

# **KOREA IN RAPID TRANSITION TOWARD A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY: CHALLENGES IN PREPARING TEACHERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Korea has been a strongly homogeneous country until recently. While the need for teachers who are prepared to address the special needs of diverse learners has never been greater, little is known about the current diversity preparation of the nation's teachers. This research investigated the current status of multicultural preparation for Korean early childhood educators. Result of this study suggest that out of 240 pre-service and in-service teachers studied, 54% of the participants ( $n=96$ ) had no experience of taking multicultural related courses in their teacher training. Despite the rapid diversification in classrooms, Korean teacher education seems quite slow in responding to the rapid diversification of classrooms. This study emphasizes the dire need for multicultural education in 21<sup>st</sup> century Korea. The study also suggests a positive direction for better teacher preparation for multicultural education.

**Keywords:** multicultural education, teacher education, right to education, Korea

## **INTRODUCTION**

Korea has maintained its historically homogeneous status until recently. As of October 2011, with the number of foreign residents living in Korea now exceeding 1.4 million and accounting for 3% of the Korean population (Kim, 2011), Korea is rapidly transitioning toward a multicultural society. For many Koreans, however, it is still believed that the nation should maintain a strong mono-ethnic national identity based on shared blood and ancestry (Moon, 2010). This common perception too often results in ethnic minority students being discriminated against in classrooms (Jo, 2009; Kim, 2006; Yum, 2006). In 2007, the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) called upon Korea to recognize the multi-ethnic character of contemporary Korean society and overcome the image of Korea as an ethnically homogeneous country (p.3).

The relatively recent influx of foreign residents can be attributed to rising numbers of foreign workers, and increasing numbers of international marriages. Foreign workers typically arrive from neighboring countries such as China, Philippines, Mongolia, and Vietnam. They come to Korea to engage in what is referred to as 3D (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) jobs which tend to be low paying and high risk menial jobs that Korean workers refuse to accept. This 3D term has been used by Koreans as a neologism referring to blue collar jobs as the number of foreign workers have grown. These workers play such an important role as members of the Korean workforce that

the majority of Korean manufacturers are now dependent upon them for survival. According to the Korean Educational Development Institute (2009), 1,270 students whose parents were foreign workers were enrolled in public schools in 2009. These numbers, however, do not include children of foreign workers who are in Korea with undocumented immigrant status and who are afraid to send their children to school (Won, 2008).

International marriage between Korean males and foreign spouses has also drastically changed the demographic make-up of Korea. Only 1.6% of all marriages in Korea were international marriages in 1993. In 2005, this number increased to 13.5% (Statistics Korea, 2011). In 2010, there were 34,235 international marriages in Korea which was nearly triple the 11,605 in the year 2000 (Choi, 2011). As young Korean females leave rural areas for better education and jobs in cities, the shortage of marriage eligible women in these areas, especially farming and fishing communities, encouraged Korean males to seek international marriages. Multicultural family in this study refers to families that begin with inter-racial marriage-including families where parents are divorced or not married, but living together.

The rapid influx of North Korean refugees has also added to the cultural diversity within Korean society. In 2007, more than 10,000 North Korean refugees lived in South Korea (Won, 2008). Although North and South Korea share the same ethnic origin, after the Korean War in 1950, the subsequent changing borders formed different societies. As a result of outside intervention, Korea became two states with very different political systems- North as a communist state and South as a republic. In addition, the border between North and South Korea portrays the sharpest contrast in living standards and social organization in the world. While South Korea has demonstrated highly successful economic growth, North Koreans continue to starve as its government withholds food rations to entire regions and uses cost savings to maintain and expand the military (Kim, 2005; Park, 2012). Due to different political ideologies, educational systems, economic status, and dialects, North Korean refugees experience serious cultural problems when they come to South Korea. These cultural boundaries are not only due to North Korean refugees' different culture, but also because of South Koreans' attitudes toward them.

