A Critical Analysis of Multicultural Education Policies in Korea : Focusing on Official Discourses About Multicultural Students

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Introduction

This paper examines three governmental policy documents on multicultural education and critiques the ways in which multicultural education is practiced in Korean school contexts. In recent years, South Korea [henceforth Korea] has witnessed demographic changes with increasing numbers of immigrants. According to Statistics Korea (2019), the number of foreign populations in Korea had risen to 2,367,607, constituting about 4.6 percent of the total population. The ongoing inflow of foreign residents and immigrants has made significant changes in various aspects of Korean society, notably in education. The number of school-aged children with multicultural backgrounds has reached over 100,000 since 2017, four times higher than 2008. Long considered to be ethnically and linguistically homogeneous, the Korean society is now strongly urged to educate students to develop awareness in diversity and live in the multicultural society. The government and policy makers have proposed policies to support multicultural education in school, including and the development of Korean language textbooks and programs as well as of teacher training programs for multicultural classrooms.

However, it is controversial whether the school has achieved the structural inclusion of multicultural students. Their low educational attainment is of particular concern. According to Jo (2017), multicultural students' educational attainments are in stark contrast to overall educational achievement in Korea, as many migrant children drop out of school or choose not to enroll in schools in the first place. A statistic indicates that while the dropout rate of

Korean primary and secondary students was 1.1 percent, that of multicultural students is 9.4 percent in primary school and 17.5 percent in middle school, respectively (Jo & Jung, 2017). The increasing dropout rate indicates that the school system falls short of addressing multicultural students' diverse needs and interests.

In accounting for the multicultural students' high dropout rates, I examine institutional policies and practices as a point of departure. I view policy documents as representing social relations of power and inequality (Scheuric, 2001) and compare three different policy documents about multicultural education in Korea. Below, I present a brief overview on multicultural education research and practice in Korea. Then I compare three policy documents to understand how the government has put the multicultural polices into practice. The findings indicate that multicultural education in Korea is practiced in the framework of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995), whereby people are socialized into seeing themselves as well as others as members of a particular nation. Further, it promotes conservative multiculturalism wherein difference is understood as a virtue to the extent that it would not challenge normative "Koreanness." This paper concludes with implications and future research directions for promoting inclusive educational practices in the school contexts.

Multiculturalism in Korea

The term multiculturalism has diverse meanings, referring ranged from folkloric artifacts, traditional songs, and festivals to ethnic studies, interracial relations, human rights, and social justice (Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010). In academia, researchers have mainly used the term to refer to harmonious co-existence amongst diverse populations (Lei & Grant, 2001).

Knight (2008) and Piller (2017) rightly pointed out that the word multiculturalism serves as a euphemism indicating racial and linguistic minority groups. A similar observation can be made in the Korean context.

That is, the rendition multiculturalism (Damunwha) in Korea is a charged notion that involves potential discrimination and prejudice. It often refers to families of either migrant workers or of intercultural marriage couples (mainly the combination of Korean men and women from Southeast Asia) with vulnerable socio-economic status. As Damunwha was first introduced to discuss rapidly increasing number of immigrant workers and intercultural marriage couples in the late 1990s (MEST, 2006), the term does not encompass families whose parent is a (white) English-speaking speaker.

The unequal gender and cultural relationships could enforce cultural and linguistic assimilation to become legitimate Korean, simultaneously downplaying the cultural and linguistic practice they brought to Korean society (Park, 2009).

Another notable feature of multiculturalism in Korea is difference *within* national groupings, or what Seol and Skrentny (2009) termed hierarchical nationhood. Although the Korean government allows for a more inclusive approach to ethnic Koreans compared to other foreign-born nationals, there are legal and social measures to distinguish native-born Koreans from ethnic ones. Although ethnic migrants from China comprise the overwhelming majority of Korean migrant (327,893) (Korea Immigration Service, 2020), their lived experiences demonstrate cases of marginalization and discrimination with unfair treatment at various social sphere, including job and marriage markets.

A key topic of debate regarding multiculturalism lies in tension and conflict about which the discourse of 'celebrating diversity' brings. In accounting for the paradox, Michelle Anne Lee (2003) points out the incompatibility of multicultural ideology within the nationalist framework. Insofar as the mainstream discourse of multiculturalism posits that "human groups and cultures are clearly delineated as identifiable entities that coexist" (Benhabib, 2002, p. 8; cited from Piller, 2017, p, 21), the efforts to maintain firm boundaries would also increase, leading to the intensification of

nationalism in the globalizing era (Kim, 2012). Given that schooling is a key site where children are socialized into a national identity, it is important to understand to what extent current multicultural education polices respond to the nationalistic ideologies and practices.

