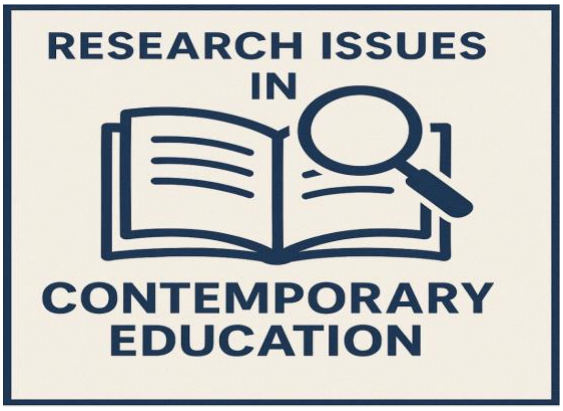


# An Intersectional Analysis of Multicultural Education Discourse: Neoliberalism, Racism, and Sexism in South Korea

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**Abstract**

This study addresses the critical importance of approaching multicultural education in South Korea through a social justice lens, aiming to tackle the unique structural and systemic oppressions and exclusions often overlooked in current research. Using critical discourse analysis on interviews with six public elementary school teachers, we examine how the discourse on multicultural education intertwines with oppressive ideologies and perspectives in South Korea. Our findings reveal that teachers' perceptions are influenced by intersecting forces of neoliberalism, racism, and sexism, leading to color-evasive pedagogical practices and the stratified, economic valuation of immigrant families. Drawing on Global Citizenship Education and an intersectional framework, this study emphasizes the importance of embracing and engaging with productive tensions as a critical starting point to foster equitable and humanizing multicultural education for all students while considering the intricate sociohistorical and political relationships entwined with the field.

*Keywords:* multicultural education, critical global citizenship education, critical discourse analysis, neoliberalism, racism, sexism

## Introduction

The present study builds upon the scholarship of Um and Cho (2022), who emphasize the urgent need to approach multicultural education in South Korea through a social justice lens. This approach considers the influence of neoliberalism and ethnocentric nationalism in the South Korean context, aiming to address the unique structural and systemic oppressions and exclusions that have remained unaddressed by the current multicultural education approach, which emphasizes cultural pluralism and tolerance (Kim & Choi, 2020). A clear illustration of how these

ideologies and approaches are normalized in the everyday classroom can be found in the story, "Chopstick Master," featured in the fourth-grade elementary Korean language textbook (Ministry of Education, 2020a), which depicts Southeast Asian immigrant families.

The story portrays Jueun, a child of an intercultural/national marriage, and her mother as subject to stereotypes by mainstream Koreans. Jueun must make deliberate efforts to emphasize her "Korean identity" in school and South Korean society. The story highlights the differences between Jueun, her mother, and mainstream South Koreans, such as skin color, language fluency, and cultural practices, and the differences are presented with a negative undertone. For instance, the narrative draws attention to the mother's Korean accent, describing it as "strange and awkward" (말투가 이상했어요. 사투리도 아닌데 아주 어색하게 들렸어요. [Her way of speaking was strange. It was not a dialect, but it sounded very awkward.]), thereby framing it as a source of embarrassment for Jueun rather than as a natural aspect of a multilingual household. The story expects understanding and acceptance from mainstream Koreans but fails to address the exclusive and oppressive perspectives it promotes. For example, although the narrative concludes with Jueun's classmates accepting her after she wins a chopstick competition, it positions proficiency in using chopsticks as a prerequisite for being recognized as Korean. This framing illustrates that her sense of belonging is conditional. It suggests that multicultural students must assimilate and demonstrate their "Korean-ness" to earn basic respect, rather than having their diverse backgrounds embraced.

The textbook story illustrates the lack of critical awareness of multiculturalism and individuals with diverse immigrant, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds in South Korean education and society. For example, the Korean Ministry of Education's (2022a) description of multicultural education as having been initiated as a response to the increasing needs and demands of education for children from immigrant backgrounds and intercultural/national marriages maintains the undertone that the minoritized individuals are the main beneficiaries of multicultural education. This perspective does not recognize the need to transform oppressive social systems and discourse around individuals with minoritized family, immigration, and ethnic backgrounds. The multicultural perspective has been maintained in South Korean education since the *Measures for Educational Support for Children from Multicultural Families* published in 2006 (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, 2006).

As scholars and teachers with former and current experiences in multicultural education, we bring diverse positionalities to this work: three of the researchers are Korea-based scholars and public school teachers, whereas one author is a U.S.-based scholar and former public school teacher in South Korea. From these perspectives, we recognize the limitations and shortcomings of the current discourse. We have observed a lack of awareness regarding multiculturalism, racialization, and the impact of globalization in shaping South Korea's multicultural landscape. Heavy reliance on a Western, particularly a U.S.-based, multicultural education framework, has been insufficient in advancing transformative conversations that are relevant to the context.

