

South Korean early childhood educators' perceptions of North Korean defectors and unification education

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Abstract: This study investigates South Korean early childhood educators' perceptions of North Korean defectors, their national identity, reunification, and unification education (UE) to provide some suggestions for an effective integrated education between the children of the two Koreas and related teacher education. Fourteen educators participated in this research in which qualitative semi-structured interviews were employed. Key findings included that most educators regarded North Koreans as the 'Same Korean race', with the exception of young educators in their 20s, whose view was that North Koreans are not a member of the Korean people. In addition, the participants felt there were ideological, cultural, language, and economic differences between them and North Korean defectors and their children. Some participants argued that UE for young children is not inherently ineffective due to a lack of understanding of the concept of unification. Alternately, some educators addressed North and South Korean UE through multicultural educational approaches. Recommendations are made for the application of UE via multicultural education approaches at government level, in the class and teacher training.

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Introduction

According to the Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea (2021), the total number of North Korean defectors who have entered South Korea since 1963 has continued to grow, reaching approximately 10,000 in 2007, 20,000 in 2010, and over 33,000 in 2020. More than a thousand defectors have been entering South Korea each year since the late 1990s (Ha & Jang, 2015; Walker, 2018). Consequently, the number of children in the 0–9 age group has also increased, with the total number of North Korean children reaching 1,209 since 2000 (Ministry of Unification, 2021). This phenomenon has created new challenges for South Korean educators (Park, 2016), and significant concerns about education have emerged regarding the potential unification of North and South Korea (Choi, 2022). The emphasis on the homogeneity of the Korean people, characterized by shared language, tradition, and values, has led to the belief in a “one-ethnicity-one-nation” concept, supporting reunification between the two Koreas since the Korean War (Chun, 2022). Consequently, the South Korean government has sought to maintain and promote a common Korean identity through education (Cho, 2021; Grzelczyk, 2014; Leem, 2021). This has been a primary role of the Ministry of Unification since its establishment in 1969 as the government body responsible for inter-Korean relations and reunification (Ministry of Unification, 2021). Given the specific circumstances on the Korean peninsula, North Koreans are regarded as citizens upon arriving in South Korea (Kim, 2016). However, many North Koreans who enter South Korea often lead lives like those of typical foreign migrants (Choi & Cho, 2010) due to significant ideological gaps, polarized economic and political systems (Chung, 2011), differing values, and distinct life experiences (Hyun, 2007). This situation arises from seventy years of differing political regimes and social institutions on each side of the Korean peninsula (Chun, 2022). For these reasons, North Korean families are categorized as multicultural families, alongside families of foreign migrant workers and those resulting from international marriage (Kim, 2006). According to Eriksen (2002), an ethnic group is defined as a community of people who share a common language, religion, customs, values, and historical memories, all of which form the core of culture. North Korean defectors, while sharing a similar appearance with South Koreans, exhibit distinct cultural traits, leading

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to their classification as ethnically the same yet culturally different (Chun, 2022). Consequently, North Korean defectors are often overlooked by South Koreans, who perceive them as coming from different backgrounds such as region, social class, education level, and gender (Chun, 2020). Interactions between North Korean defectors and South Koreans frequently result in negative perception from South Koreans towards defectors (Kim, 2016). Regarding teachers' perceptions, Watson et al., (2011) conducted a survey with 82 pre-service teachers and examined their national identity. The result indicated that about 70 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the notion of Korea's national identity as a single-blooded ethnic nation with North Koreans. Similarly, Lee and Kim (2022) conducted a study examining pre-service early childhood teachers' awareness of unification through a survey of 226 participants. The findings revealed that these teachers had limited awareness of unification, with the highest recognition of 'problems after reunification' - such as feelings of alienation due to cultural differences, social and economic conflicts, and issues related to discrimination - among the subcategories of unification perceptions. Furthermore, it was shown that early childhood in-service teachers from younger generations are generally opposed to unification, view North Korea as a hostile country, and lack awareness regarding the necessity of unification education (UE) in early childhood (Lee et al., 2015).

Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2005) emphasize the crucial role teachers play in the lives of young children. While teachers' beliefs significantly influence how they perceive, judge, and act in the classroom (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002), there is limited preservice and in-service teacher education related to North Korean defectors and their children in South Korea (Kim et al., 2015).

Although there is a significant body of research on the perceptions of early childhood in-service and pre-service teachers regarding reunification and UE, as well as the importance of implementing related educational programs (Choi, 2017; Kim, 2016; Lee, 2017; Lee, 2015; Yang, 2020; Yoon, 2005), few studies have addressed the need for support, including teacher education, that focuses on the embracing the differences between the two Koreas (Lee, 2013a).

Some Korean scholars have emphasized the need for education that embraces the differences in values and cultures of North Korean defector students, as well as the political and economic differences between South and North Korea, before prioritizing the concept of "one-ethnicity-one-nation" (Kang, 2011; Lee, 2017). In line with these claims, UE through multicultural educational approaches has gained attention in recent years (Lee, 2017). While there are studies on UE through multicultural educational approaches for primary and secondary school students (Jeong, 2011; Kim, 2011; Kim, 2010b; Lee, 2017; Park, 2009), there is a lack of research on the necessity of UE in early childhood education using these approaches. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to examine the perspectives of South Korean early childhood educators regarding North Korean defectors and their national identity, as well as their views on reunification and UE, to provide suggestions for effective integrated education for the children of both Koreas and related teacher education.

Role of Teachers and Directors in Early Childhood Education and Care

The early years are a critical period for child development, as every child thrives holistically when provided with opportunities for creative play (Froebel Trust, 2018); Ball (1994) emphasizes that young children develop emotionally, intellectually, morally, socially, physically, and spiritually with each area being interconnected. Moreover, children's experiences during these formative years significantly influence their lifelong outcomes (Murray, 2017).

Learning environments in early childhood settings must support all aspects of children's development in a fluid and child-centered manner, as the context in which children learn and grow profoundly affects their overall development (Neaum, 2010). Therefore, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) pedagogy should respond to and support children appropriately, guided by an understanding of their growth and learning processes, as well as a clear insight into the potential next steps in their development (Holland, 2010).