South Koreans consider refugees to be people from a different culture. A news article in The New York Times described a 24 years old North Korean refugee's struggle in South Korea (Fackler, 2011). In this article, the refugee shared how he felt when he first crossed the border after staying in brutal North Korean and Chinese prisons by saying I felt like someone from the 1970s who was put in a time machine and dropped in the 21st century. He also said that his classmates shun him for his northern dialect, and for his small stature likely caused by lack of nutrition. The refugee people from North Korea have been called many different derogatory terms, such as escapers, defectors, communists, or north reds. In 2005, the Korean Ministry of Unification announced the word *Saetomin* to refer to North Korean refugees in public. Today, the word *Saetomin* is a new term that is officially used in Korea in referring to North Korean refugees. The

three-syllable word *Sae-to-min* is derived from the compound pronunciation of three Chinese characters. Each character has meaning: *Sae*: new, *To*: settle, and *Min*: people. That is, *Saetomin* itself means new settlers. The term *Saetomin*, in this study is to refer to people who came from North Korea and settled in South Korea.

Korea is in the early stage of major ethno-cultural diversification. While such diversity is likely to expand even more rapidly in the years to come, schools educating future generations of Koreans remain monocultural. The purpose of this study is to explore the preparation for early childhood educators to teach multicultural classrooms in a period of rapid ethno-cultural diversification from a traditionally homogeneous society.

### **Significance Of The Study**

Research in the field of Early Childhood Education increasingly emphasize the need for 21<sup>st</sup> century teachers to better understand and support diversity in their classrooms (Spanierman, Oh, Heppner, Neville, Mobley, Wright, Dillon, & Navarro, 2011). According to the Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI), in 2009 approximately 60% of children from multicultural families were under age 6. This report further suggests that young children account for more than half of the learners from the multicultural families in Korea. In the same year, the report also estimated that more than 17,000 students from multicultural families dropped out of public schooling (KEDI, 2009). If public educational institutions do not succeed in better supporting multicultural classrooms for young learners, students from diverse cultural groups will not receive the quality of education an increasingly diverse world demands. In 2000, 189 world leaders adopted eight goals for humanity: Millennium Developmental Goals (United Nation, 2000). One of the goals addressed the need to provide high quality primary education for all children by the targeted date of 2015. This means that each nation should take responsibility for offering high quality and equal educational opportunities for all school aged children.

While the need for teachers who are prepared to address the special needs of diverse learners has never been greater, little is known about the current diversity preparation of the nation's teachers. In order to teach all children, not only Korean students but also an increasing number of children from multicultural families, foreign workers and *Saetomin* (North Koreans), specialized diversity preparation is critical. This study, then, provides insight into the current preparation of Korean teachers to meet emerging cultural diversity challenges.

### **Research Question**

In order to determine the current preparation of future Korean teachers in addressing diversity demands, the following research question was proposed:

How do Korean teacher training programs prepare early childhood educators to teach rapidly increasing numbers of diverse children?

## IMPORTANCE OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

The role of teacher education in preparing future teachers for cultural diversity has been emphasized by numerous researchers (Banks, 2008; Bennett, 2003; Gay 2000). Jenks, Lee & Kanpol (2001) point out that preschool teacher education programs must be sensitive to diversity issues: as their students bring their differences such as cultural values, prior knowledge about diversity, and learning styles into the classroom. These researchers conclude that teacher education in colleges and universities must make a commitment to transformative learning in preschool educators that will result in powerful multicultural programs for students (Jenks et al., 2001).

Likewise, Brown (2004), examined the influence of cultural diversity awareness of teacher education students in a cultural diversity course. To find out the effect of a three hour course, a pretest and posttest was administered with the Cultural Diversity Awareness Inventory (CDAI). This study used 2 different instructional methods with undergraduate students in a teacher education program. Students voluntarily registered for the course before the semester began. The course was divided into two sections: Group 1 (n=56), and Group 2 (n=44). The differences between the instruction methods for each group were: (a) course format, (b) course requirements and assignments and (c) material selection, activities, and field experiences. Although the treatments were different, both instruction methods were focused on teaching and learning in diverse classroom settings. The results showed statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) between pretest and posttest. The study found that focusing the first eight classes on reducing student resistance and providing students with opportunities for self-examination was the most effective method of course introduction. In addition, cross-cultural field experiences and cross-cultural research projects were found to influence the effectiveness of the modified class format. Brown (2004) concluded one stand-alone cultural diversity course does have the capacity to increase some factors of cultural diversity awareness while not influencing others (p. 337).

