

Beyond Homogeneity: Structural Barriers and Pathways to Inclusion for Multicultural Youth in Korea

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Abstract

This study investigates the distinct identity and mental health challenges of multicultural youth in South Korea, where ethnic homogeneity has defined national belonging. Although these adolescents are legally recognized as Korean, everyday encounters of exclusion complicate their sense of identity and safety. Drawing on existing scholarship and original survey data, this paper establishes and analyzes the youths' experiences within the broader social and institutional structures that shape their belonging.

Executive Summary

A mixed-methods survey was conducted in July 2025 with 211 participants from immigrant families in Seoul and surrounding regions. Quantitative measures gauged patterns of safety, peer inclusion, teacher support, and discrimination, while qualitative responses provided first-hand accounts of bullying, structural barriers, and a desire for a more inclusive curriculum. Results reveal polarization: some students report supportive peers and schools, while many others describe marginalization, linguistic scrutiny, and inadequate institutional intervention. Nearly half indicated that teachers rarely addressed discrimination, highlighting a need to improve

teacher training and update school policy. The findings suggest that challenges faced by multicultural youth are structural rather than individual. Comparative analysis with programs in Canada, Portugal, England, and Finland demonstrates that integration succeeds when classroom foundations, community networks, and state policies reinforce one another. Implementing teacher training, inclusive curricula, robust language support, anti-bullying initiatives, and equity data collection are urgently needed. Such interventions would not only protect vulnerable students but also strengthen Korea's long-term social cohesion and competitiveness. It is crucial that Korea's systemic reforms, cultural shifts, and legal

affairs are in correspondence in order to create improved outcomes for those who do not fit the standard designation of ethnic Korean.

Keywords

Multicultural families, Immigrant adolescents, Acculturative stress, Depression in youth, School integration, Educational support programs, Mental health vulnerability, Bicultural factors, ESOL / EAL support, Psychological well-being

Introduction

Identity is rarely fixed or absolute. For children of multicultural backgrounds, it is constantly negotiated, questioned, and reshaped by social forces. In Korea, where ethnic homogeneity has long been treated as a defining national characteristic, multicultural youths often find themselves navigating a paradox: they are legally and socially “Korean,” yet daily encounters remind them that they are also perceived as different. This tension reveals itself not only in the visible markers of identity—language, appearance, food, or tradition—but also in how these children are positioned by their peers, teachers, and larger society. The challenge is not simply whether they identify as Korean, but whether they are permitted to be accepted as such.

The central inquiry of this research is how multicultural youths in Korea construct and experience their identities within a society that still prizes cultural uniformity. To explore this, I conducted interviews with middle school students from immigrant families in Seoul. Their responses revealed a spectrum of

negotiation. Some, weary of being singled out, expressed the desire to “just be normal,” echoing the temptation of Homer’s lotus—a wish to forget or shed aspects of themselves for the sake of acceptance. Others, however, embraced hybridity with pride, insisting that having access to two cultures was a source of strength rather than shame. These contrasting voices illustrate not a simple divide but a continuum: between forgetting and remembering, erasure and resilience, conformity and self-assertion.

This paper situates those voices within the broader sociocultural and educational landscape of Korea. By examining their testimonies alongside scholarship on identity formation and multiculturalism, I argue that the struggle of these youths is not an individual shortcoming but a structural challenge. The question is not whether they should assimilate or resist, but how Korean society can expand its understanding of belonging to make space for difference.

Literature Review

Children from multicultural families in South Korea face unique psychological and social challenges that significantly affect their mental health. As the number of multicultural families grows in an otherwise ethnically homogenous society, recent research has identified various stressors contributing to emotional and behavioral vulnerabilities in these children.

Kim, Park, and Kim (2022) found that multicultural adolescents report elevated levels of stress related to depression, suicidal ideation,

and insufficient sleep. Their study highlights how these factors diminish the emotional well-being of these youths, which underscores the need for mental health resources tailored to the specific experiences of multicultural youth. Jung (2019) supports this finding, noting that adolescents from multicultural backgrounds exhibit high levels of anxiety and feelings of inadequacy, especially when experiencing emotional-social isolation or school-based bullying.