To fulfill these goals, the role of the teacher is crucial. Teachers utilize communication, problem-

solving, pretend play, and play routines to encourage young children to engage with the practical and learning functions of language. They plan activities that create a sense of stability, emotional engagement, and curiosity (De Haan, 2012). According to Murray (2018), early childhood educators must be sophisticated professionals who know when and how to intervene appropriately in young children's learning within early childhood settings. For instance, teachers should provide rich learning environments, engage in meaningful dialogue by asking appropriate questions, offer relevant provocations, and co-construct understanding with young children. In Korea, preschool teachers receive training at colleges, junior colleges, the Korea National Open University, and universities (Ministry of Education, 2019). These teachers employ structured, systematic, child-centered teaching methods and play-based curricula that align with children's developmental needs, enhancing their natural learning process through specialized knowledge gained from years of professional training (Lee et al., 2009).

Meanwhile, the directors of childcare centers hold a level 1 early childhood teacher certification or higher and have over three years of field experience (Korea Childcare Promotion Institute, 2019). In terms of their role, directors manage all operations within childcare centers, supervising and directing all staff (Korea Childcare Promotion Institute, 2019). They also consult with teachers on educational objectives, curricula, and activities. Additionally, they encourage teachers to take pride in their work when teaching and caring for young children (Lee, 2013b). In this way, directors play a key role in enhancing teachers' motivation and satisfaction in the workplace, which, in turn, significantly contributes to the quality of school life. Director support can empower teachers' teaching experiences and develop their competencies (Yuh & Choi, 2017).

Unification Education in Early Childhood

South Korea proposed unification education (UE) as part of the national curriculum to restore Korean homogeneity and consistently support the possibility of reunification (Han, 2020). UE aims to raise awareness of unification issues, strengthen preparation for reunification, foster confidence in liberal democratic values, cultivate democratic citizenship, promote the formation of a national community, recognize the importance of national security, and understand the reality of North Korea (Ministry of Unification, 2013). In line with this national purpose, the South Korean government passed the Unification Education Support Act in 1999 to emphasize the significance of reunification on the divided peninsula. (Han, 2020). An examination of the early childhood curriculum in South Korea (Ministry of Education, 2013) reveals that past curricula focused on anti-communist education and security education based on confrontation and boundaries against North Korea. The more recent curriculum shifts towards an interest in unification. Although unification is not explicitly mentioned, it includes contents related to UE, such as promoting "interest in and understanding our country" (where "country" refers to Korea as a whole rather than South Korea alone). The activity goals regarding UE in the teachers' manual were distributed as follows: "Peaceful UE" (9.52%), "National community UE" (6.59%), "Democratic citizenship UE" (5.05%), and "Multicultural UE" (3.08%) (Choi, 2017). This distribution indicates that limited areas are addressing the diverse norms, languages, and cultures related to North Korea and its people. According to a study of 400 preschool teachers conducted by Lee et al., (2015), 73% of respondents indicated that UE was not included in the annual class plan, and 60% stated that North Korea and UE were not addressed as a major issue. The study also found that early childhood teachers not only had low awareness and implementation of UE but were also unprepared to teach about it effectively. This demonstrates that early childhood teachers lack both awareness of the need for UE and the knowledge and skills necessary for its implementation (Cho & Lee, 2016). Additionally, Article 8 of the Unification Education Support Act in South Korea currently specifies that UE is intended for primary school students and above, and there are no specific guidelines on the content of unification education for young children (National Institute for Unification Education, 2018). Considering this policy, it is suggested that early childhood unification education should focus on forming the foundation of democratic citizenship through experiences that foster pride in being Korean, an interest in various cultures, and the development of values and attitudes conducive to living harmoniously with North Koreans (Lee, 2022).

Unification Education through Multicultural Educational Approaches

Multicultural education aims to ensure equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, or racial and cultural backgrounds (Banks, 2003). A multicultural curriculum design should include concepts such as historical and cultural events that enable students to understand the experiences of diverse groups (Banks, 2003; Bennett, 1986). This approach fosters empathy (Gay, 2010), encourages acceptance of different perspectives (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2010), promotes an understanding that addresses social issues rooted in oppression and inequality (Boyer & Babbiste, 1996), and helps develop friendships with marginalized groups (Banks, 2003). Multicultural education offers a framework for unification education by addressing cultural differences and promoting mutual understanding. It also demonstrates that the key elements of multicultural education, highlighted in recent unification efforts, are shared and can be effectively integrated (Lee, 2017).

Unification can be seen as a complex process that encompasses many aspects, as it involves not only politics, economics, and social systems but also the integration of consciousness and values between the two Koreas (Kim, 2010a). In this respect, the concept of unification includes both systemic and cultural dimensions. As the heterogeneity of the two Koreas intensifies, a new approach to UE must be introduced to resolve conflicts through understanding and acceptance of diverse views, cultures, ultimately fostering mutual respect between the two Korean student groups (Kim, 2010b). In other words, education that recognizes "differences" and promotes respect for "diversity" through a multicultural educational approach is essential for the new UE paradigm (Kim, 2010b). Based on this premise, several scholars have proposed content for UE through multicultural educational approaches. Oh (2008) identified five key factors: learning about the commonalities and differences between South and North Korea; understanding the concept of difference and discrimination; addressing prejudice and stereotypes against North Korean defectors; recognizing and respecting cultural diversity; and cultivating an open attitude toward other cultures. Additionally, embracing cultural diversity, understanding the North Korean language, and exploring the similarities and differences between the languages of the two Koreas are also recommended (Kim, 2010a). According to Kang (2011), a correct understanding of North Korea, the formation of open nationalism, and respect for cultural diversity are highlighted as critical components of the school curriculum. Overall, the common elements of UE through multicultural educational approaches include recognition and respect for cultural diversity, an understanding of the cultures of North and South Korea, and an exploration of their commonalities and differences.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study aims to explore South Korean educators' perspectives on North Korean defectors and their national identity, as well as their views on reunification and UE. This study seeks to provide suggestions for effective integrated education for the children of the two Koreas through the lens of multicultural educational approaches and emphasizes the necessity of teacher education related to this topic.