Multicultural teacher training can bring changes in students' attitudes and beliefs about diversity. Ketterer, Phillip, King, & Hilber (2009) support the importance of exposure to diversity to improve perceptions of multicultural teaching competence. Ketterer et al. (2009) assessed perceptions of participants' level of multicultural competence on education college faculty (n=47) and pre-service teachers (n=88). Researchers modified Wayson's Multicultural Teaching Scale (1993) and named it the College of Education Faculty Survey (CEFS). To test differences in overall multicultural competence scores, an independent sample t-test was computed. The result of the comparison of group means indicated no significant difference in the perceptions of the two groups. Yet, faculty who had experience attending multicultural workshops perceive themselves to be more competent than faculty who had not. Also correlational analysis by Ketterer et al (2009) suggests that there is a positive relationship between experiences with cultural diversity and multicultural competence ( $r = .67$ ). The study also found that experience in diversity in early

education and in adolescent friendship showed a high degree of colinearity ( $r = .88$ ). This suggests a potential relationship between diversity in early education and diversity in adolescence. Overall, Ketterer et al. (2009) concluded that experiences of diversity increase multicultural competence. To do this, the researchers suggested workshops and other types of real-world experience such as field experiences outside university in a variety of school and social-ethnic contexts.

## **DISCRIMINATIONS AGAINST NON KOREAN STUDENTS**

Jo (2009) studied Korean elementary teachers' perceptions of migrant children. Using a purposeful sample, Jo studied an elementary school that offered not only multicultural classrooms but also after school programs for minority students. Through participant observations and in-depth interviews, Jo found that minority students faced institutional discrimination. For example, in Korean schools, instead of using the students' name throughout the year, students are referred to by number. Generally, there are 25 or fewer students in each class. So the students, number 1 through 25, are full blooded Korean students. In addition most Korean teachers reserve a couple of additional numbers (example 4-5), for Korean students who might move into the classroom. Minority students, however, are assigned numbers beginning with the number after last reserved number (usually 30 plus). Another example from Jo's study, involves the social security number. Usually social security numbers begin with one's birth date. Minority student social security numbers, however, begin with 6. Jo also found that classroom teachers lacked understanding of minority students. Accordingly, teachers were uncomfortable managing their multicultural classrooms as they could not continue with the previous teaching methods. Teachers, for example, found themselves unprepared to teach students from the Philippines because they could not speak their language. Jo's study suggests that Korean elementary school teachers are unprepared to deal with multicultural classrooms.

Kim (2006) also found institutional discrimination against minority students. Kim analyzed the perceptions of minority students' schooling in Korea. By adopting in-depth interviews and participant observations (three days a week for one month), Kim found that minority students were isolated as a special group upon entrance to a Korean school. For example, minority students' test scores were excluded when average class scores were calculated. One of the students from Mongolia expressed his feeling of being excluded from the class by saying there are only 42 students in the class. I don't understand why my class number is not 42 instead of 51. In addition, or perhaps because of such discrimination, minority students tend to give up and drop out of Korean schools. Kim further found that minority students who did succeed in adjusting to Korean schools had a strong tendency to embrace a Korean identity and to deny their own ethnic identity.

While Jo (2009), and Kim (2006) found visible discrimination against minority students in elementary school system, Yun (2006) examined preschool students and their teachers. Through 16 classroom observations, and 2 interviews of 4 teachers, Yun's study revealed that it was neither teachers nor schools, but peers who discriminate against minority students. Native Korean children verbally bully or exclude minority children. For example, one child said, you go back to Peru to another child whose parents were from Peru. Another child was observed saying your skin is dark, why do you live in Korea? to an Indonesian child. Yun concluded that teachers were supportive in helping minority children adjust to the schools by helping minority students feel comfortable and welcomed. For example, many teachers assisted in teaching the Korean language to those minority children who were not fluent in Korean.

