

Korean Middle School Teachers’ Perceptions and Teaching Practices of Multicultural Education: A Qualitative Case Study

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ABSTRACT: Korean society has rapidly experienced increasing multiculturalism for over two decades. This qualitative case study explores Korean teachers’ conceptualizations and implementation of multicultural education with/for multicultural students in middle schools in Seoul, Korea. Interviews were conducted with six Korean middle school teachers experienced in teaching multicultural students. The findings reveal diverse perspectives and practices of multicultural education with the teachers demonstrating increased pedagogical flexibility and reflexivity in their teaching practices. This contributes to a more inclusive learning environment that embraces diversity and fosters inclusion.

KEYWORDS: Multicultural education, praxis, teacher pedagogy, inclusive education

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Multicultural Education (ME) has been integrated into the Korean school curriculum since the early 2000s, when the Korean population started becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Yet, an increasing number of reports indicate that Korean teachers may sometimes make “racially insensitive comments towards multicultural students” (Kim, H.A., 2020, p. 88). The reason behind this, according to B.L. Kim (2020), is that “most secondary school teachers, curriculums, and

multicultural education-related policies are not adequately prepared to support and teach multiethnic students” (p. 76). In other words, many Korean teachers are still navigating the challenging dynamics of applying multicultural knowledge, values, and skills into teaching (Chang, 2017). If this situation remains unaddressed, the presence of cultural or racial prejudice toward multicultural students in the classroom could negatively affect students’ experiences in school (Lee & Choi, 2016).

Since teachers are the frontline workers who support multicultural learners in the educational sector, Cheong et al.’s (2021) research has indicated the need for more studies on increasing teachers’ multicultural knowledge and skills. To date, most studies on this topic have been focused in the provinces outside of Seoul (e.g., Cho, 2012) and are based on quantitative research, such as surveys done at the early-childhood or primary level (Cheong et al., 2021). This may be because 70% of multicultural students in Korea are in those levels (Kim, 2022), and the majority of these students are concentrated in the southern part of Korea. However, it is equally vital to note that the second region with the largest number of multicultural students is Seoul city. Around 13,093 multicultural students are currently studying in primary schools in the city (Korean Educational Statistics Service, 2021). These students will soon advance to higher levels.

This qualitative case study aims to contribute valuable new insights to a region that has received comparatively little research attention. It addresses an important gap in the field by examining middle school teachers’ understanding and actual implementation of ME content and teaching methods in classrooms in the Seoul metropolitan area. The guiding research questions for the study include:

1. What resources and pedagogies do teachers use when they practice ME in the classroom?
2. What are the challenges that teachers face when implementing ME?
3. What additional support do the teachers say might help them to better promote inclusive and transformative ME in the future?

This study complements the existing literature through its empirical findings in a less researched context. Additionally, the study indicates key differences between teachers teaching in public/private schools versus multicultural-centered schools. A multicultural-centered school refers to a general school with a large number of multicultural students. These are government-designated schools that focus on creating a multicultural-friendly environment by providing multicultural education for all students and tailored educational support for multicultural students, including students from culturally diverse backgrounds based on nationality, religion, language, race and ethnicity. This comparison between public/private schools and multicultural-centered schools is a new contribution. Our data show that for a successful implementation of ME, teachers claim it is problematic to not acknowledge diversity in the classroom (see also Yuk & Cho, 2015). Acknowledging diversity requires being sensitive to the various backgrounds of students. This can be done by shifting teachers’ perceptions toward diversity since such a shift will not only help mitigate prejudices, but it can also help create classrooms that respect heterogeneity and inclusion (Mo & Hwang, 2007).

In the pages that follow, we first provide a brief description of the similarities and differences between the literature on ME in Korea and in other countries. Next, we

share the integrative framework of ME that we use to make sense of the data. We then provide an overview of the methods and present three key findings that emerged from our interviews with teachers. Before concluding, we discuss the findings and pedagogical implications at three levels: the individual teacher, instructional practices, and institutional environment of the schools.

Literature Review

ME has been interpreted and implemented differently across national contexts depending on the country's social, cultural, and political background. Therefore, it is important to first understand the conceptual and theoretical trends regarding this topic in general, and then within different settings specifically. In general, ME is a complex concept and practice involving a wide range of interventions and objectives (Kuppens et al., 2020). Based on extant literature, ME can be at least three things. It is a *concept* that states that all students regardless of ethnic, racial, cultural, or linguistic characteristics should experience educational equality in schools. It is also a *reform movement* intended to transform the school environment so that all students have an equal opportunity to learn. For this to happen, "all major components of the schools must be substantially changed" (Banks, 2021, p. 51). As a movement, for example, teachers, parents, and community members might protest racial or gender-biased textbooks in their schools (Grant & Sleeter, 2011). Additionally, ME can be seen as an ongoing *process* that tries to mitigate discrimination and inequity in education and seeks to nurture equity, justice, and mutual understanding.