The simplistic understanding of multiculturalism's background, which primarily focuses on the rise in international marriages and immigrant workers, often leads to treating individuals with diverse immigrant, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds as a homogenous group. This approach overlooks the historical understanding of racialization in South Korea, including the discrimination experienced by mixed-race children born to Korean women and U.S. military members stationed in Korea during the Cold War (Kim, 2015; Shin, 2019). This perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of racism, multiculturalism, imperialism, and patriarchy, all reinforced by the region's neocolonial legacies and geopolitical power dynamics. Without considering these interconnections, the narrow perspective has hindered the development of a sustainable multicultural education framework that benefits all students.

Situated within this context, this study examines how the discourse on multicultural education, represented in teacher interviews, intertwines with oppressive ideologies and perspectives. We also explore the ideology of racism in South Korean education and how it has limited teachers' capacity to engage in equitable educational practices for all students. Informed by the insights of scholars working on Global Citizenship Education (GCE), particularly those challenging and addressing normalized neoliberal and neocolonial notions of globalization and development, we propose transformative possibilities offered by the lens of critical GCE in the field of multicultural education.

## Conceptual Framework

To examine the complex dynamics of multicultural education in South Korea, it is necessary to understand how the concept of multicultural education is operationalized within the country. Hong et al. (2025) demonstrate that multicultural education in South Korea was initiated as a state-led response to manage shifting demographics. This framework shapes the view of

immigrants primarily as a means to expand the workforce, paradoxically positioning multicultural children as both valuable future labor resources and a potential societal burden (Draudt, 2019). Rooted in this systemic foundation, current educational policies are heavily focused on assimilation, Korean language acquisition, and cultural adaptation rather than addressing equity and inclusion issues. This conventional approach fails to address deeper structural racism in South Korea as well as the dominant privileges of ethnic South Koreans. As a result, multicultural policy and education often result in further marginalizing students with immigration backgrounds, for example, stigmatizing minoritized students through administrative tracking and requiring teachers to perform policy-driven roles and responsibilities rather than respecting their pedagogical agency.

To challenge the dominant, assimilationist approach, this study is grounded in an intersectional framework alongside GCE. An intersectional approach (Collins & Bilge, 2016) considers how social class, gender, ethnicity, and other ideological factors intersect to shape the complex phenomenon of multiculturalism. This perspective allows us to investigate who has been marginalized and excluded, and how this occurs within the neoliberal society, the process of multiculturalism, the local context, and the globalized world (Asher, 2005). It enables us to uncover the underlying dynamics that contribute to the perception of unequal benefits for multicultural families by examining power structures that shape social perceptions.

Furthermore, given the current state of multicultural education, scholars have argued for the critical importance of a justice-oriented approach that encompasses a global-local understanding of diverse topics and issues (Kim & Choi, 2020). Considering the necessity of this shift, GCE, developed by UNESCO (2015), serves as a generative framework to guide this study in examining discourse and systems impacting individual students' lived experiences, while also navigating future directions for multicultural education in South Korea. Scholars (Choi & Kim, 2020; Kim & Huh, 2013; Um & Cho, 2022) have argued that multicultural education should not focus solely on students with multicultural backgrounds. In this regard, GCE offers an adoptable global–local perspective that aims to nurture students' knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to construct a more inclusive, just, and peaceful world where multiple perspectives, relationships, and tensions exist (UNESCO, 2015).

GCE, with a critical emphasis, offers a necessary framework to challenge the neoliberal and neocolonial paradigms that govern current multicultural discourses in South Korea. By illuminating historical injustices and asymmetrical power relations, it moves beyond superficial

cultural tolerance. Such a critical approach to GCE prompts both students and teachers to interrogate structural inequalities, making it an empowering foundation for equitable education. This perspective offers a framework to transcend the dominant viewpoint of multicultural education, which has heavily focused on the adaptation and assimilation of immigrants and their families (APCEIU, 2017). For instance, in the context of multilingualism within multicultural education, the GCE framework ensures that language acquisition is approached as a tool for mutual dialogue and empowerment, rather than as a mechanism for forced cultural erasure or for framing students' linguistic differences strictly as deficits.