### **MULTICULTURAL PREPARATION IN CURRENT TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN KOREA**

Choi (2009) investigated educational experiences related to multicultural education and the level of the perceptions about multicultural education of Korean pre-service teachers. Using a purposeful sample, a survey was distributed to 400 university students in a teacher training program. Surveys returned ( $n=392$ ) were analyzed with t-test. Results show that only 37.8% of the participants had multicultural education coursework. Although Korean classrooms are becoming ethnically and culturally diverse, teacher training colleges fail to demonstrate their readiness for multicultural classrooms.

In order to determine the recent curricula of top ranking teacher education programs in Korea, the researcher reviewed course offerings at the top rated (as measured by entrance examination) teacher education programs. Tables 1, 2, and 3 summarize a current status of multicultural or culture related course offerings in high rank teacher education universities. Out of 8 universities, 7 universities offer either no course or only one or two as elective courses.

Table 1: Current Status of multicultural Courses at Top Universities in Teacher Education, 2011

<b>University /Program</b>	<b>Course Name (Credit)</b>	<b>Required/Elective</b>
<hr/>		
Seoul National University		
Education	-	-
Social Studies Education	Culture and Society (3)	Elective
Ethics Education	Culture and Ethics (3)	Elective
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Yonsei University		
Teacher Education	-	-
Education	-	-
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Hanyang University		
Education	Multicultural Society and Education (3)	Required

	Globalization and Multicultural Education (3)	Elective
Total	4	Required 1 Elective 3

Note: Curriculums are based on 2011, retrieved from each university website

As seen in Table 1, the highest ranked university in Korea (Seoul National University) offers two culture related courses as minors; one of the major universities in teacher education, Yonsei University, offers no courses related to cultural diversity; only one university (Hanyang University) offers a multicultural course as a required course.

Table 2: Current Status of Multicultural Courses at Top Universities in Early Childhood Education, 2011

University	Program	Diversity Course
Ewha Women's University	Early Childhood Education	-
Chungang University	Early Childhood Education	-
Sungshin Women's University	Early Childhood Education	-
Duksung University	Early Childhood Education	-
Total	4	0

Note: Curriculums are based on 2011, retrieved from each university website

Table 2 shows top universities (as measured by entrance examination) in early childhood education programs in Korea. No university offers even 1 multicultural related course in its early childhood education program. Through this survey of the curricula of several leading universities, it is clear that Korean teacher education programs are slow to respond to the increasing demand for multicultural education.

Table 3: Current Status of Multicultural Courses at Top Universities in Child Related Courses, 2011

University /Program	Course Name(Credit)	Diversity Course
Yonsei University	Childhood/Family	-
Sookmyung Women's University	Child Welfare	-
Duksung University	Childhood/Family	-
Total	3	0

Note: Curriculums are based on 2011, retrieved from each university website

As seen in Table 3, other top universities that prepare teachers of young children offer no courses dealing with diversity issues. When considering that current university students will soon become classroom teachers, it appears likely that they will be poorly prepared to teach multicultural classrooms.

Although top teacher training programs in Korea do not offer multicultural courses themselves, trainers are beginning to share multicultural issues in classes. In my recent pilot study (Park, 2011), when a Korean kindergarten teacher was asked if she had heard the term multiculturalism in college classes, she answered:

... I heard before... in a class ... that in the future, there will be children from other countries or from international marriages... but it (multicultural issue) was a part of a class which was not even in a chapter of the text book... (Interview, July 27, 2011)

As a model, Busan National University of Education is active and far more advanced than other schools in training multicultural classroom teachers. This university opened *The Center for Multi Cultural Education* in 2009, and the university has been sponsoring the center with about \$500,000 every year. In 2009, the center opened three courses for university students: Multiculture and Korean Language Education, Multiculture and Korean Society, and Korean Language Education in Multicultural Society. It also organized club activities called WF (We are Friends) and Mentoring that encourage the university students to be actively involved in multicultural education. Currently 230 university enrolled students are volunteering as one-to-one mentors to children from multicultural backgrounds. As mentors they visit children twice a week to help with homework, teach Korean language and share cultural experiences.