Policy analysis

Policy is a channel through which particular shared knowledge among social members is created, consumed and reinforced (Scheuric, 2001). Policy documents are "the social products- they are constructed with rules, they express a structure, they are nested within a specific discourse" (Prior, 2003, pp. 12-13). Its analysis should focus on disclosing hidden assumptions and social inequalities taken for granted within texts (Gildersleeve & Hernandez, 2012; Grant & Ham, 2013). Therefore, reviewing official documents on multicultural education will give us insights into how difference is perceived in the classroom and its social consequences on multicultural students.

According to Guba (1985), the term policy has different meanings at three different levels: First, *policy-in-intention* is the domain of policymakers or legislators who construct and set out a frame of reference. Second, *policy-in-implementation* is the domain of policy implementers, referring to activities and behaviors that are displayed by agents in process of carrying out programs and events in the name of policy. Finally, *policy-in-experience* is the domain of potential target populations as they are involved with policy. In this paper, I focus on the policy-in-intention stage because the primary purpose of this study is to understand the ways in which multicultural education policies perceive and represent diversity in school contexts.

For data collection, I looked for official publications on multicultural students released by Ministry of Education (https://www.moe.go.kr/main. do) and compared them by year to understand the chronological development of multicultural policy. I referred to Lee (2010) and divided the years into three stages: The beginning stage (2006), the development stage (2012), and

the establishment stage (2020). Then the policies that had major changes or revisions were further analyzed in reference to secondary resources, including news articles and academic publications. This data allowed me to access and compare multiple, and sometimes conflicting, discourses on multicultural education within the larger social discourse in which it is embedded.

The development of multicultural education policy

As I stated above, multicultural education policy has to do with the increasing presence of migrants in Korean society. Following the introduction of Employment of Permit System (EPS) in the early 2000s, the annual growth rate of the foreign-immigrant population in Korea was highest among all OECD countries (Jo & Jung, 2017). The increase in the foreign-resident population has predictably resulted in an exponential growth in the number of children born in households where one or both parents are migrants. The following table shows a summary of multicultural education support policy.

Table 1.   Multicultural education policy by year

Year	Key Features of Multicultural Education Policy/Programs
2006	1. Enhancing collaboration between government departments to support multicultural families
	2. Supporting local communities for multicultural students
	3. Enhancing communication with multicultural families
	4. Increasing teacher awareness for multicultural students
	5. Integrating multicultural perspectives into school curriculum and textbook
	6. Utilizing *University Students Mentoring Programs* [1] for multicultural students
2012	1. Inclusion of multicultural students into public education
	2. Strengthening of Korean as a Second Language (KSL) as well as basic learning skills
	3. Promoting bilingual education for all
	4. Career guidance and education for multicultural students
	5. Fostering multiculturalism-friendly school environments
	6. Supporting Korean students and parents for embracing multiculturalism

	1. Ensuring educational opportunities for access to public education
	2. Language/learning support for full integration into school
2020	3. Career education and counselling for multicultural students' wellness
	4. Creating diversity-friendly school environments
	5. Enhancing school-oriented multicultural policy development through cross-ministerial policy coordination

In review of the programs and plans for multicultural families, we can identify the following policy developments: First, the focus of the policy has shifted from multicultural students to the general public. That is, while the policies in 2006 were mainly targeting only at multicultural students, those of 2012 and 2020 view local students and teachers as important part of multicultural education. Second, the recognition of multicultural students a global human resource is noteworthy. Compared to the previous policies that described multicultural students in passive and negative terms, such as those with learning delay or psychological difficulties, the efforts to re-frame multicultural students as a global human resource deserve attention. Finally, the government began to emphasize multicultural students' career education in preparation for their full-fledged integration beyond school. As the multicultural students have reached at the age of either tertiary education or work, policy makers and educators focused on developing policies and programs that support their transition into the adulthood.

Despite the notable advances discussed above, however, much remains to be done in advancing multicultural students' structural inclusion. In the next section, I address issues and concerns regarding the multicultural education policy developments.

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[1] *University Students Mentoring program* involves two individuals (usually consisting of a college student and a student from marginalized family backgrounds) working together for academic progress in school.