GCE is not a new concept in Korean education. For instance, the Ministry of Education (2015a) defines global citizenship education as an educational approach that encompasses knowledge, skills, and values related to world peace, human rights, and diversity while fostering a sense of responsibility. The national curriculum emphasizes educating students to become democratic citizens who actively engage in community-building and global interactions while demonstrating care and sharing (2015b). Nevertheless, these objectives are barely incorporated and practiced in multicultural education. Adopting this framework allows us to transcend the dominant viewpoint of multicultural education, which has historically focused on the adaptation and assimilation of immigrants and their families (Lim et al., 2022). GCE provides a valuable theoretical lens to reconsider how multicultural education can prepare students to become global citizens who possess critical awareness of intersecting local and global contexts, challenging normalized neoliberal and neocolonial notions of globalization.

## Literature Review

The rise of South Korea's neoliberalism since the Cold War is a driving force in shaping its multicultural policy landscape. The main impetus behind promoting multiculturalism has been economic, with foreign labor seen as enhancing the strength of the economy (Draudt, 2019). This emphasis is rooted in the idea that "through regulated immigration, the state can expand its workforce while withholding full citizenship" (Draudt, 2019, p. 161). This message also permeates South Korea's national curricula and educational discourse. Within this sociopolitical and educational framework, educational policies and approaches have placed greater emphasis on assimilating multicultural students and families into the dominant Korean culture rather than prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion. Shin (2019) pointed out that children from multicultural families are simultaneously perceived as valuable labor resources and potential

factors of societal tension and instability in South Korea.

Cho and Seo (2013) emphasized that multicultural and global discourse has served as a governance strategy that reconstructs and reinforces the boundaries and neoliberal governance of the nation-state. Immigrants' differences are perceived and positioned hierarchically within social discourses, depending on their effectiveness in supporting the state's goals for governance. Multiculturalism in South Korea is thus intricately connected to neoliberalism, and an inadequate understanding of the relationship between the two can result in multicultural education perpetuating neoliberal values and discourses. However, there is a lack of research addressing neoliberal ideologies within the education system, particularly in multicultural education. A literature search using keywords such as *multiculturalism*, *multicultural education*, and *neoliberalism* reveals that while papers (e.g., Lee, 2015; Choi & Kim, 2020; Um & Cho, 2022) examining the relationship between multiculturalism and neoliberalism have emerged in the fields of sociology, women's studies, and political science since the 2010s, the discussion within the education field remains limited. Among the limited number of studies on neoliberalism and education, the focus has primarily been on investigating the relationship between neoliberalism and educational systems. These studies have explored topics such as the marketization of university entrance assessments (Kim, 2012) and the impact of neoliberalism on teacher professionalism (Park, 2015).

**Neoliberal Ideologies in Educational Discourse**

Apple (2001) cautions against the claims made by neoliberal proponents in education, cautioning against their assertion that we can overcome modern crises by subjecting teachers, schools, and children to the competitive market. This perspective also sheds light on the limitations of multicultural education in South Korea under the influence of neoliberalism. This perspective critically examines the role of multiculturalism in the global market, going beyond discussions centered on interethnic relations and addressing the integration of minority groups, thereby providing valuable insights. For instance, by conducting multicultural education research with a focus on neoliberalism, one can take an interest in supporting the participation of minoritized students in competition while also emphasizing the examination of structural and institutional issues arising from competing under unequal conditions from a socio-political and historical standpoint (Woo et al., 2018).

When discussions on socio-structural issues like neoliberalism remain unaddressed, teachers often have a vague understanding of how multicultural education can provide equal educational opportunities for all students and foster the necessary competencies in a multicultural society (Lee & Kim, 2021). In line with this perception, Lee and So (2021) emphasize the role played by the Ministry of Education and its affiliated research institution, the Central Multicultural Education Center, in portraying multicultural students as "others" who require assistance and inclusion based on the benevolence of the ethnic majority in South Korea. From this perspective, multicultural education has predominantly emphasized the provision of equal educational opportunities for all students by allocating resources and implementing language, cultural, and academic support programs.

Since 2006, the Ministry of Education has emphasized "multicultural experiences" by publishing its report, *Measures for Educational Support for Children from Multicultural Families.* Initially, this approach focused on providing Korean cultural experiences to immigrant students. Over time, it expanded to include cultural experiences related to the home countries of multicultural parents, eventually evolving into a cultural experience program for all students (Jang, 2021). However, this framework has faced criticism for its superficial application to multicultural education, as it tends to essentialize cultures without delving into a deeper and more nuanced understanding of diverse cultures.

Considering this persistent limitation, Kim (2011) argues that South Korean society must establish the concept of "plural citizenship" to challenge and expand society's understanding of citizenship, which has traditionally been exclusive, while addressing issues of discrimination and exclusion against immigrant individuals and their families. Considering the growing prominence of multicultural phenomena in South Korea in the context of globalized neoliberal market economy, Lee (2008) argues that multicultural education should transcend national boundaries and attend to the diverse positionalities and responsibilities that exist in both local and transnational contexts. Na and Jho (2017) highlight urgent global-local issues—including environmental pollution, international conflicts, women's and children's rights violations, and economic disparity—that multicultural education fails to address when confined by neoliberal ideologies and a narrow view of multiculturalism.