## DATA COLLECTION

Table 4: Description of Sample

<b>Participants Teaching Grade</b>	<b>Number of Surveys Distributed</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Pre-service Teachers ( <i>n</i> =81)		
Students who are currently enrolled in teacher training programs	120	81
In-service Teachers ( <i>n</i> =97)		
Preschool teachers	40	37
Kindergarten teachers	40	30
Elementary school teachers	40	30
Total	240	178

In order to investigate how Korean teacher training programs prepare early childhood educators to teach in multicultural classrooms a sample of Korean early childhood educators from Seoul, Korea was selected randomly through school principals. The instrument for this study was a survey that

asked participants whether they had experience taking a multicultural course. They were first asked to answer 1= Yes, or 2= No. If Yes, they were asked to circle one of the choices: 1= 1-2 hours, 2= 3-4 hours, 3= 5-6 hours, 4= 7-8 hours, 5= 9-10 hours, 6= 11-12 hours, 7=13 or more hours. The hours in this survey indicate time spent taking courses dealing with cultural diversity. The survey took place between November 2011 and January 2012 in Korea. A total of 240 surveys were distributed. After deleting the cases with missing data, the final sample size of 178 teachers was used for this study.

## RESULT/DISCUSSION

Data was analyzed using the computer statistical software SPSS. The college students who were currently registered in teacher education programs showed slightly more experience in taking multicultural classes (.7%) than in-service teachers. The T-test result, however, found no statistically significant difference in the multicultural course taking experience between pre-service and in-service teachers,  $F(1, 178) = .009, p > .05$ . This trend suggests that the teaching status is not related to an experience of taking multicultural related courses. Thus, whether the participants are in teachers training or currently teaching, they relatively lack exposure to multicultural education.

Descriptive statistics suggest that about 54% of the participants ( $n=96$ ) had no experience taking multicultural related courses in their teacher training. This suggests that more than half of the teachers had not taken multicultural related classes in their teacher training. The distribution of hours of multicultural course taking is presented below.

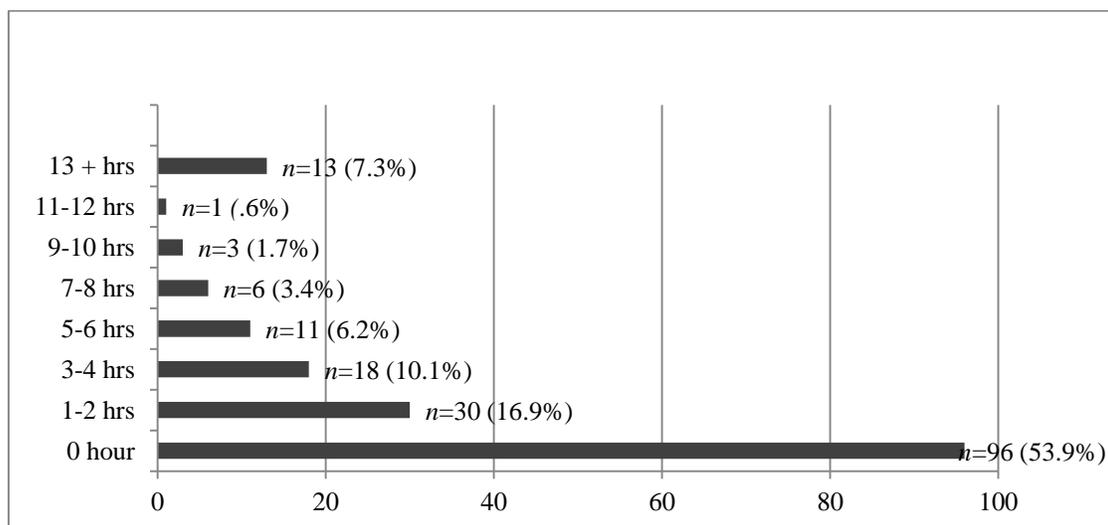


Figure 1: Hours Of Multicultural Course Content Experience

When the number of the participants who had taken multicultural courses ( $n=82$ ) was analyzed, 58% ( $n=48$ ) indicated that they have taken less than 4 hours of multicultural courses in

their teacher trainings. About 16% ( $n=13$ ) answered for more than 13 hours. This figure tells us that multicultural courses might not have been offered as a full semester course, but rather was a part of a class. This data also suggests that multicultural education might not be a strong focus in teacher education programs in Korea.