Issues and concerns

In this section, I give an account of why the current policy development falls short of achieving multicultural students' structural inclusion, which are: 1) Banal nationalism: rethinking culture and language; 2) The limitations of liberal multiculturalism; and 3) Multicultural students beyond school.

(1) Banal nationalism: Rethinking nation and language

Schools, as a major institution to socialize students into a nation, organize their curriculum and school activities with a nationalistic viewpoint. Mundane activities to inculcate nationalism are prevalent as part of larger socialization process through which students see themselves as members of the nation. This includes display of national flags, national anthems, and teaching of national language and history throughout the school years, all of which point to what Billig (1995) called banal nationalism.

The emphasis of nation-states is no exception in multicultural education. The current policy on multiculturalism is to take nation and/or ethnicity as their point of departure and encourage (mainly multicultural) students to learn about the "Other". For instance, school activities and programs for multicultural schools focus mainly on identifying and confirming difference between countries. Multicultural students often serve as cultural envoys of the country they came from (or are considered to know well) and introduce its language and culture to the classmates.

Assumptions of nationhood in multicultural education runs the risk of fixing multicultural students' multifaceted, fluctuating identities into single cultural boxes with an expectation that they would identify themselves with one of their salient cultural heritages over one another (Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010). As Hall (2006) pointed out, assuming one particular national identity within an individual may be neither appropriate nor meaningful on the ground that "national identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and in relation to representation" (p.

240). Moreover, the static notion of national identity may not resonate with multicultural families' transnational histories and family cultures.

The second issue concerns with the Korean language in multicultural education. As shown above, the policies strongly encourage multicultural students to develop the Korean proficiency for successful school life. Indeed, competence in the Korean language is necessary for multicultural students to gain full-fledged membership in Korean society. Yet it should be noted that one's linguistic competence is the result of joint construction between interlocutors (Han, 2007). It is thus important for Korean speakers to make efforts to accommodate the multilingual speakers, as the multicultural students' linguistic proficiency will always remain deficient and deviant without the interlocuters' support.

On a broader level, critical researchers have pointed out that the emphasis of a standard national language is the tangible product of a long-established ideological industry of exclusion (Piller, 2001). Haque (2012) mentioned that "language has become an acceptable site for the articulation of exclusion when race and ethnicity could no longer comfortably do so" (p. 238). Spotti, Avermaet, and Extra (2009) also made a point that the ideology of dominance over marginalized groups are justified and naturalized through the emphasis on one national language for the maintenance of social cohesion. Although the traditional nation-state model may no longer be adequate for social cohesion in globalizing era (Castles, 2004), the emphasis on dominant society's language and culture in multicultural education attests to the fact that multicultural populations are acquiesced to accept the nationalistic framework.

(2) The limitations of liberal multiculturalism

To what extent is ethnocultural and linguistic difference being accepted and tolerated in Korean society? Grounded in the philosophy of liberal multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 1995), the Korean government attempts to

accommodate cultural or ethnic difference in both public and private spheres. As May and Sleeter (2010) notes, however, the celebrating difference discourse would face resistance and loses its power as a dominant ideology when it attempts to trespass the boundaries of difference and requires the people of the host society to change their long-standing social beliefs and structures. Within the framework of liberal multiculturalism, then, diversity is enjoyable to the extent that multicultural students are to introduce their culture and food, and to learn the Korean culture and language and, ultimately, to become honorary Koreans.

Celebrating difference within the framework of liberal multiculturalism is not without its issues. First, multicultural education perpetuates the idea of foreignness by continually (re) producing difference between local and multicultural students. Second, it takes hold of unidirectionaltiy, whereby multicultural students are only the target of education. For instance, while the policies in 2012 and 2020 promised multicultural education for all, a majority number of programs continue to focus on teaching the Korean language and culture to multicultural students. As a result, multicultural education is perceived as an after-school program to learn Korean language and cultures, not as a fundamental practice to increase awareness on social equity between newcomers and the host society.

Second, conservative multiculturalism could make it harder to achieve social cohesion, evoking a backlash in the host society (Choi, 2011). Calling the hatred against multicultural families as "multiculturalism fatigue", Park (2012) pointed out that sympathy toward multicultural families has given way to growing apathy as the government programs and support for multicultural families are perceived to be duplicating and excessive. The main thrust of the backlash is that multicultural policy is a form of reverse discrimination against Koreans who struggles in the job market. Indeed, it is notable that young adults in their 20s and 30s have grown increasingly wary of the impact immigrants have on South Korean society. It also brought

up an issue of fairness in the distribution of social welfare resources in comparison with other 'multicultural' groups such as North Korean defectors, international students, and students with disabilities.