## Method

This study aimed to develop an intersectional understanding of the discourse surrounding

multicultural education in South Korea while raising awareness about the influence of normalized neoliberalism and racism within the country's sociohistorical and political context. We employ critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodological approach to our analysis and gain new insights into the intricate power dynamics in multicultural education in South Korea. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach focused on addressing problems and understanding social contexts' ideologies and power dynamics by examining language use (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.3). In line with the CDA perspective articulated by Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000), which views discourse as a social phenomenon, we regard multicultural education discourse as a social phenomenon that manifests through language in society.

We call upon Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an empowering tool capable of (a) challenging the superficial understanding of multicultural curriculum and practice and (b) unveiling underlying assumptions and hegemonic power relations that have become normalized and valorized (Lazar, 2007). Drawing on Ahmed's (2021) decolonial approach in CDA, we utilize this methodology to bring sociopolitical and historical dimensions of the discourse to the educational discussion while being mindful of Western-centric biases in multicultural education research. CDA also prompts us to uncover opaque power relations and systems associated with multicultural education that often elude conventional social science research relying on a positivistic perspective (Sengul, 2019).

This CDA study draws on semi-structured interviews with six public elementary school teachers in South Korea. We selected participants from various regions in South Korea, ensuring a diverse range of teaching experiences ranging from 3 to 21 years. Our recruitment process involved contacting our in-person and online professional networks, which included teacher colleagues and alumni from elementary teacher education programs. The eligibility criteria for participants included being South Korean public elementary school teachers with at least one year of teaching experience working with multicultural students. While this one-year requirement served merely as a minimum threshold for inclusion, the actual participants in our study were highly experienced educators, bringing a diverse range of teaching experiences ranging from 3 to 21 years. During the data collection phase, the research team collectively determined that six participants would suffice to provide the necessary interview data for this study; thus, additional interviews were not conducted. Although gender was not used as a selection criterion during

recruitment, all participants who volunteered and met the study criteria were female teachers.

CDA allows for a detailed exploration of each participant's experiences while capturing diverse perspectives, contributing to a thorough understanding of their language use and society. To ensure the rigor of our analysis and mitigate the risks of misinterpreting individual utterances, we employed an iterative process of repeated reading and cross-comparison across transcripts.

All six teachers identify as South Korean women and come from different schools and regions, representing the demographic majority among elementary teachers. While some of the participants' schools and regional affiliations may have a higher population of multicultural students, these schools still predominantly consist of South Korean ethnicities. Despite our attempts to obtain official data on the number of multicultural teachers in each school district and region, such information was unavailable at the time of the study. As of 2025, South Korea reported a 5% presence of multicultural students in elementary schools, which has been increasing (Ministry of Education & KEDI, 2025). The number of multicultural students in elementary and secondary schools was 46,954 in 2012 and has risen to 202,208 in 2025 (Ministry of Education & KEDI, 2025).

**Data Analysis**

The analysis began with a thorough reading of the interview transcripts to understand the teacher participants' lived experiences with multicultural education and the language they used. This process involved identifying the data's tentative themes, patterns, and recurring concepts. We paid close attention to power relations, ideologies, and social contexts related to multicultural education that participants expressed and nuanced in their utterances (Lazar, 2007). Next, a coding process was employed to categorize and organize the data. The coding process involved assigning relevant codes to the transcripts' segments related to emerging themes and concepts from the data. This process was iterative, refining and revising codes as we underwent the analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

All interviews were conducted and transcribed in Korean to preserve the participants' authentic linguistic expressions and nuances. The initial coding and analysis processes were also performed using the original Korean transcripts. Only the excerpts selected for inclusion in this paper were translated into English using the translation software *Papago*. The translations were then cross-checked by the research team to ensure accuracy and conceptual fidelity.

During the analysis process, we examined ideological implications and power relations

within the discourse to better understand the dominance of neoliberal or racial ideologies, the reproduction of normalized sexism, and the negotiations in teacher practice. This also guided us to consider the historical and sociopolitical dimensions of the discourse, which are essential in understanding how global and local sociohistorical and political factors shaped the teachers' perspectives and practice of multicultural education.