The following research questions were addressed:

Q1. What do early childhood educators who have experienced teaching children of North Korean defectors think about North Korean defectors and their national identity?

Q2. Regarding reunification, how do they think they can best educate children about it, and what are effective educational strategies for unification education?

Method

A qualitative research design was used to explore South Korean educators' perceptions of North Korean defectors, their national identity, reunification, and UE to provide suggestions for effective educational strategies for UE and related teacher training. In qualitative research, a semi-structured approach to interviewing is much more common than the more strictly structured forms because the more open nature of the data generation and analysis fits well with the overall aims of qualitative inquiry (Gibson

& Brown, 2009). Therefore, the data was gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews and conducting thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were also used in this study.

Participants and Procedures

In qualitative research, sampling is a very significant part and decisions about it are often taken on a concrete, substantial level rather than on a formal and abstract level (Flick, 2009). Purposive sampling is more commonly used as qualitative strategy in research (Newby, 2014), and this is in contrast with random sampling in quantitative studies (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This research employed purposive sampling by choosing the members of a sample with a purpose to signify a type that related to a key criterion (Ritchie et al., 2014). The key criterion in selecting the site and sample of this study was gaining access to investigate early childhood teachers' and directors' perception of North Korean defectors, their national identity, reunification, and UE. Considering this, as one of sampling strategies in qualitative research, I first tried to use random purposive sampling which adds reliability to the sample when the purposeful sample is large (Punch, 2009). With the assistance of acquaintances, I contacted preschools in areas where most North Korean defectors reside. Additionally, I circulated an email containing information about the research to potential participants in these regions. However, during the time of recruiting participants, I discovered that there were few schools in my sample area that North Korean children attended so that I had to abandon this strategy for my study. Therefore, I thoroughly searched and selected areas in South Korea with a high density of North Korean residents, I then contacted teachers and directors who are working at pre-schools in these areas, through the federation of pre-schools, and asked for their permission to conduct this research.

During the time of recruiting participants, it was very difficult to collect larger numbers of educators due to their unwillingness to take part. For example, some educators did not want to reveal that their schools had North Korean children in attendance as they knew that many South Koreans were prejudiced against these people. In order to collect a bigger sample size, I also employed snowball sampling after interviewing, asking these participants to suggest friends, colleagues, or family members (Tracy, 2013) who were in different schools. This strategy is helpful for sampling a population where access is difficult, maybe because the topic for research is sensitive or where contact is difficult (Heckathorn, 2002). Through this process, seven pre-schools, which have children of North Korean defectors were recruited. Participants in this current study included seven directors and seven teachers and these are all women. The overview of participating educators is provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Overview of Fourteen Participants

		Gender & Age	Educational Background	Early Childhood teaching experience (At present school/In total)	Numbers of children from NK defectors taught
School A	Director1	F/60s	Nursery teacher training school	20/26	2
	Teacher1	F/30s	Bachelor of Social Welfare	5/11	1
School B	Director2	F/60s	Bachelor of Social Welfare	5/11	5
	Teacher2	F/40s	Bachelor of Early Childhood Education	5/11	3
School C	Director3	F/50s	Bachelor of Early Childhood Education	7/21	2
	Teacher3	F/30s	Bachelor of Early Childhood Education	4/4	2
School D	Director4	F/50s	Master of Early Childhood Education	7/21	3
	Teacher4	F/40s	Bachelor of Family and Child	6/14	1
School E	Director5	F/50s	Bachelor of Early Childhood Education	7/21	2
	Teacher5	F/20s	Bachelor of Early Childhood Education	4/4	1
School F	Director6	F/50s	Master of Early Childhood Education	13/25	2
	Teacher6	F/20s	Bachelor of Child and Welfare	1/2	1
School G	Director7	F/50s	Doctoral degree of Early Childhood Education	6/27	5

Data Collection

I initially intended to do observation, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews for my data collection methods. I asked participants with great anticipation whether I could observe their classes that can provide the opportunity to collect 'live' data from naturally occurring social contexts (Cohen et al., 2011). However, I was not given permission to do this by school directors because they said that North Korean mothers do not like their children to be observed by someone. Again, I asked my participants if I could conduct focus groups by asking questions that focus closely on their experiences with children of North Korean defectors and their parents to encourage discussion and the expression of varying opinions and viewpoints (Rossman & Rallis, 2017), but participants rejected my offer due to time available. Interview questions were designed from the literature on "Young Koreans' perceptions of North Korean defectors and their national identity" (Campbell, 2015) and "Early childhood educators' perceptions regarding reunification and UE" (An & Kim, 2018; Lee, 2017; Yang, 2020).

A semi-structured interview was used in this research as the primary instrument because it provides both a structured format and the flexibility needed for participants to discuss certain issues (White, 2008). Semi-structured interviews are typically employed in contexts where the interviewer establishes a general framework by deciding in advance which topics to cover and what main questions to ask (Drever, 1995). This approach led to the creation of interview questions such as: "What do you think about North Korean defectors living in South Korea?" "What are your thoughts on their national identity?" and "What differences do you observe between yourself and North Korean defectors?". Second, it offers some flexibility for interviewers. In this type of approach, the questions might be improvised in the research setting when new questions in relation to the interviews come into the researcher's mind (Gibson, 2010). For example, when talking about the questions of experience with a North Korean mother, during the interview the participant revealed a fact which was unknown before the interview that a North Korean woman who has two children used to work at the school as a cook. When this came to light impromptu questions were asked such as: "Could you share your experiences with the woman as a fellow worker?"

In addition, the interview questions were thoroughly checked by a professor who works at the College of Education before interviews. For example, before conducting the interviews, the interview questions were checked several times to see whether they have prejudice or not. The interview scripts were also examined after the interview to prevent researcher's bias.