The school environment also plays a critical role in influencing the mental health of the mixed-heritage adolescents of this nation. In a study exploring the intergenerational transmission of acculturative stress, researchers found that immigrant mothers' struggles adapting to Korean society directly influenced their children's depressive symptoms (Lim, 2022). Importantly, this effect was mediated by school adjustment and bicultural acceptance, indicating that interventions must consider both familial and institutional dynamics. School participation and support for cultural identity are crucial in mitigating negative psychological outcomes.

Furthermore, a 2023 study in Social Sciences identified how cumulative adversity—including neglect at home and school violence—leads to internalizing behaviors such as withdrawal, low self-esteem, and depressive episodes. These findings suggest that mental health risks compound when multiple social systems fail to provide appropriate support for those in need. Without intervention, these children are more likely to suffer silently within these institutions.

Hong and Park (2024) take a broader structural approach, as they examine risk factors among multicultural families through national survey data. They find that mental health vulnerability is most severe in families facing socioeconomic hardship or limited access to community networks. This reinforces the argument that mental health policies must be intersectional, addressing economic disparity and institutional exclusion as part of comprehensive care.

Taken together, these studies provide a cohesive understanding of the complex risks facing multicultural children in Korea. From interpersonal discrimination and family stress to structural inequalities, the literature points to a clear need for culturally responsive, community-based mental health initiatives. School-based interventions, identity-affirming practices, and targeted social services may offer pathways toward resilience for this vulnerable population.

While existing research offers valuable insights into the psychological and social challenges faced by multicultural youth in Korea, several important gaps remain. Much of the scholarship to date emphasizes large-scale quantitative surveys or clinical measures of stress, depression, and adjustment (e.g., Kim, Park, & Kim, 2022; Hong & Park, 2024). These studies successfully establish correlations between risk factors and mental health outcomes, but often lack the lived, nuanced perspectives of the youths themselves. In particular, the voices of children describing their own experiences of identity conflict, discrimination, or belonging are rarely

foregrounded in the data.

Another limitation is the narrow focus on either family dynamics or school environments in isolation. Few studies explore how these spheres interact with each other, nor do they adequately account for the intersectional nature of identity, where cultural background, socioeconomic status, and peer relationships converge to shape outcomes. Additionally, research tends to prioritize pathology (stress, depression, anxiety) over resilience. There is less attention given to the strategies young people use to navigate adversity or build hybrid cultural identities, which could be equally important for designing supportive interventions.

This study's survey data will be used to address these gaps by centering student perspectives in their own voices. By asking multicultural children directly about their experiences at home, at school, and within their communities, the investigation will capture a more holistic picture of both struggles and sources of resilience. The survey also intentionally includes questions about identity, belonging, and coping strategies, areas underexplored in the existing literature. In doing so, it will complement the quantitative, risk-focused orientation of prior studies with qualitative insights that can inform more culturally responsive, youth-driven approaches to mental health and social support in Korea.

Methods

A mixed-methods survey was administered between July 22–29, 2025, to multicultural families residing in South Korea. The

questionnaire employed quantitative and qualitative responses to capture both measurable patterns and personal narratives.

The quantitative component consisted of 5-point Likert-scale statements measuring five domains: (1) identity and cultural belonging, (2) perceived safety at school and in the broader community, (3) sense of inclusion or exclusion in peer groups, (4) perceptions of school climate and teacher support, and (5) frequency of experiencing discrimination. The qualitative component included open-ended prompts inviting participants to describe discriminatory incidents, articulate desired policy changes, and suggest ways schools could better support multicultural youth.

Respondents (N = 211) were recruited through school administrators, local multicultural community centers, and youth advocacy networks across the nation. Participants represented a diverse range of national and cultural backgrounds, including Korean, Chinese, Russian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Mongolian, and stateless identities. The sample included slightly more female-identifying respondents (54%) than male-identifying (44%), with 2% identifying outside of the gender binary. All survey responses were anonymized; no identifying information was collected.

Results

Quantitative Findings. Analysis revealed striking polarization across domains of safety, belonging, and discrimination.

- **Safety.** While 41% of participants reported

feeling “safe” or “very safe” in school, 37% indicated they “rarely” or “never” felt safe.