## Findings

To better understand how multicultural education is conceptualized in everyday teaching, it is necessary to examine the underlying assumptions teachers hold about multicultural families. Analyzed through intersectional and GCE frameworks, the teachers' narratives illuminate how sociohistorical and economic contexts might shape individual teachers' perceptions in the classroom. The following example from Suyeon on multicultural families illustrates how neoliberal ideologies stratify immigrant populations based on economic value.

> The majority of multicultural individuals who came to Korea for marriage were those who faced financial challenges, right? Also, multicultural students mainly consist of children of international marriages and immigrant workers. Those families have often encountered economic difficulties and face issues related to their family's financial situation [in their home countries]. (Suyeon)

We recognize that citing Suyeon's statement carries the potential risk of perpetuating stereotypes about students and families with immigrant backgrounds. However, quoting her provides a significant starting point for our analysis of discourse that addresses the intricate and intersecting aspects of multiculturalism, particularly those rooted in capitalism and patriarchy based on neoliberal and neocolonial ideologies (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This section presents our analysis of how dominant ideologies and power dynamics are ingrained in the teachers' depiction of multicultural families, particularly women and multicultural students (Kim et al., 2009). The analysis examines how ethnicity, gender, and class intersect to shape the complex phenomenon of multiculturalism and multicultural education in South Korea (Asher, 2019).

> Her mom is a multicultural individual, but I don't think she's multicultural because she speaks Korean well. (Jimin)
>
> I have a student whose mom is Vietnamese. But she has adapted well to Korean culture. So, I just consider her Korean. It's just that the mom's Korean is a little unclear. I also think

she [the student] is just a normal kid. I don't want to call her a foreigner or a multicultural student. (Jimin)

The quote above provides a snapshot of how the perception of immigrant individuals revolves around their potential benefits to South Korean society and the economy. These contradictory utterances describe a case where multicultural students' parents are considered multicultural, yet they are simultaneously viewed as Korean. Multicultural families, especially women who have married Korean men and have children, are subjected to gendered and stratified treatment influenced by a neoliberal ideology that fails to acknowledge their full humanity (Choo, 2013). Through a GCE lens, Jimin's erasure of the students' multicultural backgrounds in favor of a homogenized "Korean" identity highlights the absence of critical global–local consciousness. This reinforces a Korean-centered perspective that dismisses linguistic diversity as a deficit.

To overcome a superficial understanding of the discourse on multicultural education, it is crucial to recognize the positionality of immigrant women in South Korea, who typically serve as the mothers of multicultural students. Viewed intersectionally, these immigrant women face the challenge of double marginalization, as their social class, gender, and ethnicity are exploited to fulfill the sociopolitical and neoliberal agenda of the nation. An example is the pressure placed on immigrant women to assume multiple individual and social roles, particularly in addressing the issue of low marriage rates in rural areas. This gendered pressure includes the expectation of caring for their Korean parents-in-law. Such expectations perpetuate a neoliberal and sexist perspective toward immigrant women and reinforce a portrayal of ethnic Korean women as deviating from their expected gender roles (Hong, 2010).

For instance, Suyeon's quote exemplifies how immigrant women are commonly perceived in society. She stated, "They [immigrant women] got married to Korean men mainly because of the consideration of their economic gain from the marriage, not necessarily out of love." This observation demonstrates the prevalent instrumental perspective held by Korean teachers—and likely many other Koreans—toward immigrant women who marry Korean men. Such a perspective can significantly impact how teachers perceive multicultural students, framing them as children from families constructed primarily for material benefit and practical needs rather than based on love, which is often idealized and normalized in societal discourse as the typical foundation of a family. However, it was evident that the teachers were unaware of this perspective's oppressive and problematic nature, which limits their ability to recognize and teach

multicultural students equitably. Instead, they perceived the perspective as grounded in factual observations.

We observed a neoliberal and gendered perception of multicultural students and families during our interviews with teachers, as they emphasized the need to differentiate among different types of multicultural students and families. Suyeon exemplified this distinction by stating:

> Most multicultural students who came here [Guryeong district, Southwestern Seoul with a high immigrant population] due to economic problems were children of international workers. So, they faced economic difficulties, and that became a problem. But multicultural families in Hosan District [Central Seoul with a high foreigner population and where many embassies are located], to put it simply, they include the children of diplomats and such. They are well-off multicultural families. These multicultural families only have the problem with language and cultural differences. (Suyeon)

The differentiation between "Hosan district multicultural" and "other multicultural" can be interpreted as distinguishing between "students who have received elite education at home" and "students who require essential and basic education to function well in South Korean society." This stratified understanding highlights the pervasive influence of neocolonial and neoliberal notions of globalization. Through a GCE perspective, we see how the "Hosan district multicultural" students are not viewed as "children of immigrant workers" like other multicultural students but are seen as children of leaders and potential future global leaders. This differing perception indicates that multicultural students in districts like Hosan are often overlooked and excluded from multicultural discourse due to their perceived privilege. Conversely, multicultural students in districts like Guryeong are targeted explicitly in multicultural education, viewing them from a deficit perspective and emphasizing their need for acculturation into the Korean way, reproducing social hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