Ethical Considerations

This research received ethics approval through the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work Ethics Committee at Queen's University Belfast. Before commencing the study, face-to-face meetings with the directors of the schools were held to introduce the researcher and highlight the researcher's role. The purpose of the study was also explained, a brief account of the interview questions was given, and the voluntary nature of participation outlined. The directors were also asked about teachers whom the researcher could approach. A two or three-days gap was designated between the initial visits and the commencement of the research to offer appropriate time for directors to think about participation and to contact the researcher. With the directors' permission, access to schools and staff was granted. The consent forms were designed into two types; one was for directors and the other was for teachers. For directors, they were asked for consent to access the school and the teachers in their school who would be interviewed and to use the school premises. Directors were asked to identify at least two teachers whom the researcher could approach to ensure that directors were not aware of who has/has not participated to mitigate power disparities and ensure confidentiality. Therefore, teachers did not need to feel under pressure to participate in the research. The researcher also asked the teachers for consent for their own participation by helping them to understand that they are doing so voluntarily. Once the teachers gave verbal permission, a consent form was given to them, and the researcher again stressed that there was no obligation to participate in this research as the researcher was aware of the disparities of status and power between directors and teachers. All participants who wished to take part then signed the consent form to be interviewed.

A comparatively quiet location was chosen for the interviews, as privacy for the interview settings was important. Each interview lasted one hour, and all interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. Interviews for data collection from the participants were conducted over eight weeks in June to July 2017. The periods of time between site visits allowed for transcription of interviews, field notes and reflective journals, and preliminary analysis. At the end of the research, data collected from the interviews was analysed.

Data Analysis

The six phases of conducting thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used in this study: data familiarisation; generating initial codes; constructing themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; producing the report. Through this process, two significant themes and five subthemes emerged from the analysis. An overview of the final list of themes is provided in Table 2.

Table 2
Final List of Themes

Themes	Subthemes
1. Educators' perceptions of North Korean defectors and their national identity	1-1 Educators' perspectives of North Korean defectors living in South Korea 1-2 Educators' perspectives of defectors' national identity 1-3 Educators' perceptions of differences with North Korean children and their parents
2. Educators' perceptions regarding reunification and Unification Education	2-1 Educators' perceptions of reunification and UE 2-2 Educators' thoughts of the effective strategies for UE

Results

The results reflect participants' perceptions of North Korean defectors, their national identity, reunification, and unification education (UE), and provide suggestions for more effective educational strategies for UE and related teacher training. Concerning the research questions and analyzing the data, two significant themes included: *Educators' perceptions of North Korean defectors and their national identity* and *educators' perceptions regarding reunification and UE*. Additionally, five subthemes emerged from the data: 1) Educators' perspectives of North Korean defectors living in South Korea, 2) Educators' perspectives of defectors' national identity, 3) Educators' perceptions of differences with North Korean children and their parents, 4) Educators' perceptions of reunification and UE, 5) Educators' thoughts of the effective strategies for UE.

Educators' Perceptions of North Korean Defectors and Their National Identity

Educators' Perspectives of North Korean Defectors Living in South Korea

Some educators acknowledged and mentioned that North Koreans who come over to South Korea to live have difficulty settling down in the society. Viewing this, the educators showed an empathetic view of North Korean families as people who have trouble adjusting to South Korean society. For example, Director One experienced a female North Korean who has a child attending her school stated

It was very challenging for her to live in a capitalistic society. She seemed to find it very difficult to follow this way of life because she came from a communist country.

She also expressed empathy that these family groups required financial support as they are living in poverty.

I think the South Korean government should help them to settle down well in this society in spite of the financial burden.

The data indicate that teachers are aware that North Korean defectors in South Korea may have a hard time due to financial difficulties.

Educators also shared what they experienced with North Korean defectors, which caused them to have negative or positive perspectives. In the interviews, Director One reported that her experiences with North Korean defectors had been negative, but she reflected on how she had turned these negative experiences into a positive mind-set that enabled her to demonstrate increased understanding and knowledge about North Korean defectors.

I met the first one who was aged 30 at the church and she seemed as if she was not adjusted to society. It seemed that she came over to the South with the fantasy that many South Koreans would back her one hundred percent and she would live comfortably. Having experienced these things, I had a bad image about North Korean defectors at that time. The second one whom I met was Jumin's mother. To tell you the truth, I had a prejudice towards her, thinking she would be the same kind of person whom I met at first, but she was a very gentle and hard-working person. Therefore, I realized not all North Korean defectors are the same.

The data suggest that the director was prejudiced towards the first woman whom she met but her experience with Jumin's mother influenced her as an exception. The director acknowledged her initial stereotypical beliefs towards a female North Korean, but continued interactions with another female North Korean appeared to have influenced her biased beliefs and she was able to begin to change her beliefs and increased her understanding.

In contrast, Director Two's positive view changed to a negative one. For instance:

At first, I was positive as I believe we are one nation, but I have discovered negative things from North Korean defectors. For example, they take it for granted that they should be well treated by South Koreans, for they have come here through a rough escape route journey.

These negative experiences also appeared to show some stereotypical beliefs surrounding North Korean defectors. For example:

As they already experienced human trafficking through the rough escape journey, they tend to easily change their partners". (Director Two)

This is in line with previous research that when female North Koreans cross the border, they survive by relying on quasi-marital relationships as they have experienced a traumatic process of family dissolution and reorganization during the long journey from North Korea to South Korea (Lee et al., 2009). Consequently, the director's statements show that her beliefs based on her experience with female North Koreans may limit her ability to engage in respectful interactions. Similarly, another teacher stated:

To be honest, I do not have a positive image of her because I felt she shut her heart towards South Korea. (Teacher One)

Also:

As I experienced, North Korean defectors usually take an unfriendly attitude, and they do not trust people at first. (Director Five)

These findings indicate that educators viewed North Korean defectors with a negative image due to their distrust and wariness, and this circumstance has become the cause of their prejudice against them.

