographically, 14 participants resided in Seoul, while three lived in Gyeonggi-do. Their employment statuses varied: 12 were university students, four were employed, and one was a full-time housewife. Among them, five were enrolled in elementary, middle, and high schools, and five were parents with school-going children, sharing their educational experiences in South Korea. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants and their families in North Korea. Table 1 presents their demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Participants' demographic characteristics.

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

All names are pseudonyms

4.2. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source, providing in-depth insights into participants' experiences and affording them considerable control over the discussions [64]. Indicative questions, such as 'Can you tell me about your early days of settling in South Korea?' and 'Are there any challenges you have experienced in South Korea?' guided the initial direction of the interviews. Further, questions like 'How do you cope with these challenges?' and 'How do your experiences of these challenges impact your identity?' explored deeper aspects of their experiences. Open-ended questions followed, empowering participants to select topics and detail their experiences meaningfully and in their own terms.

All interviews were conducted in Korean, the native lan-

guage of the author. Each interviews lasted approximately 80 minutes and was transcribed verbatim for analysis. Participants were informed about this process and given the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy. As a token of appreciation, each participant received 30,000 K-won (approximately USD 20). Additionally, the author conducted field observations, including computer workshops and a North Korean female choir, where participants' experiences occurred. Various resources, such as TV reports, memoirs, and North Korean refugees' networks (e.g., Woorion), were also consulted. These efforts provided diverse perspectives and enriched the insider understanding of the participants' world.

4.3. Data Analysis

This study employed three stages of Straussian coding:

‘open’, ‘axial’, and ‘selective’. Through these stages, the data were deconstructed and conceptualized, culminating in a central concept that abstractly encapsulates the phenomena grounded in reality [14].

During open coding, initial categories representing participants’ experiences were generated. The author read the transcripts thoroughly to familiarize himself with the data. Then, line by line and sentence by sentence analysis identified participants’ actions and interactions within specific structural conditions. This process led to preliminary categories, including, ‘feeling puzzled with new settings,’ ‘being treated as outsiders,’ ‘experiencing partial citizenship,’ and ‘knocking on the door for information.’ These preliminary categories elucidated struggles North Korean refugees faced in settling and their strategies for seeking assistance, laying the groundwork for more abstract interpretations of the data [13].

In axial coding, these preliminary categories were refined by establishing relationship between them, leading to more precise explanations of participants’ experiences [14]. Constant comparison was employed to identify similarities and differences between categories, grouping some under more abstract concepts based on their properties and dimensions. For example, categories such as ‘being treated as outsiders,’ ‘facing discrimination,’ ‘eliminating their accents,’ and ‘behaving like South Koreans’ were grouped under the more abstract concept of ‘being one of them,’ encapsulating participants’ strategy for integration. This concept positions other concepts, such as ‘accepting new social norms’ and ‘building supportive relationships’ as subcategories to address the why, how, and consequences of dealing with prejudiced social reception while rebuilding their lives in South Korea.

Selective coding yielded a central concept that integrated all major concepts [13]. By continuously checking hypotheses against incoming data until all significant concepts could be sufficiently linked together, the central concept explained a substantial portion of the data’s variation, creating a coherent analytic story [66]. Significant concepts from axial coding, such as ‘understanding new surroundings,’ ‘behaving like South Koreans,’ ‘valuing their heritage,’ and ‘experiencing support for their identity,’ were compared, resulting in the central concept of ‘Constructing an inter-Korean identity.’ This concept was abstract enough to explain participants’ aspiration of developing an identity reflective of the two Koreas.

The data analysis in this study employed both procedural and recursive operations [21], wherein the researcher continuously cycles through data analysis stages [67] until reaching theoretical saturation, defined as a point where “additional new data will not add new understanding to the question at hand” [69]. Analytical notes and the development of a storyline preserved emerging ideas and hypotheses [14]. This approach facilitated a comprehensive and insightful understanding of the variables under investigation.