In terms of its development in different settings, the term "Multicultural Education" first appeared in North America in the 1960s and rapidly expanded to South America and Europe; it reached Asia in the early 2000s (Kim et al., 2010). At the beginning stages, ME started as social rights movements aiming to eradicate discrimination against people originating from different backgrounds (Shen, 2019). When it comes to incorporating ME into the school curricula, it has been found that ME practices have been aligned or interchangeably used with already existing educational approaches, such as equity pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy, critical pedagogy, social justice pedagogy, peace pedagogy, and so on (Banks, 2021; Bekerman, 2004; Gay, 2000; Grant & Sleeter, 2011; Matriano & Toh, 2013; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Since ME practices should be contextualized to each setting (Gay, 2000), and the focus of this study is in Korea, the following section will cover how ME has been conceptualized and practiced within the Korean context.

Korean Conceptualization of ME

Unlike in the United States and Europe, where political struggle and minorities' civil rights movements have been prominent (e.g., Tarozzi, 2012), ME in Korea is mostly linked to rising immigration since the 1990s. As such, the Roh Moo-hyun Government declared a shift toward a multicultural society and developed the very first policy on *damunhwa* (multicultural) education in 2006 (Lee et al., 2020). It is evident that ME in Korea started as a top-down approach with a shallow political slogan rather

than a goal of addressing the needs of multicultural students (Kim & So, 2018). Internationally, it is widely known that ME is meant for all students and not just the racial “others;” yet, in Korea ME has been primarily targeted toward “multicultural students” to assimilate them better into Korean society (Kim, H.A., 2020). For Korean ethnic students, on the other hand, ME has been approached as *education for international understanding* (Chang, 2017). It can be argued that Korean students are hardly compelled to study immigrant and minority cultures; rather, they look outward toward diversity in the world instead of within Korea. Therefore, “integration” and ME are rarely incorporated into the majority of Korean students' education (Shen, 2019).

More recently, however, the Korean government has put some effort into creating a multicultural-friendly educational foundation so that all students understand cultural diversity and grow harmoniously in school (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2021). Some of the main elements of ME as presented in the most recently published Multicultural Education Plan include: “equality,” “anti-bias,” “identity,” “respect for diversity,” “intercultural understanding,” and “cooperation” (MOE, 2021, p. 17). This is meant to serve as a guideline for teachers and students to not only understand the difference among diverse cultures, but also to encourage them to value and respect one another.

Korean Implementation of ME

Based on international literature, when it comes to incorporating ME into the school curricula, the values of ME should be integrated into various subjects through the incorporation of different views, histories, and cultures (Shen, 2019). The Korean MOE seems to be aware of this as it is currently trying to expand ME for all students by encouraging schools to include at least two hours of ME per year to promote a school environment where diversity is valued. It is recommended that ME content be dealt with in an integrated manner throughout the curriculum and within non-curricular activities. At the end of the semester, one week should be allocated to convey messages that discriminatory behaviors can be a violation of human rights and to show videos aimed at improving multicultural awareness. In middle schools, ME is mainly carried out through creative experience activities, such as arts, music, foreign cuisine, and cultural experiences. It is also integrated into major subjects such as morals and ethics, Korean language, English, mathematics, social studies, and science by reflecting elements of multicultural education and global citizenship education (Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education [SMOE], 2021a).

Based on a quantitative study done by Kim and Lee (2021), it can be recognized that the ME content taught in Korean schools can be divided into four aspects: (i) understanding the characteristics of various cultures (*knowledge*), (ii) learning to respect others (*attitudes*), (iii) interacting with people from different cultures (*functions*), and (iv) learning to take action for the development of a multicultural society (*behaviors*). However, one challenge when integrating ME content into middle school curriculum is that the *knowledge* and *attitudes* aspects are most commonly seen while *functions* and *behaviors* need also to be integrated. ME in Korean schools is still teacher-centered where ME knowledge is delivered, and students receive in a passive learning mode. Some teachers may be lacking the knowledge and skills to successfully

implement multicultural education into their instruction to promote ME functions and behaviors. For this to happen, teachers themselves must be cross-culturally competent (Jenks et al., 2001). This more complete approach to ME would become more participatory and allow students to get involved in working toward social justice.