**Unveiling Racism at the Intersection of Neoliberalism and Color-Evasiveness**

In this section, we examine how teachers in the South Korean context engage with the ideology of racism within their practice of multicultural education, which often emphasizes equal treatment of students regardless of their backgrounds. This principle is widely emphasized across national curricula, including the revised 2022 national curriculum, which underscores the importance of education in addressing and respecting diversity while actively combating prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination (Ministry of Education, 2022b).

> In my classroom, we don't even perceive students as multicultural. So, when a child looks different or speaks [Korean] differently, we see them simply as fellow students in the same class without recognizing their differences or labeling them as "from another country" or "multicultural." (Jina)

This quote from the teacher exemplifies their intentional avoidance of labeling "'multicultural" in their classroom practice, believing that it would help prevent their exclusion. Although Jina's intentional color-evasiveness is framed as a strategy for equality, a GCE approach argues that ignoring a student's background does not reduce structural inequalities. Instead, it abstracts their lived experiences and hinders the productive tension necessary to work toward equity. At first glance, this approach may appear to promote equality by treating all students the same; however, the approach actually positions teachers and students to overlook the power dynamics and privileges that shape different lived experiences, which are influenced by socioeconomic context and systemic relationships (Moon et al., 2009).

Scholars such as Um and Cho (2022) have highlighted that the approach of not addressing injustice experienced by students from marginalized backgrounds perpetuates racial and neoliberal ideologies uniquely established in the South Korean context. The national curricula have barely addressed the systemic and structural oppression and marginalization faced by students and families with diverse immigrant, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. For instance, the national ethics education curriculum focuses on conflict resolution and respecting diversity in a multicultural society. It revolves around "recognizing the importance of cultural diversity through multicultural theories" (Ministry of Education, 2022b, p.39) and "exploring conflict resolution strategies in a multicultural society" (Ministry of Education, 2022b, p.32). The example below illustrates how the failure to address underlying systemic issues leads to a lack of recognition of racialized interactions among students in the classroom, consequently hindering the ability to address problems equitably.

> I once had a student who struggled with the Korean language. Another student in the class was being mean and bullying this student. After discovering the bullying, I approached the student and warned them that their behavior would lead to trouble. I also contacted the parent of the student who was bullying (Jimin).

As demonstrated by the example, the individual-focused approach posed challenges in addressing issues of racism within classrooms, as there was limited opportunity for students and teachers to

reflect on their positionalities within the broader social structure (Ullucci & Battey, 2011). As a result, the teacher's response relied on a punitive approach, issuing warnings and involving parents rather than addressing racism and intervening in classroom interactions.

The interviews revealed that teachers often consider students' cultural differences and practices as the main factors contributing to classroom conflicts and tensions. We consider that this deficit-based understanding of differences is closely linked with the neoliberal notion of globalization and development, which contribute to people's understanding of stratification among countries, ethnicities, and cultures, perpetuating the idea that multicultural students' differences are shortcomings that must be changed and assimilated. Mirae and Suyeon's quotes exemplify how this ideological perspective is manifested in their understanding of multicultural education.

> I do have respect for their cultures, but we must remember that public schools are educational institutions. Honestly, we need to encourage them to become more similar. Our focus should be correcting their cultural practices and aligning them with the Korean way. (Mirae)
>
> I believe the purpose of multicultural education is to raise them as Korean citizens. So, it's about "Koreanizing" them by helping them assimilate into Korean culture. (Suyeon)

Their perspective also aligns with the national curriculum and policy that address educational support for multicultural students (Ministry of Education, 2022b, p.44). The discourse presented in the curriculum document also reflects the perspective that multicultural students' differences are portrayed as something that can be accepted, contingent upon the premise of generosity from the dominant group in South Korea (Lee & So, 2021). This attitude can be characterized as conservative multiculturalism, which assumes equality is achieved by assimilating minoritized individuals (Choi, 2014). This fixation on "Koreanizing" students contradicts the goals of GCE, as conservative multiculturalism assumes that equality is achieved through the erasure of differences rather than by nurturing students' critical awareness of intersecting local and global contexts.

An excerpt from a second-grade teacher guidebook (Ministry of Education, 2020b) addressing diverse family arrangements and structures further elucidates the normalization of the neoliberal ideal in education, reinforcing a tone of neoliberalism and a sense of national superiority over less industrialized countries.