5. Findings

In this study, participants navigated complex acculturative challenges, contending with stereotypes and discrimination tied to their North Korean identities. In response, North Korean students adopted a strategy of ‘being one of them’ to foster interaction with their peers, gradually constructing an inter-Korean identity. This journey reflects their aspiration for a hybrid identity that values their North Korean heritage while embracing their newfound South Korean citizenship.

Guided by Straussian grounded theory, which asserts context-dependent actions [59], this study explored how participants respond to life challenges [21], construct life-meaning [5], and engage in self-development [9]. The findings highlight significant conditions, strategies, and aspirations of North Korean refugee students in South Korea.

Three significant conditions influenced participants’ settlement: ‘family reunification,’ ‘support for returning citizens’ and ‘partial citizenship.’ Despite heterogeneous circumstances, these micro- and macro-conditions collectively shaped North Korean refugee students’ experiences in South Korean society.

5.1. Family Reunification

Since the influx of North Korean refugees into South Korea in the 1990s, they have often been portrayed as impoverished individuals escaping food insecurity and economic hardship. Due to the difficulty of crossing the border, many relied on human smugglers. As Mija noted, *‘Except for those who have relatives in South Korea, the only way to cross the border is by hiring smugglers,’* exposing them to heightened risks such as human trafficking, particularly for women in China. Oakhee recounted, *‘When I arrived in China, I was sold to brokers.’*

This study identifies a new wave of North Korean refugees facilitated by relatives already in South Korea, *‘My mother already lived in South Korea. She arranged our trip’* (Soojin). These refugees, influenced by North Korea’s underground market, *‘Since markets emerged in the 2000s, North Korea has become a capitalist society where everything can be solved with money’* (Miyung), are relatively familiar with South Korea’s market economy. They were also exposed to South Korean culture through media, like Eunjung, who said, *‘I watched numerous South Korean dramas.’*

This new group often comes from socially and economically stable, and in some cases, privileged families in North Korea, *‘My mother was a doctor. I also graduated from university and had my own business’* (Yongja). Hyunjung echoed a similar sentiment, stating, *‘We were affluent then. I had a tutor for my study and regularly toured the zoo in Pyongyang.’* Motivation for leaving North Korea varied, including economic oppression, *‘It was too hard to run the business with many nonsensical regulations and the risk of confiscation without due process’* (Chunhee), aspirations for a better life, *‘I came here for a better future for my daughter’* (Yongja), and

family reunification, *'I have a cousin in South Korea'* (Misook).

This trend of family reunification, as Jungja described, *'My uncle already lived in South Korea. My trip to South Korea was discussed even when I was young,'* is reshaping the demographic landscape of North Korean refugees in South Korea. While some, like Chunhee, suffered from food insecurity in North Korea, *'We lived on a bowl of porridge a day,'* others, such as Soojin whose parents owned a business, had no experience of poverty, *'I did not have any experience of hunger.'* This diversity within the refugee population highlights significant differences in socioeconomic status and life experiences prior to arriving in South Korea.

While many North Korean refugees still escape due to food insecurity and economic hardship, recent departures are often driven by aspirations for a better life in South Korea, *'I came here for my child's better future'* (Misook), resulting in heightened expectations 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 extend to their children's education that, *'My children should graduate from university'* (Yongja), influencing their desired location to settle, such as Sookhee's desire to live in Seoul for better educational opportunities, *'I want to live in Seoul. A bigger city would provide better educational opportunities for my children.'*

5.2. Support for Returning Citizens

Whether their journeys were pre-arranged or not, participants often detoured through China before reaching South Korea, facing risks like repatriation and exploitation. As stateless individuals in China, North Korean refugees lived in constant anxiety, *'In China, I was always anxious ... I felt scared thinking that Chinese police might hunt me for repatriation'* (Sookhee).

For many North Korean refugees, arriving in South Korea offered safety and a fresh start, *'When we landed at Incheon airport, the first thing on my mind was that I am safe now'* (Oakhee). To facilitate their transition, the South Korean government offers various support programs. Upon arrival, participants spent three months at Hanawon, receiving intensive orientation on South Korean life. After leaving the facility, they received financial assistance, state housing, educational or vocational support, and a weekly allowance for living costs and medical care.