- **Belonging.** Responses showed similar division: 45% reported feeling “included” or “very included” in school, whereas 32% reported frequent exclusion or isolation.
- **Discrimination.** Experiences of discrimination varied widely: 29% reported never experiencing it, but 34% reported experiencing it “often” or “very often.”
- **Teacher Support.** Nearly half of respondents (48%) perceived their teachers as “rarely” or “never” intervening in discriminatory incidents.

Qualitative Findings. Three themes emerged prominently from the open-ended responses:

1. **Peer Exclusion and Bullying.** Students frequently described exclusion based on appearance or language. A Chinese-Korean student shared: “When I speak Mandarin with my mom after school, other students laugh and say I’m not really Korean.” Similarly, a Vietnamese-Korean respondent wrote: “Other kids call me ‘foreigner’ even though I was born here.”
2. **Structural and Institutional Barriers.** Several respondents cited systemic challenges tied to documentation, policy, or school structures. One stateless student explained: “I was told I couldn’t join certain programs because I don’t have the right ID card.” Another Russian-Korean participant described difficulty accessing tutoring and extracurricular programs because of restrictive eligibility rules.
3. **Desire for Inclusive Curricula and**

Representation. Students emphasized the importance of representation in classrooms. One participant noted: “We should learn about different cultures in class, not only Korean history. That way we all feel seen.” Another suggested integrating multicultural narratives into literature and history classes to “normalize difference instead of treating it like an exception.”

Overall Trends. While a subset of participants described supportive peer groups and inclusive school climates, many articulated feelings of marginalization. The polarization of responses underscores the uneven distribution of supportive environments: multicultural youth in certain schools or regions may experience affirmation and acceptance, while others remain subject to systemic barriers and peer discrimination.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight both the resilience of multicultural youth in South Korea and the structural challenges they continue to face. Quantitative polarization reveals that experiences of safety, belonging, and discrimination are not uniform but contingent on school climate, peer culture, and institutional structures. This variability suggests that while progress has been made in some contexts, inequities persist in ways that hinder the integration and well-being of multicultural students.

Peer-Level Challenges. The frequent reports of bullying and exclusion based on appearance or

language reinforce earlier research that highlights the salience of visible difference in South Korea's largely homogenous social fabric. Language, in particular, surfaced as a key marker of difference: students speaking their heritage language in public settings reported heightened peer scrutiny. These findings echo prior scholarship suggesting that linguistic assimilation is both an expectation and a barrier for migrant and multicultural populations.

Institutional Gaps. The perception that nearly half of teachers “rarely” or “never” intervene in discriminatory incidents points to significant gaps in teacher training and school policy. Existing multicultural education policies, while rhetorically supportive, often lack consistent implementation at the school level. Participants’ narratives suggest that educator awareness and proactive interventions could significantly mitigate peer-level discrimination.

Curricular Representation. The expressed desire for inclusive curricula underscores the importance of visibility in fostering belonging. By integrating multicultural narratives into textbooks, literature, and history instruction, schools can affirm diverse identities rather than relegating them to the margins. Such representation has been shown in other contexts (e.g., Canada, the U.S., and parts of Europe) to strengthen resilience and social cohesion among minority youth.

Policy Implications. The survey findings suggest three avenues for policy reform:

1. **Teacher Training and Intervention Protocols.** Mandatory training programs

could equip educators with the skills to identify and address discrimination in classrooms.

2. **Inclusive Curricula Development.**

National and regional education authorities could revise curricula to incorporate diverse cultural histories and perspectives.

3. **Equitable Access to Programs.** Revisiting eligibility requirements for extracurricular programs and scholarships would address the barriers reported by stateless and migrant-background youth.

International comparisons offer a roadmap. Canada's Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) program demonstrates how integrating education with settlement services enables entire families, including students, to adapt and thrive, underscoring the importance of a holistic community approach. Portugal's PLNM framework underscores that language support is most effective when it is systematic, regularly assessed, and tailored to diverse learners rather than assuming a generalized framework appropriate for all individuals. England's school-linking initiatives demonstrate how structured opportunities for students from different backgrounds to collaborate can break down prejudice before it hardens into adulthood, while Finland's KiVa anti-bullying program proves that nationwide, evidence-based interventions can make intolerance socially unacceptable within classrooms. Importantly, both Portugal's Programa Escolhas and Canada's equity data legislation highlight that what happens outside of schools—community investment, transparent data, and

accountability—matters as much as what happens inside them. Together, these cases suggest that integration depends not on isolated reforms but on aligning school policies, community support, and government accountability so that students encounter a consistent message of belonging wherever they go. For Korea, the lesson is clear: multicultural education cannot be an afterthought. It must be embedded in both the daily life of classrooms and the broader social fabric, ensuring that immigrant and multicultural youth are not left navigating exclusion alone but supported by an ecosystem that values their presence.