> Multicultural families are a result of the significant gender imbalance that occurred in rural areas […] To address this issue, Korea has encouraged international marriages between Korean men and foreign women […]. (p.242)

While the description of multicultural families is problematic, the curriculum document ironically implies the need to acknowledge the neoliberal and racial experiences of families with immigrant backgrounds rather than dismissing them through a color-evasive ideology (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Although the teachers claim to view and treat all students equally, their interviews reveal a differential perception of multicultural students and families compared to the ethnic majority of Korean students. For instance, Suyeon stated:

> The problems start within their family, and the academic and behavioral disparities continue to accumulate. So, when these students enter school, it becomes difficult for them to catch up because there are things that they are unlikely to learn no matter how much effort is put in. (Suyeon)

This quote can add complexity to our analysis of teachers' engagement in multicultural education. While the teacher exhibited biased and judgmental perspectives toward students and families from minoritized backgrounds, she failed to examine these issues and engage in self-reflection critically. Instead, she solely placed the responsibility on multicultural families without considering the broader systemic factors. As Garcia and Guerra (2004) explain, this deficit thinking is prevalent in various government documents, including curriculum and policy. The teachers' perspectives on multicultural families coincide with the stance presented in the curriculum document. The document highlights cultural differences and the use of languages other than Korean at home as the main factors contributing to multicultural students' problems, tensions, and challenges. The curriculum also focuses on cultural differences and diversity, suggesting that these aspects may hinder students' learning and personal development (Ministry of Education, 2020b, p.242). This example highlights the necessity of a guiding framework, such as GCE, that supports teachers in critically interrogating the broader systemic and structural power dynamics that marginalize these students.

## Discussion

Our analysis has demonstrated that multicultural education in South Korea has inadequately addressed the marginalization and oppression immigrants face, perpetuated by the

intersecting forces of neoliberalism, sexism, and racism (Cho & Seo, 2013). The teachers' understanding of multicultural education has been shaped by dominant and oppressive ideologies, limiting their understanding of multiculturalism and multicultural students and families. As evidenced by the teachers' stratified distinction between "elite" Hosan students and "labor-class" Guryeong students, as well as their reliance on color-evasiveness, their perspectives are tied to multicultural students' perceived economic value. These narratives resonate with Cho and Seo's (2013) and Draudt's (2019) assertion that multicultural discourse interacts with neoliberal governance strategies, while hierarchically positioning immigrant students and families based on state goals.

Building on this analysis, our objective was not only to provide new insights and challenge the existing oppressive system but also to advocate for and support teachers by outlining potential steps for multicultural education. Therefore, this section discusses transformative possibilities in multicultural education through the lens of GCE. We draw on the work of scholars (e.g., Swanson & Gamal, 2021; Pashby & Costa, 2021) who have emphasized the capacity of GCE to recognize and navigate the inherent contradictions and complexities that teachers face within the neoliberal and neocolonial processes and notions of globalization and development.

One of the most valuable perspectives offered by GCE is the space to critically examine the normalized gaze toward multicultural students and families. GCE provides theoretical and practical tools to identify and challenge racist and dehumanizing descriptions of multicultural students, as exemplified in the portrayal of multicultural students and parents in the "Chopstick Master" scenario. It encourages South Korean education to reconsider the prevailing Korean saviour complex and Korean-centeredness evident in curriculum and policy documents. As GCE encourages consideration of multiculturalism within both global and local contexts, it promotes a global-local understanding of the positionalities and experiences of multicultural students and families. This process encourages teachers to examine and reflect on their involvement in shaping the curriculum and implementing policies.

GCE encourages educators and scholars to embrace and engage with "productive tension" (Swanson & Gamal, 2021, p.457) as a critical entry point for transformative possibilities that promote humanization and equity for all students. As seen in Jimin's punitive approach to bullying and Jina's color-evasive stance, teachers are not adequately equipped to navigate this tension. This embrace of productive tension contrasts with the individual-focused, punitive approach to

racialized bullying and intentional color-evasiveness we observed in the teachers' narratives. By acknowledging this tension, GCE highlights the need to delve deeper and add layers of complexity to discussions on raising social awareness and promoting inclusive social discourse for individuals with diverse immigrant, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, which often remain superficial and abstract in studies on multicultural students and in curriculum and policy documents in South Korea. As Swanson and Gamal (2021) exemplified, addressing the complex power dynamics and sociohistorical threads underlying multiculturalism can lead to contradictions. However, engaging with these contradictions is particularly valuable in attaining a nuanced and intricate understanding of the concepts of majority and minority in the South Korean context. It is crucial to acknowledge that South Korea continues to grapple with postcolonial and neocolonial legacies, particularly with Japanese colonization and ongoing neocolonial relationships with the U.S. Additionally, there are sociohistorical and political tensions with China. Therefore, it is inadequate to position South Korea as a majority or oppressor; its position is more complex and multifaceted.