Educators' Perspectives of Defectors' National Identity

Despite the prejudice against North Korean defectors, it was also common to regard them as the "same Korean race". Some educators shared details about their perspectives on North Korean defectors. For example,

I am positive toward them, and we need to live in harmony with the people who come over to the South as we are the same Korean race. (Teacher Five)

Also, Director Seven viewed them as those who could make a peaceful environment in the Korean Peninsula in the future:

Personally, I am happy having North Korean defectors for it will create a good environment to prepare for reunification.

The data illustrate that some educators had strong convictions about "the Korean race" as they grew

up with that belief. It is acknowledged that such beliefs show ethnic nationalism, the concept of the single bloodline and the homogeneous nation to be core and predominant issue to the understanding of Korean identity.

In contrast to other interviewees, three educators regarded North Korean defectors as "other". For example, Director Three stated that

I think people from the North are different for we have been living separately for ages and I consider North Korea as another country.

The other two teachers who are aged in their 20's also stated that:

I have grown up learning that the North and the South are one nation, but it just did not appeal to me. Though my parents' generations firmly believed in the Korean race, I feel we are different due to ideology, social norms, and cultures. (Teacher Six)

and

I considered North Korea as a different country in that we have a different accent and way of speaking. (Teacher Seven)

These outcomes confirm that young South Koreans usually define themselves as the southern part of the peninsula only.

Educators' perceptions of differences with NK children and their parents

When asked about the main differences, most participants appeared not to have any thoughts or images regarding NK children, but rather regarded them as the same as all the children in the school for they have common features. For example, Director Two stated:

I considered these children the same as South Korean children due to the same appearance and language.

However, some educators acknowledged children's language difficulties in their schools. Director Two recalled Sujin who had a North Korean mother:

She had a communication difficulty as she was born and brought up in China until the age of six. At the age of entering primary school, she was not accepted because she could not speak Korean. In turn, she enrolled and attended this school.

The following data also gave insight into Haein and Jinju who are siblings and were born to a Chinese man and a North Korean woman. Looking at their family background, the father only speaks Chinese, and the mother can speak both Chinese and Korean. Haein came to South Korea from China at the age of five. Because he graduated from the school the previous year and his teacher also left the school, Director Four did not recall much of his story but stated:

Haein could not attend primary school due to the language problem. Therefore, he had to attend this preschool at the age of entering primary school. For example, he could not speak even a Korean word and used body language in communication. Consequently, he could not catch up with the class. Therefore, Haein had to observe the situation and tried to imitate other kids' actions. For instance, when the class teacher said, "*We are going out to play, could you line up in front of the door over there?*" He tried to observe other children and followed, doing the same things his friends did.

These comments indicate that the directors identified that the children born in China have language difficulties in their schools. The data show that there is a need to be aware of those children to provide an equal opportunity in education as they have trouble adapting to school.

In terms of North Korean parents, several participants identified some differences with them. Especially, the differences of educational system between the two Koreans were emphasized. Director One reported the differences and stated:

At first, both Jumin's mum and Dongju's mum did not understand the programmes and the activities which were run in school.

Additionally, teacher One stated that:

Though Dongju was too young to write letters, she asked me to teach him how to write in school. I explained the

appropriate age for children to begin writing and introduced her to the best method for helping early childhood children learn letters: reading storybooks. After that, she understood what I meant.

Teacher Two also reflected on their experiences with North Korean mothers.

She seemed unable to understand South Korean teaching methods with their emphasis on individual levels and respect for autonomy. I assume they might have been used to the standardized education system in North Korea.

The data show that educators' experiences with North Korean mothers have increased their understanding of the different education systems in the two Koreas. These remarks indicate that the contrasts between the two educational systems are quite apparent as the educators identified that North Korean mothers considered the most important method in education to be rote learning. It resulted from the standardized education system of the North and could cause difficulties when teaching these children in their South Korean classes. Director Four, who has faced challenges with a North Korean mother due to her non-participation in school events or activities, stated:

It seems as if she does not know the importance of partnership between home and school. For example, she never participated in a school event or a sports day.

The director expressed frustration with the mother's lack of involvement in school activities. The following two educators also showed acquired knowledge through experience with female North Koreans by illustrating the mothers' lack of knowledge regarding instant food and the difference in attitudes to cleanliness. Teacher One stated:

When she packed lunch for Dongju on the day of a picnic, she sometimes sent instant food which should be heated but without heating it. It seemed she had no knowledge about microwave instant food.

Also:

She does not bathe her children or take them to the hairdresser for haircuts. She reminded me of parents in South Korea in the 1970s and 80s, as many people at that time did not prioritize their children's cleanliness due to the challenges of earning a living (Director Four).

The educators mentioned the different style of living of North Korean families. Especially, Director Four seemed to consider not washing children well and keeping their hair neat as a backward or unsophisticated life. This cultural chauvinism may have been influenced by the Southern media which has incited negative perceptions of North Korean defectors as new residents who must be modernized to keep up with the living standards and norms of South Korea.

Educators' Perceptions Regarding Reunification and Unification Education

Educators' Perceptions of Reunification and UE

When the educators were asked about their perceptions of reunification and UE, most felt UE was important as preparation for a future unified Korea. According to eight participants, they expressed their positive views on UE based on the beliefs of "same Korean race". For example, Director One stated that:

As we are one nation, UE is necessary. Early childhood is a critical period, which can be described like a sponge because children usually accept well what they learn. Therefore, it is very important to teach these children that we were one country, and we can also live together again someday. For this, children can be educated as to how we can be ready to be united.

Also:

I feel the need for UE because the reunification of Korean peninsula will happen someday. (Director Seven)

These statements of Director One and Seven who are in 50-60s are the oldest of the participants demonstrated that the older generation is eager for the North and South to be united and this could affect their educational beliefs that UE is necessary.

Teacher Three also discussed her view regarding reunification and UE through interaction with a North Korean mother. The data below reported this:

I think that there is a need for UE because the last task that Korea must achieve is reunification. I have heard from Min's mum that North Korea is still a closed country, and it is illegal to watch other media besides North Korean

broadcasting, but I heard that young North Koreans secretly encounter South Korean dramas and K-pop through China because South Korean culture is receiving the attention from the world. Due to these phenomena, I think reunification will come true soon and a related education is necessary.