Toward an Integrative Framework

Since most existing frameworks have been critiqued as being Western-centered and promoting whiteness (Asher, 2007; Kester, 2023; Kester et al., 2020; Kim, 2011; Sleeter, 2018), we especially look toward perspectives on ME that have been created by Korean authors. First, Cho's and Choi's (2018) framework helps elucidate the epistemological dimensions of ME in the Korean context (e.g., conservative, liberal, critical) and the beliefs teachers have regarding the goals of ME (e.g., to improve academic performance, promote mutual respect, and address social inequalities). These dimensions and beliefs are detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Integrative Framework

Dimensions	Conservative ME	Liberal ME	Critical ME
Perspectives on ME	Teach multicultural students to conform to the mainstream society (e.g., preserve cultural values and beliefs)	Teach students skills to live together (e.g., promote attitudes of living in harmony)	Teach students to challenge social or institutional injustice (e.g., seek social and political change)
Beliefs in ME Goals	Emphasize students' academic achievements (e.g., catching up with standards)	Promote tolerance and mutual respect (e.g., focus on students' attitudes and behaviors); Reduce stereotypes	Foster educational equality and justice; Develop critical consciousness and social action (e.g., focus on structural transformation)
ME approaches	<i>Assimilationist</i> : Convey the curriculum as it is; Reproduce current social order, which is perceived as just; Support students to acquire skills to successfully navigate the current system	<i>Human Relationships</i> : Facilitate students' understanding of cultural diversity; Promote multiperspectivity (e.g., to overcome biases); Support students to acquire dispositions of empathy and compassion	<i>Social Change</i> : Help students analyze and disrupt inequality (e.g., recognize power imbalances among different social groups); Support students to acquire skills for social transformation

Second, Yuk's and Cho's (2016) framework shows the approach of instructional methods through three types of ME teachers in Korea (e.g., assimilationist, human-

relationship oriented, and social change oriented) and illuminates the ways teachers can practice ME (e.g., deliver contents as they are, help students connect with members of other cultures, and help students develop skills to respond to social oppression). Together, these integrated ME approaches drawing on Korean scholarship may better support the contextualization and implementation of the concepts within the Korean context. Broadly, these two frameworks provide teachers with the concepts and methods they need to incorporate ME in their classrooms.

Methodology

The assumption that realities (e.g., teachers' perceptions of ME) are shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts—and that such perspectives are important in understanding how and why teachers teach the way they do—naturally led us to a qualitative research methodology. Guided by a critical constructivist view, we sought to explore the varied and multiple views on how teachers develop their subjective meanings and perceptions of ME. This complexity of views is examined as a bounded system or case study. We use the case study methodology as the most suitable approach for this research, as we investigate teachers' perceptions of ME and their teaching practices in the natural context of schools. A case study approach allowed us to examine in-depth the experiences of the educators in each of the schools and to compare their responses for insights into the phenomenon of ME practice in secondary schools. Examining in-service teachers' vivid experiences with ME provides useful information (e.g., practical implications) for others in the field in Korea and beyond (Kim & Jung, 2021).

To obtain in-depth insights into the participants' interpretation and implementation of ME, data collection involved individual interviews with six Korean middle school teachers who were from four different schools in Seoul. The interviews were conducted by the first author, and each interview was approximately 60 minutes in length. The methods also involved document analysis of three primary sources to help triangulate the data, including two ME reports published by the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education (SMOE, 2021a, 2021b) and a third unpublished internal report for multicultural-centered schools provided by two of the participants. Lastly, in order to mitigate biases and preconceptions, we authors practiced reflexivity throughout the study and shared our interpretations of the data with each other and with the participants prior to publication. Reflexivity involves constant reflection on one's position while trying to prevent individual biases from getting in the way when doing the research and analyzing data. This is similar to Dewey's (1933) "reflexive thinking" where he emphasizes that "critical thinking" is more than just accepting one's biases and assumptions but also actively finding the knowledge that influences one's position. Reflexivity aided a balanced analysis.

Context and Participants

The school environment is one of the key factors influencing teachers' perceptions and their teaching practices. As such, in order to examine whether there

are differences and commonalities in how teachers conceptualize and practice ME, we selected three participants from schools that have only two to three multicultural students in each grade (e.g., Participants 1, 2, and 5) and the remaining three participants are from two different multicultural-centered schools where almost half of the student population is made up of multicultural students (e.g., Participants 3, 4, and 6). This provided a well-balanced source for comparison to identify whether participants had contrasting views on ME or toward multicultural students. We additionally compared responses with the demographic information of the participants (e.g., age, years of experience, type of school in which they taught, extended interaction with multicultural students, etc.) to infer possible influence (or not) of the educator's background on their type of responses.

Furthermore, in terms of the characteristics of the participants, although we tried to target maximum variation of gender, age, socioeconomic status, and years of teaching experience, there was only one male participant and the remaining five were all female (see Table 2 for more details). Otherwise, there is variation regarding age, degree level, number of years teaching, subject taught, and experience across public/private schools or multicultural-centered schools.