At the community level, participants accessed support through NGOs and North Korean refugee networks. Approaching NGOs like the Red Cross provided crucial assistance, *'The volunteer from the Red Cross helped me connect power, open a bank account and purchase necessary appliances'* (Sookhee). Connecting with North Korean refugees' networks like Woorion, a portal site for North Koreans in South Korea, *'I sought necessary information via Woorion'* (Yoojin), also facilitated their transition. Participants partic-

ularly appreciated their protection officer's support, *'To be honest, the person who has helped me the most is my protection officer. He even arranged a part-time job for me'* (Miyung).

Ethnic homogeneity, sharing ancestry and language, eased integration, *'We speak the same language'* (Mija) and *'Some people warmly welcomed me by holding my hands, saying their parents also came from the North'* (Miyung). This homogeneity helped participants rebuild their lives in South Korea. Yongja explained how it facilitated her employment, *'After leaving Hanawon, I immediately worked as a cashier at a local supermarket. Although my accent was different, we could communicate and understand each other.'*

For school-aged refugees, various support programs addressed academic deficits and eased the stress of transition. They particularly appreciated their time at Hanawon, where they were exposed to the South Korean educational system. Junga noted, *'There was a school for us at Hanawon, called Hanadull school. I studied with other North Korean students and South Korean teachers. I have joyful memories about it.'* Yungsook highlighted the systematic programs at Hanawon that eased the refugees' integration into South Korean educational system.

At Hanawon, there is a kindergarten for toddlers, separate programs for primary school students, and a school for middle and high school students. Adults also attend trainings relevant to their respective needs ... I think their programs are vital for us to settle well here.

With support from the government and NGOs, *'There are lots of NGOs helping us'* (Minji), and the advantage of ethnic homogeneity, *'I speak and understand Korean'* (Yonghee), 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 in their new environment, *'After five years, I felt comfortable living in my community'* (Misook).

5.3. Partial Citizenship

After three months of training at Hanawon, many participants began their new life in the community, benefiting from cultural and linguistic similarities. At the community, local Hana centers, NGO volunteers, and religious or community groups provided support, *'Some people gave kimchi or a bag of rice and regularly bought me boxes of ramen'* (Chunhee). This supportive environment fostered participants' optimism for success, as Miyung noted, *'If I do my best here, I will live better and get a relevant reward.'*

However, the enduring division between North and South Korea created adaption challenges, especially in understanding local lifestyles, *'In the first few years, it was very hard to understand local people'* (Yonghee), and dealing with linguistic differences, *'I found South and North speak different Korean dialects, in particular, there were lots of English*

signages on the street' (Misook). Speaking with a North Korean accent often led to misunderstandings, *'My classmates said they did not understand what I was saying'* (Minji) and being treated as outsiders, as Sookhee expressed frustration, *'When I told a taxi driver where to go, the first question he asked was where I was from. It disappointed me.'*

Participants also faced daily discrimination based on their North Korean identities, *'There are different reactions when people notice my accent ... People look down on me'* (Mija), affecting their participation in daily life, such as performing social roles, *'I did not go to my son's school. I was worried if they knew my North Korean background, they might treat my son differently'* (Sookhee), or looking for a job, *'When they noticed my accent, they hesitated to hire me'* (Chunhee). Participants often felt ostracized and stereotyped based on assumptions, that *'We are poor people ... They sometimes looked at us like we were street beggars'* (Oakhee), and in many circumstances, this social reception perpetuated feelings of being treated as outsiders, limiting their sense of belonging in South Korean society.