However, the teacher showed the error of hasty generalization, which viewed reunification as a necessity due to the reason of North Koreans' strong interest in South Korean culture. This perspective seems to put no requirement on many South Koreans to adapt to the cultures of people from different backgrounds.

Meanwhile, six participants expressed their negative views on reunification between the two Koreas. Some seemed to feel that there would be an economic burden. For example, Teacher Six stated that:

For me, I am very negative about reunification for South Korea would lose many things when two Koreas are united.

Also:

I feel burdensome regarding reunification because South Koreans must help them with the taxes that we pay, and it might be putting a burden on the next generation. (Director Four)

These views display greater sensitivity to the costs rather than the benefits of reunification. Director Six expressed her view that huge differences between the two Koreas lead to the impossibility of reunification:

This school has never taught about reunification because I, myself, believe that the North and the South would not be united in the future because there have been a lot of gaps between the two Koreas such as culture, norms, views, and economics.

The example above indicates that she was concerned about conflict and confusion caused by social and cultural differences. The director seemed to have a strong belief that those who have different cultures, norms, and views cannot be associated with South Koreans. This demonstrates that the director's strong belief, in which she regarded North Korea and its people as different, hinders her in implementing UE in the school.

The following data also reflect educators' perspectives that UE for young children is not necessary, citing young children's "incomprehension of the concept of reunification". For instance, Teacher One stated that:

I think children in early childhood would not understand what reunification means for them.

Director Three also expressed this:

Such education is not necessary because I think early childhood children do not understand the situation and relation between the North and the South. I believe that some children would not appreciate that the Korea peninsula is divided.

Director Six also commented:

UE is unnecessary at this age because they would not fully understand what reunification means. I am concerned that children at this age would have a bad image toward the North and the people by regarding them as "commies" if they learn about UE.

The data demonstrate educators' perceptions of young children's lack of comprehension regarding reunification between the two Koreas. Especially, Director Six's misperceptions regarding reunification between the two Koreas by using the negative term "commies" was possibly influenced by anti-communist education (North Korea and its people are enemies, not one nation or people) that she learnt when she was young.

Educators' Thoughts of the Effective Strategies for UE

Despite the controversy over the need for UE programmes in early childhood, some participants described the child-centred teaching methods of engaging in dialogue with children appropriately about inter-Korean relations. A School has been teaching UE since the children from North Korean defectors attended. The director stated that:

I think the North and the South can be united someday, and I have done this programme because I feel the necessity of it. When children at the age of five had lessons about their home country, they also learnt about inter-Korean relations. During the class, a song about “we are one nation” was introduced by explaining the meaning of the words. It was found that some kids sobbed while singing the song.

This indicates the director's strong belief that she regarded the two Koreas as one nation. This enabled her to implement UE in her school although the UE curriculum of South Korea has not been applied in the early years.

The following data show that some participants became aware of prejudice toward North Korean defectors by reviewing what they had said. They also highlighted the necessity of developing their understanding of North Korean defectors to increase their respect for them and to decrease their bias or prejudices and negative view of differences. For example, Teacher Two stated that:

Integrated education will be possible if educators are prepared first and learn about North Korea's culture and education system so that we can abandon prejudice against North Korea and North Korean defectors.

Director Four also commented that:

I think educators should have an unbiased attitude toward them because children learn from their attitudes. This is the first step to implement integrated education between the two Koreas.

Teacher Four suggested improving teacher education to complete an effective UE:

Teachers should first develop an attitude of understanding and respecting each other's views through teacher education. This is definitely necessary, I think.

These outcomes indicate the necessity of a teacher education programme that resists bias by reflecting on teachers' possible prejudice when teaching these children and that promotes ways of interacting with parents, because prejudice and bias are prevalent in South Korean society. Some participants acknowledged differences between the two Koreas which confirms the necessity of education related to embracing diversity. The data below show the importance of the teacher's role in the class as some addressed UE through multicultural approaches. For instance, Director Three stated that:

UE should provide children with a way to accept and understand the differences first. For example, when we introduce a North Korean child in the class, I would introduce him “Soo is from the Northern part of Korea, which is different from us”. In the view of multicultural educational approach, children could learn about the North and get along with them and, I believe children could embrace the cultural differences. Through this, they could learn to live together with people from different backgrounds.

In the data, the director adopted a multicultural educational approach to acknowledge the cultural diversity between the two Koreas and to foster understanding of each other's differences. This indicates that unification should extend beyond mere geographic and institutional consolidation to embrace cultural integration, which is essential for multicultural education that acknowledges and respects cultural diversity.

Teacher Three also agreed saying:

I think we should proceed with a multicultural educational approach. In order to live as a citizen of unified Korea, I think it would be better to conduct education from an early age to coexist and learn about each other.

Director One commented that:

I think South Korean children should be educated first to embrace the differences of North Korean kids. Therefore, early childhood is the right time to become ready to embrace people from different backgrounds.

The educators emphasized the importance of a multicultural education approach in early childhood to help children from diverse cultural backgrounds be understood and embraced by their peers in the host country. This understanding fosters positive cultural identities in interdependent relationships.

Discussion

This study explores participants' perceptions of North Korean defectors, their national identity, reunification, and unification education (UE) to suggest more effective educational strategies for UE and

related teacher education.

Educators' Perceptions of North Korean defectors and Their National Identity

Some participants expressed empathetic views regarding North Korean mothers, recognizing them as individuals from a different country. As one director stated, "She came from a communist country." This finding highlights the need to examine teachers' perceptions of inter-Korean relations before implementing unification education in the class. Additionally, while most educators regarded North Koreans as part of the 'Same Korean race,' younger educators in their 20s emphasized differences, viewing North Koreans primarily as people from the North. Some even exhibited prejudices toward North Korean defectors. For instance, Director Six, who is in her 50s, regarded North Korea and its people as enemies rather than as part of a single nation. The data indicate that educators tend to consider North Korean defectors as "other", underscoring the necessity for teacher education that embraces the cultural differences and values of North Koreans. This approach should be prioritized over an emphasis on the idea of "one nation" between the two Koreas.