(3) Multicultural students beyond school

The proposed plans for multicultural students' career education does little justice to the within-group heterogeneity. With renewed perspective on bilingualism as global capital, the officials propose that multicultural students should be able to utilize bilingual skills in furthering their career. Policies on web-based bilingual textbooks and bilingual speech contests, for instance, promotes the development of bilingual competence among multicultural students. However, given that more than 80 percent of multicultural students are born in Korea, it would be wrong to assume multicultural students as necessarily bilingual. That is, a child's bilingual competence is largely a function of the family language policy; a child would be a monolingual Korean speaker if the parents choose Korean as their medium of communication or do not have a common language other than Korean.

In addition, career education for tertiary education is a subject of much debate. In response to the low attainment in post-secondary education, the government officials have set up a special track for multicultural students' college entrance with the expectation that such measures would level out the playing field in favour of multicultural students. And yet, as Jo (2017) pointed out, the multicultural students often felt powerlessness and mystification in navigating through the complicated college entrance process. Their source of help and advice is found to be limited to the teacher in school. The parents, feeling constrained by their unstable economic and social status in Korea, tend to have low educational inspiration for their children, especially toward college education. Even if some parents believed in education as the key to success and tried to prepare the children for college, without college experience themselves or up-to-date information, they struggled to provide

the necessary guidance and skills for success. Given that the current policy for supporting multicultural students' higher education focused on providing them with supplementary materials and resources, more systematic support for multicultural students' college education should be followed.

Finally, it is important to ask whether multicultural students have cultural and economic resources enough to translate college education into professional, middle-class jobs. In contemporary Korea, getting a college diploma no longer promises future success; it functions as a qualification to enter professional middle-class jobs. Since a diploma in higher education is often not explicitly transferrable to middle-class, professional jobs, they must engage in various job-related activities and programs to make the most of college experiences to their advantage. Without information and social networks, many multicultural students were left feeling overwhelmed, vulnerable, and inadequate (Jo, 2017). That is, even if they managed to complete higher education successfully, there should be more structural guidance so that they could get middle-class jobs and have economically and socially stable life in Korea.

Summary and implications

This paper has addressed the development of multicultural education policy in Korea. Despite a notable advance in understanding and recognizing diversity that multicultural students has brought into the school contexts, I have shown that the seemingly supportive school practices for multicultural students could involve dysconcious racism (King, 2004) within which multicultural students are acquiesced to follow dominant, often unjust, reality. Gosh and Abdi (2004) emphasize that even though celebrating diversity appears to the ultimate goal of multiculturalism, yet it gives little space for multicultural students to nurture a sense of belonging and of independence in the classroom. Given this, the current notion of inclusion in the Korean official discourse should take social equity into account so that

multicultural students exercise power and agency for political and democratic participation.

Banks (2004) argues that practitioners often circumscribe the nature of multicultural education to school curriculum, rather than implementing a multidimensional and critical approach to social justice and equity. As an agent of knowledge (re)production, educators and teachers should be aware that multiculturalism is neither a temporary, curable phenomenon through a series of treatments nor the seed of potential treat to social cohesion. Rather, in the broader context of globalization, the value of multiple identities and a sense of cosmopolitanism needs to be promoted to effectively accommodate student diversity in the school contexts.

For future research, it seems worthwhile to take a policy-in-experience perspective to understand multicultural students' idiosyncratic, personal construction of self in Korea. While multiculturalism policy consists of a set of strategic plans (policy-in-intention), to each multicultural student it is a subjectively created reality, a lived experience (policy-in-experience). As Guba (1985) reiterated, to understand the results of a policy, we must tap into the domain of policy-in-experience because the impact of the policy hinges upon their experience regarding the policy.

Another fruitful line of inquiry is to investigate teachers' perceptions on multicultural students. As one of the main mediums of school policy, teachers have a strong influence "from the national level of formal policy making through to the informal arena of pupil-teacher relations" (Ozga, 2000, p. 3). Given their critical roles as agents of production of social values and cultural homogeneity (Juliano, 2008), teachers' perception on multiculturalism and understanding about diversity in their daily teaching contexts should be examined.

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