Table 2

Participants

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Level of Education	School type	Subject	Years of teaching
Participant 1	Male	50-59	BA	Private	Social Studies & History	27
Participant 2	Female	30-39	Currently MA Student	Public	Social Studies	5
Participant 3	Female	50-59	BA	Private	Korean Literature & Career Advisor	25
Participant 4	Female	50-59	MA	Public	English	32
Participant 5	Female	20-29	Currently MA Student	Public	Ethics	5
Participant 6	Female	30-39	Currently MA Student	Public	English	6

Analysis

Several rounds of inductive thematic analysis were conducted to allow themes from the data to emerge naturally. We first let the codes emerge from the findings (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022) without trying to fit findings into a particular framework based on our preconceptions. This was done through data familiarization, which involved manual transcription of interview files by using word documents and iteratively analyzing documents provided by the participants (Saldana, 2021). Furthermore, in order to identify, organize, describe, and report key themes that were discovered from the data set, we kept in mind Nowell et al.'s (2017) six phases of thematic analysis (i.e.,

familiarizing ourselves with the data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report). Analyzing and structuring the findings thematically gave us flexibility when examining participants' perspectives, highlighting differences and similarities as well as generating insights that were unexpected.

Specifically, in the process of analyzing the data, we conducted three cycles of coding through multiple readings. For the first cycle of coding, we read the data set inductively using *in vivo* coding (Saldana, 2021). We extracted direct quotes from the participants to understand teachers' views and practices of ME. In the second cycle of coding, we generated categories of codes by using triangulation. We compared and analyzed keywords or phrases by looking for common topics and issues that were being addressed by the teachers and their pedagogical responses. These categories were then organized into similarities and differences. In the third cycle of coding, we examined the categories through the integrative framework as outlined in the literature review to understand the categories better and interpret the themes that emerged from the data. By the third round of analysis, the categories were placed into three themes that answered the research questions.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed the ethical standards of the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2011), and we received ethics approval from Seoul National University (IRB No. 2202/001-011) before commencing data collection. In particular, we obtained informed consent from each participant prior to interviews and ensured confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process. All potential identifying factors have been removed from the paper. Furthermore, participants were given the opportunity to member-check transcripts and analysis prior to publication so that they could notify us of any concerns with representation or confidentiality (Thomas, 2017).

Findings

This section presents the vivid voices and experiences on how teachers perceive and practice ME, which is something that has been lacking in the Korean context, particularly at the middle school level. Findings will be presented thematically in three interrelated categories: ME as Pedagogy for Assimilation; ME as Pedagogy for Coexistence, and ME as Pedagogy for Social Change. Analysis of interviews and documents are guided by the integrative framework as described in the Literature Review.

ME as Pedagogy for Assimilation

Although all the participants had different views and approaches to ME, what tied them together (regardless of their school settings) was their view that ME has “no

choice” but to be carried out on two-tracks, as explained by Participant 4: “one is to teach Korean language and culture to students who enter the country in the middle of the semester, and the other is to teach ME to all students.” Participant 1, however, seemed to have a strong view that ME is primarily for multicultural students. He said,

Living together is a life for the community, for that reason ME can be understood as education for those with multicultural backgrounds who came to Korea and come in contact with a new culture, to help them share the values of being able to live together by teaching them the Korean language, understanding their cultures, and so on.

This perspective can be considered as having a conservative view to ME since it is closely related to Cho’s and Choi’s (2018) description where teachers are mostly trained to teach multicultural students to conform to mainstream culture and attend to Korean values and norms. Notwithstanding, Participant 1 proudly shared that “There is clearly an aspect of the government that is trying to be considerate of students.” He added that,

Schools can invite guest speakers to talk about human rights, gender equality, cultural diversity, and the difficulties that multicultural students face, etc.... We also teach that since our multicultural society is expected to progress gradually, let’s be more careful of bullying our friends and instead try to understand them well.

Inviting guest speakers was a popular response among all the participants.

However, Participant 2 had a different point of view on the government efforts that Participant 1 mentioned. She said,

I think the current ME is all about cultural diversity... But I think students don't respect different cultures just by knowing what Japanese culture is like or Chinese culture is like. So, I think the content should be more related to reality.

Participant 2 indicated during member-checking that what she meant by *reality* is the “discrimination that migrants and foreigners” face within Korean society and that Korean students must learn to address those problems. Participants 1 and 2 further stressed that they do not want to give “special treatment” and instead prefer to treat all students equally. Not only that, they both mentioned that, due to time constraints, they would only teach curriculum as it appears in the social studies textbooks. Participant 1 particularly emphasized that,

It is not easy to allocate time in the curriculum even if you want to, there are certain parts that cannot be dealt with in-depth unless the teacher takes the initiative in finding it [time to teach more in-depth]. I think this is an inevitable phenomenon.