At the same time, these cases reveal a key tension: policies that appear transferable are often deeply rooted in national histories and governance structures. Canada's success with SWIS, for example, rests on a broader policy commitment to multiculturalism, a framework less developed in contexts where ethnic homogeneity has historically been tied to national identity. Similarly, Finland's KiVa program relies on high levels of trust in educational authorities and a tradition of teacher autonomy, conditions not equally present everywhere. Thus, the comparative value lies less in direct transplantation and more in extracting principles—such as early intervention, systemic coordination, and accountability—that can guide context-sensitive adaptation.

A recurring theme is the importance of consistency across domains of a child's life. When language instruction, anti-discrimination efforts, and community engagement operate in

isolation, their impact is limited. When they reinforce one another, belonging becomes a stable experience rather than a fragile exception. This holistic alignment benefits not only immigrant and multicultural youth but also strengthens social cohesion by preparing all students to engage constructively in diverse societies.

For Korea, then, the challenge is not simply to borrow programs but to create a coherent framework that connects classroom pedagogy, school networks, community organizations, and state-level policy. This means embedding multiculturalism into teacher education, curriculum standards, and social policy rather than relying on short-term initiatives. More broadly, these comparisons highlight that integration is not the responsibility of schools alone but a societal project—one requiring political will, sustained investment, and a willingness to reconsider dominant narratives of national identity.

Limitations and Future Research

While the sample size ($N \approx 210$) allows for valuable insights, the study is not nationally representative. Respondents were recruited primarily through schools and advocacy networks, potentially excluding those most marginalized or disengaged from institutional nexuses. Future research could expand geographic reach, employ longitudinal tracking, and incorporate intersectional dimensions (e.g., gender, class, and disability) to better capture the complexity of multicultural youth experiences.

Conclusion

The findings of this study make clear that multicultural youth in Korea face structural barriers to belonging, safety, and equitable education. While students expressed resilience and creativity in navigating their identities, they also reported frequent experiences of discrimination and a lack of institutional support. If Korea is to build a genuinely inclusive society that will adequately support multicultural families, lawmakers must move beyond rhetoric and enact evidence-based policies that have proven effective abroad.

International comparisons offer a roadmap. Canada's Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) program demonstrates how linking education to settlement services enables immigrant families to thrive. Portugal's PLNM framework shows the importance of systematic language assessment and support tailored to specific needs. England's school-linking initiatives and Finland's KiVa anti-bullying program provide scalable, nationwide models for reducing prejudice and xenophobia within classrooms. Beyond schools, Portugal's Programa Escolhas and Canada's equity data legislation highlight the need for community-level investment and transparent accountability.

For Korea, the policy priorities are clear. Schools should empower students by creating anti-discrimination networks formally recognized and subsidized by the Ministry of Education, in order to institutionalize peer advocacy and solidarity. At the same time, the government must expand robust language support that reaches beyond immigrant

children to include Korean-born children of immigrant parents, who often face unique linguistic and cultural challenges. A nationwide, evidence-based anti-bullying program that explicitly addresses xenophobic harassment rather than treating it as a peripheral issue is essential. From an institutional standpoint, teachers must be required to undergo training focused on recognizing ethnic biases to ensure diversity is valued, not simply tolerated. Equally important is the systematic collection of privacy-safe equity data, enabling policymakers to track disparities honestly and design distinct interventions grounded in personal experiences. Beyond schools, community inclusion hubs should be established to provide mentoring systems while encouraging civic participation for multicultural youth. These reforms are not optional, but rather urgent. They would not only protect vulnerable students but also strengthen Korea's social framework and long-term competitiveness. The lesson from international evidence is conspicuous: integration works when governments invest in both equity and belonging. Korea must act now to ensure that multicultural youth are not left disillusioned with their identity in their homeland, but instead willing and able to play an active role in shaping the nation's future.

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