The concept of 'partial citizenship' highlights the gap between North Korean refugees' legal citizenship and their everyday experiences. Despite government efforts to facilitate integration, participants often encountered discrimination and stereotypes, leading to a diminished self-esteem, as Junga quoted, *'I am becoming increasingly discouraged and timid in society.'* Minji's account at her first workplace illustrates the social reception they received as outsiders, *'At my workplace, people did not talk to me and just looked down on me ... I still remember their cold faces when I approached them. I eventually quit the job.'*

For school-aged refugees, the experience was particularly challenging. Upon arrival in South Korea, middle and high school North Korean refugee students attended separate schools at Hanawon, while primary students enrolled in local schools with separate afternoon programs to aid their adjustment.

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. (Yungsook)

Upon leaving Hanawon, despite alternative school options, all participants in this study, who were of school-age at the time, attended public schools with a strong desire to interact with local peers, *'I wanted to play with local students as soon as possible'* (Hyunjung), and 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). Their preference for public schools stemmed from positive exposure to South Korean culture, *'I watched many South Korean dramas and became curious about life'* (Mija) and from their confidence in adapting to public schools, *'I was wondering why I had to choose an alternative school ... I wasn't a fugitive, so I didn't have any reason to avoid locals'* (Hyunjung).

However, school-aged refugees encountered significant

barriers to engagement in school. First, there were curriculum differences between the two Koreas, *'The subjects taught in schools are different between the two countries'* (Eunjung). Academic deficits during their asylum period compounded their challenges, *'I couldn't go to school before leaving North Korea and while I stayed in China'* (Soojin). These curriculum differences and academic deficits resulted in learning difficulties and lower academic achievement, as Soojin shared, *'I didn't understand the subjects at all.'*

Second, limited parental and school support hindered North Korean refugee students' academic progress. Parents were often too busy to provide support, *'I was too busy to work for a living. I didn't have time to support my daughter's study'* (Yongja), while having limited ability to assist their children's studies, *'I couldn't help my children with school activities, as I didn't understand school systems'* (Misook). Schools were also unprepared to accommodate their academic needs due to their small numbers, *'I was the first North Korean refugee at my school, so my teacher was unable to offer much guidance'* (Jungja). Consequently, many school-aged refugees felt alone in managing their studies, as Hyunjung explained,

I didn't have any foundational knowledge for studying the middle school subjects ... 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 third obstacle was the reception from South Korean students. North Korean refugee students appeared different in accents, looks, behaviors, and attitudes, *'My son told me that his classmates didn't understand what he said to them'* (Minji). Their differences initially sparked curiosity, as Soojin stated, *'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.'* However, this curiosity alone was insufficient for establishing meaningful relationships. Instead, this often led to the perception of refugee students as outsiders, resulting in rejection of interactions with North Korean refugee students, *'So many times, I was rejected when I asked people to have lunch or play together'* (Hyunjung).

Many North Korean refugee students faced academic challenges, compounded by a cold reception. These experiences led to feelings of anxiety and depression, *'I was disappointed and depressed'* (Yoojin). It also resulted in low self-esteem, *'I was always cautious about others' reactions to my presence'* (Junga), and a sense of exclusion, *'I was alone and invisible in school'* (Yungsook). This exclusion made them realize their outsider status, as Junga explained, *'As time went by, I realized 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.'*

5.4. Being One of Them

Academic deficits, socio-cultural differences, and stereotypes significantly hindered North Korean refugee students'

participation in educational activities. Despite government support and ethnic homogeneity, many expressed frustration with their unfamiliar surroundings and limited knowledge, *'My children didn't even master Korean alphabets when they started school'* (Sookhee), and *'Mathematics was the most challenging'* (Yungsook).

To address academic challenges, participants typically enrolled at lower grade levels than their intended ones. As Minji noted, *'My child started school joining a lower grade than his intended grade.'* They also sought government support, *'I received the government allowance for private tutoring'* (Yungsook), and NGO assistance, *'People at my church taught me English'* (Yoojin), to bridge their academic gaps. These efforts gradually helped them acquire foundational knowledge for their studies. Soojin explained, *'I attended a private academy after school to acquire foundational knowledge in subjects I learn. This gradually helped my understand of my teachers' lessons.'* This approach proved effective to some extent, with participants gaining confidence over time, Mija attested, *'Although the first few years were challenging, I believe I grew stronger mentally.'*