These thoughts naturally led Participants 1 and 2 to convey the curriculum to students as it appears in textbooks to keep knowledge ‘neutral’ and provide no “special treatment.” This is a practice that Yuk and Cho (2016) would describe as being an “assimilationist” approach. Both Participants 1 and 2 encountered some difficulties going beyond the conservative approach to ME. They described these difficulties as “structural barriers,” such as insufficient time for ME in the curriculum, lack of practical teacher training for ME, and linguistic challenges among students.

ME as Pedagogy for Coexistence

Another evident theme in the data was that teachers viewed ME as a pedagogy for coexistence. More than half of the participants expressed that ME helped students learn the important skills to be able to coexist in a multicultural society. This indicated that the majority of teachers were aware of the new ME policy promoting ME as education for all students. Some were even knowledgeable about a well-known scholar in the field. Participant 4, for example, said,

One day the words of [James] Banks got me, which says that “ME is an education that fosters such ideas that children from various cultural backgrounds can be educated equally and coexist in an equal world” [...] ME helps educate students from various cultural backgrounds to understand each other’s cultures and learn the attitude of living together.

Participant 5 added what she perceived to be the strengths of ME, mentioning that,

ME allows children to have a much wider idea.... The opportunities to meet other cultures are rare, but... there are also opportunities to meet other cultures and promote inclusion through education. So, its advantage is in being able to expand cultural sensitivity and tolerance.

Thus, ME from the perspective of a pedagogy of coexistence included tolerance for others and efforts to learn to live together.

Apart from these, other responses included understanding ME as “expanding one’s horizon” (Participant 3) and “respecting others” (Participant 6). These sentiments are present in Cho’s and Choi’s (2018) liberal approach to ME. Under Yuk’s and Cho’s (2016) categorization, these teachers would be considered as having a human relationship-oriented focus and believing that students should cultivate an attitude of mutual respect and make efforts to connect members of different ethnic and racial groups to live harmoniously within a society. However, one of the challenges that teachers face within this approach is what Participant 6 stated:

It is difficult to promote the values of ME when the current system encourages competition and individuality... So, it is hard for me to tell the students to go slowly, learn to live together, etc., when there are so many standards for Koreans causing jealousy and anxiety among members.

To move away from this dilemma, Participant 6 hopes that “the more diversity we have, Korea will become a society where equality and diversity are respected in a more egalitarian and genuine sense.”

In line with this perspective, efforts taken by teachers from this category include integrating their multicultural students’ backgrounds into their instruction, such as including knowledge about the students’ cultures, religion, and so on, in lessons. Although it might “take twice the effort” (Participant 1), these practices were believed to help the students “take pride in their identity” (Participant 3) and “feel like they are a part of the class” (Participant 6). However, responses from teachers have shown that they have to be sensitive to diverse backgrounds and take these approaches carefully. For example, Participant 6 shared an intriguing case,

There was this one case where one teacher tried to involve a Vietnamese student in class by asking him how to say “*sugohasyeotseumnida*” [thank you for your hard work] in Vietnamese. The teacher was surprised because the student reacted negatively to that by saying that he doesn’t want to respond and that she [the teacher] should stop asking him questions in front of everyone just because he was Vietnamese.

This was a challenge encountered in a multicultural-centered school, and cases like this show how educators need to be careful and consider the psychological and emotional vulnerability of students, as addressed in the report from SMOE (2021a).

Additionally, one of the biggest tasks within schools is the recognition of the expression of “multiculturality.” Multicultural students who were born in Korea or entered Korea as children should not be labeled as multicultural students because they usually do not have difficulty using Korean and have a very negative reaction to their perceived “multiculturality” (SMEO, 2021a, p. 90), which explains why the student of Vietnamese heritage above reacted the way he did. These kinds of difficulties existing within schools are easily overlooked by pluralistic and human-relationship-oriented approaches to ME (Cho & Choi, 2018). This brings us to ME as a pedagogy for social change.

ME as Pedagogy for Social Change

Although most of the participants stated that ME is about learning to live together and respecting those from other cultural backgrounds, some teachers had a slightly different perspective on this. Participant 2, for example, addressed that ME “needs to be more critical and talk about social justice and inequalities in our society.” She added, “I think students need to know about social discrimination like migrants or foreigners. So, yeah native students should know about that reality and they need to address those problems and social inequalities.”