In the global neoliberal economy and development, it is essential to examine the role that the country and individual Korean people play in capitalistic relationships with neighboring countries, especially Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and the Philippines, which are significant countries of origin of immigrant populations (Kang, 2010). This examination should address how South Korea has engaged with neoliberal, sexist, and capitalist ideologies in its interactions with other countries and individuals. This macro-level dynamic mirrors our findings, particularly Suyeon's assumption that immigrant women from these specific countries marry Korean men primarily to escape financial difficulties, thereby viewing them through an instrumental, capitalist lens (Kim et al., 2009). This complicated understanding of multiculturalism, globalization, and global citizenship opens up generative possibilities in addressing growing social discourse that claims, "reverse discrimination against Korean people," which we found implied in the teacher interviews. Jina described:

> In our country, multicultural families and students receive significant support. It is considered natural for them to receive such assistance; they believe they should be protected from harm. They see themselves as deserving of unconditional protection and support. (Jina)

Through the lens of GCE, we can explore the belief that multicultural families receive more government benefits, moving beyond simplistic characterizations of South Korean people as

exclusive or lacking empathy. This sentiment echoes Apple's (2001) concern about education in a competitive neoliberal market, where equity-oriented social support is often misinterpreted by the dominant group as an unfair advantage. For this reason, it is vital to adopt an intersectional approach (Collins & Bilge, 2016) that considers social class, gender, and other ideological factors. This broader perspective allows us to investigate who has been marginalized and excluded—such as the double marginalization of immigrant mothers, expected to fulfill traditional gender roles while being judged based on their perceived economic values—within the neoliberal society, the process of multiculturalism, the local context, and the globalized world (Kim et al., 2009). We can better understand the complexities involved by examining the discourse and related phenomena from an intersectional standpoint. It enables us to uncover the underlying dynamics that contribute to the perception of unequal benefits for multicultural families. This approach encourages critical analysis of power structures and ideologies that shape social perceptions, shedding light on the multifaceted experiences of marginalized individuals and groups within multiculturalism and the globalized world.

GCE also emphasizes the need for an equitable and sustainable approach to developing an inclusive and equitable understanding of who is considered Korean and what it means to be Korean. Our observations from the teacher interviews indicate that the exclusive notion of Korean identity has undergone limited shifts, with the previous definition primarily highlighting Koreans as a single ethnic group. Given the status quo, GCE empowers us to examine and challenge neoliberal and neocolonial elements in the expectation and treatment. Specifically, immigrant populations are expected to contribute to the country's economy while also being burdened with addressing social challenges like labor shortages and declining birth rates. However, their rightful demand for the protection of rights and equitable inclusion is often seen as unconditionally encroaching on the privileges of South Korean citizens. Regarding curriculum and policy documents, GCE prompts us to question why Korean education is fixated on instilling a "proud Korean" identity in multicultural students while not fully embracing their humanity, experiences, cultures, and heritages. Although engaging in this conversation can be controversial and generate tensions due to differing perspectives, ideologies, and values, we believe that challenging the normalized exclusive and oppressive image of citizenship is imperative to move beyond the conditional belonging illustrated in the textbook narrative, "Chopstick Master," embracing the

plural citizenship (Kim, 2011) needed to guide students toward becoming responsible members of both local and global societies (Jho & Cho, 2013).

## Conclusion

We initially intended to provide specific recommendations for teacher training, curriculum modifications, and policy reforms based on our analysis of discourses and discussions on the possibilities and future of multicultural education in South Korea through the lens of GCE. However, instead of presenting those recommendations, we acknowledge the pressing need for structural and systemic changes to address the issues. Therefore, we conclude this paper by emphasizing the importance of active scholarly engagement in developing a nuanced understanding of multicultural education in South Korea. Our objective in this study was to spark conversations that lay the foundation for empowering and advocating multicultural education practices in the classroom, moving beyond the mere addition of another component to teacher training or policy documents. This aspiration stems from interviews with teachers and our experiences as elementary teachers, where we encountered such superficial approaches. While a sample size of six teachers does not allow for statistical generalization, CDA prioritizes depth, saturation, and the critique of normalized discourse, making the participants of this qualitative study relevant for unveiling systemic ideologies. By embracing the inherent complexities of this topic and delving deeper into our analysis, even if it requires time and involves navigating contradictions and tensions, we believe we can work toward a more transformative and sustainable multicultural education framework.

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