The result suggests that Korean teacher education colleges need to put multicultural education into action. While educational experiences are important in changing teachers' attitudes and beliefs about cultural diversity (Garmon, 2005), Korean teacher education programs seemed quite slow in response to the fast cultural diversification of classrooms.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Participants were not given a definition of a multicultural course. As multiculturalism is a novel phenomenon in Korean society, it is possible that some participants were confused when asked such a question in the survey. Another concern was whether the multicultural course was elective or required. If there were more multicultural courses as elective, but the pre-service teachers did not take them, this may limit the ability to generalize the preparation for multicultural training. Yet, based on the result that more than half of the participants had no experience taking such a class, it can be interpreted that the multicultural classes were offered as an elective course. Lastly, the quality of multicultural courses was not able to be investigated. This limits the generalization of the preparation for Korean multicultural education, which needs further research on the quality of multicultural courses. Preparation for multicultural classrooms is more than just offering a multicultural course in teacher training programs.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study has added to the growing research interests on the multicultural education of Korea. There are several key findings of the study. First, even top ranking teacher training programs in Korea did not appear to offer official courses that are related to cultural diversity. Second, fewer participants of the teachers have taken multicultural courses. Third, the groups of in-service and pre-service teachers showed no statistical difference in exposure to multicultural education in their trainings. This result brought a disappointment to the researcher's expectation. The researcher hoped to find more pre-service teachers being exposed to multicultural courses than in-service teachers. This was based on the assumption that teacher education colleges may start to offer multicultural courses soon as a preparation for multicultural classrooms. While Korea is in rapid transition toward a multicultural society, this study caught a glimpse of Korea facing a challenge in multicultural education.

Korea ratified the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Children on November 20, 1991. Now, responding to Article 28: right of the child to education, all children in Korea are allowed to go to public schools. This also means that every child has the right to education without discrimination of any kind. However, despite the guaranteed educational opportunity for all children, it is not quite fulfilled when it comes to real life for minority students. When teachers are not prepared to teach multicultural classrooms, the mission to fulfill all children's right to education cannot succeed. And in that sense, the findings of this study have implications for Korean early childhood educators and teacher education colleges. In order to meet the educational needs of increased cultural diversity, teacher education colleges and universities need to make a conscious effort to build schools' multicultural environments through training pre-service educators. For teachers to have greater awareness in diverse classrooms, it is imperative to learn and experience cultural diversity. Korean teacher training institutes, therefore, must open multiculturalism related courses. Multicultural education in teacher training requires more than just a little knowledge. Relevant courses must consider how the students' cultural background interacts with the cultural pattern of Korean society. Also, the quality of courses will need to be carefully reviewed prior to opening diversity courses in teacher education colleges. Well planned multicultural courses can address the growing need for educators to be competent in teaching students from different cultural backgrounds. Without teachers who exhibit multicultural awareness and cross-cultural abilities, equity pedagogy and necessary social changes would not be possible (Hong, 2010).

Furthermore, in-service teachers who are already graduated from colleges and are currently teaching in classrooms are also suggested to gain multicultural teaching competence by participating in professional activities such as attending conferences and meetings. Such multicultural education in teachers' training may help teachers to gain competence to teach children from different cultures. Regardless of ethnic background, or language spoken, all children have a right to education. In order to actualize the right to education for all, teachers and schools need to make schools where minority students can continue their education in safe, included, and harmonized environments. This may start administrators, teachers, as well as Korean students learning to accept and understand differences and to embrace them with humanity.

Future research might consider examining the quality of multicultural courses that are offered in teacher training programs currently. Further, positive directions for developing effective courses that fit Korean educators are suggested to be explored. With a rapidly rising number of students from ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse backgrounds in Korea, this is an urgent research problem.

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