In terms of viewing ME as education that aims for anti-discrimination, Participant 6 also mentioned that, through ME, “students can learn to respect each other and respond to discrimination and hatred.” It is evident from some teachers’ responses that they were holding a more critical view on ME as they believed ME should be employed to help students develop the ability to challenge power relations and take action toward equity and social justice (Cho & Choi, 2018). However, when it comes to adding these ME values into their teaching, there were different ways the teachers engaged students to work together toward social change. Participant 4, for instance, shared the examples of letting students try new food; letting them be in a classroom where, if they cannot speak the language, they can speak in any other language they know; and challenging right-handed students to use their left hand; etc. With a smile, she said,

Imagine how frustrating it must be for those who only spoke Korean? [...] So, we [teachers] wanted students to purposely go through those uncomfortable experiences so that they would know how others might feel when put in the same situation.

This perspective aligns with what was emphasized in the report published by SMOE (2021b), which stated that it is crucial to “experience multicultural sensitivity with your

body through the experience of welcoming the voices of others rather than memorizing the concept of multicultural sensitivity” (p. 13). These practices focus on fostering students’ awareness of power imbalances among different social groups. Through these exercises, students gain experiential insights that facilitate discussions about how to address issues of power dynamics and societal structure.

These collaborative discussions also hold the potential of reevaluating the school curriculum in a way that is more multicultural-friendly. For example, Participant 6 claimed to provide diverse topics such as people’s role when tackling the climate crisis, the Myanmar crisis, sensitivity toward people with disabilities, etc. She shared that,

I also promoted dialogue among students regarding discrimination against Chinese students during Covid-19. This resulted in students creating anti-discrimination and anti-hate banners for their school website. Lastly, I also started a campaign with the students to help raise awareness of the case of an Iranian refugee who was trying to apply for refugee status in Korea.

Therefore, in Yuk’s and Cho’s (2016) categorization these teachers could be considered as being social change-oriented teachers where they put efforts in delivering transformative classroom practices by helping students to acquire social behaviors and skills that respond to inequalities as seen within their schools and society. Therefore, it was evident that teachers from multicultural-centered schools put more emphasis on the promotion of educational equity and dealing with issues of power rather than just acknowledging cultural differences.

Discussion

At the beginning of this study, the research was conducted with the belief that teachers’ perceptions of ME influenced their decision making and teaching practices, which then directly or indirectly impacted students’ learning. However, findings from the study have revealed that, when it comes to translating ME theories into practice, teachers’ perceptions did not always reflect their actual classroom teaching. This was evident as teachers explained during interviews that the challenges they faced in the wider school context often prevented them from practicing ME as preferred. Moreover, variables such as gender, age, and years of service were not inherently determinant factors shaping teachers’ perceptions and implementation of ME. Instead, the findings revealed two pivotal factors that emerged as influential in the teachers’ perceptions and practices of ME: 1) teachers’ perceptions influenced by interaction with multicultural students and 2) teachers’ practices influenced by the school settings.

Teachers’ Perceptions Influenced by Interaction with Multicultural Students

At the beginning of this study, we expected that there would be diverse interpretations of ME among middle school teachers. In fact, findings revealed that there were multiple ways teachers interpreted the concept of ME. Indeed, teachers’ conceptualizations of ME were highly influenced by factors including teachers’

knowledge about multiculturalism, their experience interacting with multicultural students, and other personal beliefs which are constructed within the social and cultural milieu in Korea.

Nieto and Bode (2008) indicate that interactions with individuals from different cultural backgrounds have an impact on the implementation of multicultural practices by teachers. Similarly, Cho and Choi (2018) suggest that teachers who have a more conservative or liberal view on ME are those who have had limited interactions with multicultural students in their school environment, whereas those who took a more critical approach to ME had more opportunities to engage with multicultural students. This reaffirms the findings from our study that Participants 1, 2, and 5, who had fewer opportunities for interaction with multicultural students, seemed to view ME as education for assimilation and/or coexistence. For example, Participant 2, despite having some aspirations toward critical ME, still found her teachings to be limited to a more conservative approach to ME. She found that she could only deliver ME content as it was mentioned in the textbooks.

This also confirms Kim's and Lee's (2021) findings that there are some practical limitations in not being able to present all the necessary core contents within a limited timeframe; thus, students are not able to sufficiently experience ME in school. Moreover, just delivering knowledge keeps students in a passive learning mode (Kim & Lee, 2021). Our study also confirms Kim's (2022) research that teachers have restricted opportunities for in-depth examination of the concepts and applications of multiculturalism. Additionally, it has been addressed by B.L. Kim (2020) that middle school teachers are under pressure to educate and support multicultural students since the majority of them are classified as one of the most under-achieving groups, and textbook content is even more distant from their ethnic, cultural, and family backgrounds.