Despite growing confidence in schools and new surroundings, their North Korean identity remained a barrier to full acceptance as South Korean citizens. Although they believed, *'I am now a South Korean citizen'* (Eunjung), refugee students were often categorized as outsiders, *'I do not tell people my background because their attitude changes before and after'* (Soojin). Discrimination and stereotypes based on their North Korean identity hindered their participation in school. Yungsook shared, *'Once they knew where I came from, students suddenly showed their judgmental attitude and kept their distance from me.'* Regardless of their confidence, participants' North Korean identity consistently impeded their acceptance, *'They were ok with me and suddenly changed their tones after they knew I came from North Korea'* (Hyunjung).

In response, participants employed a 'being one of them' strategy, concealing their North Korean identity and trying to behave like South Koreans. They feared 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 was doable due to ethnic homogeneity, *'If I don't say my North Korean background, people think I am South Korean'* (Minji), aiming to minimize discrimination and facilitate interaction with their South Korean peers.

Many refugee students adopted this strategy in both domestic and social settings. Initially, they 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 employed 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 to engage in conversa-

tions on the same topics as their peers, *'I learned about K-pop idols, so that I could engage in other students' conversations'* (Yungsook). These efforts allowed refugee students to hide their North Korean identity and behave like South Koreans, *'When I entered high school, I didn't tell my North Korean background, and no one questioned where I came from'* (Soojin).

The 'being one of them' strategy was challenging and stressful, requiring constant efforts to speak, look and behave like South Koreans while cautiously concealing their North Korean identity, *'If I didn't understand their conversation, I tried to pretend to understand it. I was scared they might wonder where I came from'* (Jungja). However, this strategy enabled them to interact freely with their peers without fear of discrimination, allowing them to build supportive relationships and boost 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'* (Hyunjung). This approach led to satisfactory performance in school. Jungja recalled, *'I really enjoyed high school and joined many clubs. I was even elected as the head girl of my school.'*

Despite being South Korean citizens, discrimination and stereotypes tied to their North Korean identities highlighted the disparity between their legal citizenship and participation in school. Many North Korean refugee students did not experience immediate and comprehensive acceptance in school. To address this, they made continuous efforts to conceal their identity and behave like South Koreans in hopes of better interacting with their peers. The strategy of 'being one of them' encapsulates the participants' concerted efforts to facilitate their integration, leveraging all available resources within both domestic and social environments.

5.5. Constructing an Inter-Korean Identity

Newly arrived refugee students made significant efforts to adapt to new educational systems, *'For the first few years, I only slept 3-4 hours a day to catch up on my study'* (Mija). With collaborative support from the government and community, these students achieved commendable adaptation, *'The first two years were extremely hard, but as time went by, I gradually felt better'* (Yonghee). Utilizing the 'being one of them' strategy, participants consistently sought interaction with South Korean peers, helping them attain proficiency in new social norms, *'I speak with a South Korean accent and know much about the community. No one asks where I came from now'* (Yungsook).

By adopting this strategy, refugee students began to proclaim themselves as South Korean citizens, *'Now I call myself as South Korean'* (Hyunjung), with some preferring full assimilation, as Mija noted, *'I'd like to be absorbed into the host society and live quietly'*. This transformation involved concealing their North Korean identity, *'Many of my North Korean friends hide their backgrounds'* (Yungsook), while

reconciling with their newfound South Korean citizenship, *'I think I am South Korean'* (Mija), leading to the shedding of their North Korean roots.