The data indicate that some educators recognized children's language difficulties in their schools. This finding underscores the need for multicultural approaches in interacting with and teaching Sujin and Haein, who were born in China. It aligns with previous research showing that early childhood teachers struggle to engage with children from North Korea or China (Kang, 2014). Although all North Korean children have been fully funded by the government since the educational policy changed in 2012 with the introduction of the "Nuri Curriculum", this funding does not extend to private education or extracurricular activities (Lee et al., 2015). Furthermore, the literature on local adaptation centers, commonly known as North Korean Refugees Foundation [i.e., 하나센터], reveals that while these centres provide language programmes for children from North Korea or China (third countries), early childhood children are often overlooked in these initiatives (Lee et al., 2012). Therefore, the government needs to consider providing appropriate support for children of North Korean defectors to ensure equal educational opportunities, as these children struggle to adapt to school.

The study also shows that educators faced difficulties because North Korean mothers did not understand the South Korean preschool curriculum and teaching methods, particularly regarding the emphasis on individual development and respect for autonomy. The data indicate that teachers struggled to communicate and discuss children's learning due to parents' lack of familiarity with the South Korean education system. This suggests that North Korean families may feel discouraged when trying to engage in their early education, but they have limited opportunities to access information on these topics (Lee et al., 2012). These findings align with previous research, which emphasizes that the government should provide North Korean families with effective parent education, including information on the different education cultures of South Korean society, to enhance their understanding of the educational ethos and philosophy (Lee et al., 2012).

Furthermore, some educators expressed difficulty due to parents' lack of involvement in school activities. This finding highlights the director's recognition of North Korean families' non-participation, underscoring the importance of home-school partnerships. The data indicate that the director seemed unaware of the reasons behind the mother's lack of involvement. This trend aligns with existing literature, which suggests that there is no home-school partnership in North Korea, as teachers are seen as solely responsible for educating children (Jo & Kwon, 2013). Therefore, teachers need to enhance their understanding of parental involvement, considering factors such as limited financial resources, past experiences with schooling, and linguistic and cultural differences (Jones, 2010).

Two educators also perceived female North Koreans' lack of knowledge about using microwaves, along with their inability to properly wash their children and keep their hair neat, as indicators of a backward or unsophisticated lifestyle. These instances of ignorance and prejudice highlight the need for teacher education focused on effective interactions with parents, emphasizing attitudes such as openness to other cultures and respect for diverse values.

Educators' Perceptions Regarding Reunification and Unification Education

Early childhood teachers' perception of unification is considered crucial for shaping young children's awareness and attitudes toward unification, as well as for the practice of early childhood UE (Lee & Kim, 2022). The data reveal that some participating directors in the older age group appeared to welcome reunification under the concept of one nation between the two Koreas and preferred UE in their schools. This aligns with findings from previous studies (Campbell, 2015; Yim, 2014). However, the results showed that six participants had negative perceptions of reunification, and one participant had not taught UE programmes in her school. These findings are supported by previous research indicating that the South Korean government perceives North Korea and its people not only as part of one nation but also as an enemy, which has shaped the attitudes of South Koreans (Yim, 2014). The data suggest that the influence of mass media on the political decision-making process regarding inter-Korean relations continues to subtly impact South Korean citizens. Both conservative and progressive Korean newspapers exacerbate the ideological and political conflicts affecting relations between the two Koreas (Akulova, 2015). Additionally, decades of political division have led many young South Koreans to view North Koreans not as fellow Koreans, but as a distinct out-group, similar to immigrants, with whom they do not share language, culture, or ancestry (Ha & Jang, 2016) as demonstrated by this research. These teachers' perceptions and attitudes may be also influenced by the National Institute for Unification Education (2018), which has determined that UE does not extend to early childhood. Consequently, this policy has contributed to ECEC practitioners' lack of awareness, knowledge, and positive attitudes toward North Korean defectors and their children. Therefore, the South Korean government should consider effective alternative curricula and related teacher training to build accurate awareness, knowledge, and unbiased attitudes toward North Korean parents through "true knowing" about North Korean defectors before teaching their children about North Korea and its people.

For these, teacher education should be conducted in a multicultural manner to enhance its effectiveness. Pre-service teacher education should be implemented in universities to increase their awareness and knowledge about the lives of North Koreans and the importance of reunification. It would also be effective to plan the curriculum by using cultural content such as films or literature. Such contents could be dealing with North Korean culture, perspectives, or human rights in North Korea. Various and high-quality strategies through cultural contents should be applied in the curriculum on a regular basis. For example, the 2023 film *Beyond Utopia*, directed by Gavin, depicts the reality of life for North Koreans and captures the entire process of their defection from North Korea. Pre-service teachers can gain insights into human rights issues in North Korea after watching the film. Over the past decade, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations human rights bodies have brought significant attention to egregious human rights violations in North Korea (Cohen, 2013). However, education systems across the country are failing to inform students about their rights and how to access them as global citizens (Gibson, 2023). Therefore, it is important to incorporate classes that focus on learning about and discussing North Korea's human rights within the regular curriculum. Through these films, trainee teachers can develop awareness and knowledge related to North Korea and its people, as well as the human rights issues they face.