Teachers' Practices Influenced by the School Settings

Another point for discussion is how school settings influence the different approaches taken by teachers when it comes to translating ME theories into practice. Some reasons for this are due to the structural barriers found in school settings, which inhibit teachers to fully implement the ME content and their visions for ME into classrooms. Conversely, in multicultural-centered schools where there is a higher number of multicultural students, teachers were able to adopt more multicultural teaching techniques.

The remaining half of the participants (P3, P4, and P6) were categorized as having liberal and critical views of ME. The multicultural schools have almost half of the students from different cultural backgrounds and teachers have more flexibility to implement ME in their classrooms. These teachers were able to create more opportunities for students to discuss and get involved in projects to address social injustice. Participants 4 and 6, for example, viewed ME as education for coexistence and social justice. They went beyond just teaching about cultural diversity and instead created ME programs and activities that were closer to education for social change, such as supporting students to take action to raise awareness about discrimination, creating anti-hate banners, and campaigns to understand refugee issues in Korea.

These teachers were more inclined to confront their ME limitations by implementing new teaching methods that were more considerate of students' backgrounds and that sought to promote an inclusive and just society.

All three of these participants emphasized that they enjoyed having like-minded teachers around them. They would discuss among teachers and put those discussions into practice. If a practice did not work, they would try again in a different way next time. This community of practitioners provided an educational environment that reinforced efforts toward critical ME. However, even at the multicultural-friendly schools, there were still structural factors hindering a full and successful implementation of ME. Participant 6 said that “those hands-on activities were only possible if we had enough time at the end of each semester.” Thus, an important question to ask is whether the multicultural educational environment produces more critically minded ME educators or whether critically minded ME educators gravitate toward these multicultural schools?

Overall, this study confirms that interactions with individuals from different cultural backgrounds and a supportive school setting may have a significant impact on the implementation of multicultural practices by teachers (Nieto & Bode, 2008). When teachers have the chance to interact more often with multicultural students and feel supported by the environment, they may attempt to learn about their students' backgrounds; and, as Kim (2022) says, it motivates them to integrate ME into their teaching. However, it would be ideal to avoid putting the students “on the spot” (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018, p. 476). This could make students become more resistant to “multiculturality”, as seen with the Vietnamese case; instead, teachers could try to facilitate multicultural-themed activities where all students get to participate. Furthermore, Gorski and Parekh (2020) have found that, in order to achieve these types of inclusive practices, there are instructional and institutional challenges that must be overcome, which we will now share in detail in the following section.

Implications

After data collection and analysis, it was found that, regardless of the different views on the concept of ME and the various challenges that teachers faced when trying to integrate ME contents into school curricula, the participants from multicultural-centered schools were able to provide some pedagogical practices that could help promote a more multicultural-friendly school environment. The participants from public/private schools were also able to reflectively consider supportive activities to discuss social justice and expand cultural sensitivity. The following implications are provided in terms of what multicultural knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and practices the participants said other teachers in similar contexts should consider. These are further supported by suggestions from the existing literature and divided into levels in terms of the individual teacher, instructional practices, and institutional practices.

At the Individual Level: Create a Space for Building Relationships

Although it has not been shared in detail in the findings above, the majority of teachers mentioned how their multicultural students had some issues at home. In fact, according to one Korean report (SMOE, 2021b), some multicultural children may not have a good relationship with their parents due to issues such as remarriage, cohabitation, and divorce. In this case, students must at least feel welcomed and safe at school. Therefore, most of the teachers in this study emphasized the importance of creating a space for building trusting relationships. This means having teachers pay attention to their students in order to create a welcoming and inclusive environment (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018; Gay, 2000).

Participant 3, for example, indicated that she “listens” and “observes” her students whenever she can and as much as possible. She said, “I always try to communicate with the students with a smile and show affection for that person.” She observed what her students like and try to do those activities more often. Not only that, she would “look into students’ eyes during class to make sure they are following the lecture,” and if they were not, then she would get another Korean student to help out. Creating opportunities for bonding among students was also a good exercise for prejudice reduction. Gradually, after a few months of working closely with her students, Participant 3 said, “one of my students started to become brighter and seemed to get along better with her school friends.” As shared in another study, caring for others “can do wonders” (Pourdavood & Yan, 2020, p. 127). Although this “technique” alone does not address more systemic issues, cultivating a sense of empathy is the first step to going beyond the superficial celebration of diversity (Kim & So, 2018).