Sometimes, I forget my North Korean background. When I watch the news about the harsh reality of North Korean people. I realize that I watch it just like other South Koreans. Those news stories sound sad, but I do not feel empathy. (Soojin)

However, participants sometimes had to disclose their North Korean heritage due to domestic and societal pressures, *'One day I have to tell my friends where I come from. It is the kind of homework we have to do here. Otherwise, I deceive them'* (Mija). Despite their efforts to blend in, revealing their North Korean identity challenged the development of long-lasting relationships, *'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'* (Hyunjung). 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,'* leading some participants to question their identity in society. Jungja described, *'When I wrote a cover letter for University admission, I questioned myself, am I South Korean or North Korean?'*

While the 'being one of them' strategy facilitated integration, participants realized that their newfound South Korean identity did not fully represent their status within South Korea, *'If I call myself South Korean, it is just a half side of me. If people call me North Korean, it also represents a half side of me'* (Yungsook). Instead of simple assimilation, they began to aspire to construct an inter-Korean identity that preserved their North Korean heritage within the context of South Korean citizenship, as Soojin emphasized, *'For my South Korean friends, I was just a friend from another town in Korea. This identity reminded me of who I am here.'* This hybrid identity reflects both Koreas' identities. Yoojin explained, *'I am South Korea but like a girl from Pusan, I am from Yang-gang Do in the North.'*

Participants in this study demonstrated a desire to forge an inter-Korean identity, allowing them to feel a sense of belonging in South Korea while embracing their North Korean heritage, as Mija stated, *'How can I forget my hometown in the North.'* This newfound identity often inspired these refugee students to seek ways to bridge the two Koreas in the future, reconciling their past and present selves.

I am South Korean but also have a North Korean background. Why do I have to choose only one? If you ask me who I am, I am South Korean who has a hometown in the North. This identity gives my life direction, and I will find something to bridge the two countries. (Junga)

Having an inter-Korean identity enabled participants to navigate between their past and present cultural dimensions, fueling their desire to bridge the gap between the two countries, with the belief that *'We are pioneers for the reunification of the two Koreas'* (Oakhee). Consequently, participants engaged in various activities that utilized their transnational

knowledge, including *'I am mentoring North Korean refugee students'* (Jungja) and *'I shared my own story and believed my story might change some people's minds. I asked for their help to change North Korea'* (Yungsook).

It was evident that the 'being one of them' strategy facilitated interactions with peers but did not entail simple assimilation into South Korea. Instead, refugee students strove to construct an inter-Korean identity that equally embraces the identities of the two Koreas, *'I am South Korean from the North'* (Soojin). This sense of identity has become the aspiration of many North Korean refugee students, motivating them to go above and beyond in their everyday activities to bridge the gap between the two Koreas in the future.

6. Discussion

South Korea grants citizenship to North Korean refugees upon arrival based on its Constitution [46]. These refugees are considered South Korean citizens with non-discriminatory citizenship rights [16], including educational equality. This aligns with Ayers' [1] assertion that "education is a fundamental and universal human right". To promote educational equality, the South Korean government offers various forms of assistance primarily aimed at assimilating North Korean refugee students [68], under the assumption that cultural and linguistic similarities would facilitate their acceptance [43].

For refugee students, education is seen as the primary path to upward social mobility [15], *'I think my children should go to university if they want to be treated decently'* (Yongja). However, many North Korean refugee students face educational inequality due to academic deficits [10], exacerbated by a lack of parental support [37], and school's unpreparedness [49]. Additionally, social rhetoric perpetuates negative stereotypes associated with North Korean identity [25], leading to their exclusion and marginalization [7]. In this study, refugee students often encounter different receptions, *'They suddenly changed their tones after they knew my North Korean background'* (Hyunjung), and feel like outsiders in schools, *'I realized they had their own inner-circle, and I wasn't a part of it'* (Jungja). This discrepancy between their educational rights and everyday experiences hinders their sense of belonging, as many participants express feeling like *'An alien in my town'* (Minji).

To foster North Korean refugee students' integration, it is imperative to recognize their identities, as identity is central to a sense of belonging [16]. However, many refugee students choose to conceal their North Korean identity, *'I do not say my North Korean background because I do not want to be the subject of people's gossip'* (Yoojin). Creating an inclusive school where refugees feel a sense of belonging while cherishing their heritage is of paramount importance. This environment can be cultivated by multicultural education, aiming to achieve educational equality among students, irrespective of their racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds [3].