Educators should also cultivate positive attitudes toward diversity through teacher education. As the data indicate, some participants show assimilative views toward North Korean defectors, and some demonstrated ongoing prejudice against them. Young children in the class could be influenced by teachers who hold negative attitudes toward diverse people so that it becomes easy for children to accept stereotypes. Therefore, educators should be reflective about whether they are biased or not and need to view the North Korean context objectively. They also need to get rid of assimilative views based on a perceived cultural superiority of South Korea. For this, trainee teachers should be trained in reflecting on their own prejudice against North Koreans and all people groups. It has been emphasized that the first and most significant task of a teacher-training programme is to help teachers to review their own beliefs, values, ideas, practices, and bias as they bring these into their learning and teaching (Yurtseven & Altun, 2015). Thus, trainee teachers should develop positive attitudes toward diverse families through designing pre-

service teacher education programmes which are embedded in experiential learning. For example, in guided exercises with their own class groups, trainee teachers would engage in role-play as North Korean defectors, and they would engage with their feelings and think about what they experienced. Other activities might be based on real scenarios, such as discussing the case of discrimination by local people. Through these activities, trainee teachers could get understanding of why North Korean women cannot help but experience human trafficking or why they close their minds, in turn trainee teachers could increase their ability to stand in another person's shoes to understand his or her feelings.

Other participants also argued that teaching UE to young children was unnecessary due to concerns about their comprehension. This perspective highlights teachers' lack of awareness regarding children's right to know about the background of division, the harmful effects of division, and the necessity of reunification. Young children are rights holders, yet their rights are often overlooked because of perceptions of immaturity (Theobald, 2019). It is essential to provide teacher education that enables educators to recognize and uphold children's right to know, as early childhood is a critical period of rapid development during which the foundations for communication, connection, and identity are established. Simultaneously, the government should implement UE curriculum in the early years to allow young children to exercise and experience their rights in their daily lives. Regarding this, some educators addressed unification education through multicultural educational strategies, recognizing that children may perceive ideological, cultural, linguistic, and economic differences between themselves and North Korean defectors and their children. Based on these research results, the necessity of a multicultural approach within early childhood unification education can be suggested as follows. Firstly, the growing number of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in South Korean society indicates that unification education, which emphasizes the traditional concept of a single nation, needs to evolve. Since the 2000s, multiculturalism has rapidly emerged in Korea due to the influx of migrants, including migrant workers and women from international marriages, leading to a significant increase in the multicultural population. It was also found that among the children of married immigrants, 61.9% were under the age of six (Yang et al., 2014), underscoring the necessity for a multicultural education approach in ECEC.

Secondly, multicultural education is one approach that can address the limitations of unification education. Since the Korean War, South and North Korea have been shaped by distinct political, economic, cultural influences, and educational systems. These differences may lead to increased conflicts regarding unification. Especially, there are considerable differences in aims, teaching methods, and educational resources between the North and South Korean children (Han & Lee, 2014). For example, North Korean preschool education emphasizes 'rote learning' as this study indicated. A key difference between the curricula in North and South Korea is that North Korea prioritizes content over skills development (Jo & Kwon, 2013), while South Korea pre-school curriculums place greater emphasis on the balanced growth of the individual (Jin et al., 2023). Therefore, unification education should facilitate understanding of each other's differences and help resolve conflicts. A multicultural approach to unification education will be essential for preparing all members of the Korean Peninsula for social integration. To sum up, UE should be able to achieve social integration to embrace the difference of values in South Korean society so that recognizing the need for UE through multicultural education approaches should be increased. While there are currently studies on UE through a multicultural educational approach these are only for primary and secondary school students (Lee, 2017).

As suggested by some scholars in the literature review, this section will outline the common elements of UE through multicultural educational approaches. These elements include recognition and respect for cultural diversity, an understanding of the cultures of North and South Korea, and an exploration of their commonalities and differences. For young children, one effective approach is to allow both North and South Korean children to share their stories. Kidd et al., (2005) emphasize the importance of children sharing stories about their home and family lives in class. For example, children could present materials related to their typical language, food, and traditional games to foster mutual understanding. These stories help South and North Korean children become more culturally aware, leading to a celebration of diversity. When these stories are shared with all families in the classroom, they can promote a sense of community

(Araujo, 2003), creating a foundation for integration between children from the North and the South.

Preschool is also responsible for providing opportunities for programmes that allow children to experience different languages by exploring the commonalities and differences between the languages of the two Koreas. Play is an essential component of early childhood programmes, and all areas of academic learning should be integrated into play (Griswold, 2018). For example, children can explore Korean words illustrated by pictures and identify similar or different words in their own languages. Following this, they can participate in a game in which they form two groups and quickly pick up a card when the teacher asks them to find a word that is similar to or different from their own words. Experiencing Chinese language and culture is also necessary, as research shows that young children born in China face challenges in school. Korean shares many Sin-Korean words with Chinese, etymologically rooted in Chinese characters but pronounced in Korean (Wang et al., 2016). Additionally, both Korea and China share Buddhist and Confucian heritages (Gupta et al., 2002). Learning through media can significantly impact learners. For example, Kung Fu Panda, an exciting digital animation film suitable for all ages, features plots and elements, such as chopsticks, that help young children explore the commonalities and differences in language and culture between South Korea and China (Wang, 2023). Through these activities, young children will not only understand diversity but also enhance their sense of community by discovering commonalities with one another.

Limitations

There are certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, this study cannot be generalized to the larger population due to the small sample size (7 teachers and 7 directors) and the specific area where the study was conducted. Recruitment of a larger and more diverse sample would be necessary. Second, the results were obtained from small urban settings, so replication of this research in a variety of geographical contexts is needed.

Conclusion

This study examines participants' perceptions of North Korean defectors, their national identity, reunification, and unification education (UE) to inform more effective educational strategies for UE and related teacher training. The results of the study demonstrated that early childhood educators play a key role in fostering young children's awareness and knowledge about North Korea and its people, as well as developing positive attitudes towards them. Therefore, this study recommends teacher education aimed at enhancing awareness, knowledge, and positive attitudes toward North Korean defectors and their children. It also identifies that the unification education (UE) curriculum in South Korea has not been implemented in early childhood settings. Therefore, it is recommended to implement the UE curriculum through multicultural educational approaches for young children, who are rights holders. The study highlights implications for helping young children achieve social integration, embrace diverse values in their classrooms, and exercise their rights in daily life.

Despite its limitations, this research provides a new and significant perspective by suggesting specific measures on how to raise young teachers' awareness of the importance of reunification, how to provide related teacher education, and focus on UE through multicultural educational approaches in early childhood education fields.

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