At the Instructional Level: Promote More Active Teaching and Learning

It was apparent from this study and stressed by previous research (Kim & Lee, 2021) that ME in Korea is still focused on a passive learning method where teachers deliver ME knowledge and attitudes. The traditional teacher-student dynamic, where teachers impart knowledge passively, needs to shift to a model of critical care, transforming teachers into co-learners who foster reciprocal relationships based on mutual trust, respect, and responsibility (Freire, 1970; North, 2009a as cited in Cho, 2017). In other words, teachers could encourage a more active student-centered approach where students are given the opportunities and means to choose how, when, and where to express their identities, experiences, and opinions (Szelei et al., 2019). This approach would provide authenticity in teachers’ practices where they have a better chance of recognizing, representing, and appreciating cultural diversity in ways that students can relate to.

Allowing collaboration between the teachers and students where both get to critically examine their views and actions could equally enhance cultural connections in the classroom (Gay, 2000). This could be done by incorporating multicultural students’ experiences and addressing various topics through different types of instructional techniques (Pourdavood & Yan, 2020). For example, as it was suggested by Participants 3, 4, and 6, teachers could facilitate more student-led discussions on

multicultural topics (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018), create more opportunities for hands-on learning such as role-playing and team activities where students work collectively to address social issues. These could help mutual understanding among students.

At the Institutional Level: Create More Opportunities for Reflection

All of the participants shared in common that teaching ME in schools allowed them to reflect more on their practices (e.g., knowledge delivery, attitudes, teaching methods, etc.) and, for some, ME even allowed them to take action in reforming the school. In fact, this study has shown how some teachers were able to overcome structural barriers by practicing reflection-in-action and encouraging its use among colleagues. This implies that teachers should become more aware of their own perceptions through reflexivity (e.g., reflection on identities, beliefs, and values in regards to culture and education) and how this may affect the way they engage with multicultural students.

Since ME can also be considered as a process that is constantly evolving depending on the context, teachers may also go through constant transformation to be able to provide a wider school environment that is inclusive for all students. Without this transformation, as Kim et al. (2010, p. 111) posit "any attempts at developing a multicultural perspective will be shallow and superficial." As teachers go through constant encounters, reflection, and deconstruction of their worldviews, this supports them to better understand structural inequalities in their classrooms, school and society (e.g., discrimination, classism, racism, sexism, etc.). This awareness allows them to adjust their teaching practices and, in turn, promote more inclusive school policies in ways that do not unconsciously help maintain dominant discourses and structures (Howard, 2003).

Limitations

The utilization of a qualitative case study allowed us to explore teachers' perceptions and practices of ME at the middle school level in Seoul, Korea. Although this approach helped answer the research questions in the study, we acknowledge that there are also limitations associated with the study. First, due to the small number of participants, involving only six teachers from four different schools, the results cannot offer generalizations across a broader population (e.g., as surveys might). Nonetheless, the findings of this study may still offer some theoretical significance (Yin, 2014) when applied to other similar contexts (e.g., middle schools in other urban areas with similar characteristics to Seoul). Second, since we were not able to directly observe teachers' ME practices in classrooms due to Covid-19 restrictions during the period of this study, we rely only on the use of interviews and document analysis in the study. For a fuller picture of ME in practice we recommend classroom observations in future studies to substantiate the findings.

Implications for future research include conducting ethnographic observations in classrooms to examine the connection between what teachers say they do and what they actually do. Finally, awareness of the diversity of multicultural issues and teachers' pedagogy in Korea could be enhanced through additional studies that take into account the importance of context while sharing good practices across contexts. For example, the narratives and conceptualizations of ME described herein are useful to inform others' practices. Such studies may contribute to a discussion about how distinct or similar multicultural contexts exist across different countries, especially beyond the West. This study contributes to that global discussion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, using an integrative framework comprising two Korean-authored multicultural education frameworks, this article has developed an argument for further inquiry into professional perspectives and practices of ME as a means to understand individual, instructional, and institutional changes that may better support transformative ME practice. The research has revealed that, regardless of the different views and approaches teachers have regarding ME, the participants in the study experienced structural challenges hindering them from successfully implementing ME. The data indicate differences and similarities between teachers teaching in public/private schools and those teaching in multicultural-centered schools, confirming what long-standing research in this area has argued, that: (i) building empathy at the individual level is critical; (ii) teachers incorporating multicultural students' diverse backgrounds into their instructional practices is important; and (iii) more opportunities for professional reflection within institutional environments is needed.

This research not only contributes to domestic literature by proving some of the local challenges in Korea, but also international literature by introducing new perspectives that may be applicable globally. Moreover, the paper suggests that schools must create more opportunities for teachers to interact with multicultural students, allowing educators to be flexible when integrating ME content into their instruction. Teachers, too, must be willing to continually reflect, questioning whether their practices embrace diversity and inclusion. Through this combined effort, schools and educators may practice more critical and transformative ME today.

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