Multicultural education is crucial in promoting North Ko-

rean refugee students' academic success by incorporating multicultural components into the curriculum [43]. This approach is essential for inclusive school reforms [4]. For example, New Zealand's curriculum includes cultural diversity as one of its principles, encouraging educators to affirm students' cultural identities and incorporate their cultural contexts into teaching programs [53]. Research has also produced extensive knowledge and materials on teaching multiculturalism [1, 3, 22, 30, 60], and teachers' intercultural competency has become a core quality in endorsing transformative multicultural education [47].

While multicultural education is crucial, serving as "a vehicle for greater multicultural understanding" [43], it largely lacks attention to the social reception that ethnic minority students face and its impact on their academic success [6, 35]. Each individual exists in context [14]; hence, refugee students' participation in school is inseparable from the attitudes of the host society. This can be interpreted in pedagogy as the idea that students' involvement in school activities is inevitably determined by the level of social reception. Teachers should carefully consider how societal factors impact these refugee students' education.

7. Study Limitations

This study has several limitations. Interpretive data analysis carries the potential bias [14]. Despite the back-translation of transcripts into English for validation, subtle discrepancies between the original text and translation may still exist. The findings are confined to the stories of 17 North Korean female refugees in metropolitan areas, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader North Korean refugee population. While these findings shed light on the experiences of North Korean female refugees, there are gaps in representing the changing demographics of the North Korean refugee population in South Korea. Future research should include diverse genders and geographical backgrounds, particularly North Korean refugees who were born in China.

8. Conclusion

The study underscores the disparity between North Korean refugee students' legal citizenship and their everyday experiences. Participants shared stories of social exclusion that hindered their integration into the school environment. In response, many adopted the strategy of 'being one of them' to facilitate interactions with their peers, establishing supportive networks in the process. Through these networks, they aspired to construct an inter-Korean identity that preserves their North Korean heritage within the framework of their South Korean citizenship. This identity fuels their desire to bridge the 70-year gap between the two Koreas in the future.

The study illuminates the challenges experienced by North Korean refugee students, who, despite being granted citizen-

ship, often face exclusion and marginalization within the educational system. It calls for multicultural education initiatives designed to promote educational equality and proposes inclusive school reforms that foster an environment where refugees and members of the host society embrace each other's differences. Emphasizing the vital role of social interaction, the study underscores the importance of creating inclusive schools where refugee students can fully participate and thrive, regardless of their origins.

9. Recommendations

Citizenship symbolizes equality within states [16], yet for many North Korean refugee students, it remains an abstract concept until they feel a sense of belonging in their school environment. This study reveals prevalent discrimination and stereotypes against North Korean identity in schools, leading to their exclusion and marginalization. It underscores the importance of social bridging programs that enable refugee students to engage more broadly in social life and attain full citizenship rights, as "citizenship exists within and between individuals in the way they relate to one another and to the place" [32].

Participants in this study struggled to define their identity as either South or North Koreans, feeling incomplete aligning with one identity and uncertain about their place in society. As Yungsook expressed, *'South Korean or North Korean? That question makes me wonder who I am here.'* Social bridging programs help refugee students integrate, preserving their unique identity alongside host citizens, as Sunja described, *'I attend a OOO club where same numbers of South and North Korean debate future leadership.'* Such initiatives foster a deeper understanding of identity and nurture a sense of connection and belonging. For example, during a camp with equal numbers of South Korean students, Yungsook realized her identity spans both Koreas, enriching her inter-Korean identity and her sense of belonging in society.

When I attended a camp to share each other's stories with equal numbers of South Korean students for five days, I realized that I am a person who knows both cultures because I came from the North but grew up in the South. That is me and this perfectly represents who I am here.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges the Mulmangcho Foundation for its assistance in participant recruitment. I also extend my sincere appreciation to the participants who generously shared their experiences in South Korea. This work was funded by the Korea Foundation [Fellowship for Field Research] and Massey University under Grant [Readi 16450].

Author Contributions

Hagyun Kim is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

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