

Finding a Voice Across Educational Systems

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International educational mobility can put adolescents into school environments having different expectations for participation, assessment, teacher interaction, and learning. Previous research has examined the acculturation and adjustment of adolescents studying abroad, but less attention has been paid to students with experience in different national secondary education systems and how they interpret educational expectations and their identities as learners. This qualitative study looks at 12 Korean students aged 16-20 with experience in South Korean and U.S. secondary education to see how they describe and interpret their educational transitions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis examined participants' accounts of classroom participation, academic expectations, relationships with teachers, adaptation over time, and learner identity. In general, participants described their Korean educational experiences as more structured, examination-focused, and formal, and their U.S. school experiences as more discussion-oriented and flexible. Some participants reported initial difficulty adjusting to classroom participation expectations and more informal interactions with teachers, but became more comfortable over time. Participants described as well differences in how they experienced academic pressure in the two contexts. Several reported combining study habits they associated with their Korean education with greater willingness to participate and express their views in U.S. classrooms. These retrospective accounts show how participants connected their cross-system educational experiences with how they understood themselves as learners, but the study cannot say if educational context caused these reported changes.

Keywords: International education, Korean students, educational transition, learner identity, classroom participation, acculturation, qualitative research

Introduction

International educational mobility has expanded a lot in the recent decades. OECD data show continued growth in international student mobility in tertiary education in the participating countries¹. The pattern gives a context for examining how students encounter different educational expectations when they study in the different national settings. South Korea has a long history of educational migration. Earlier scholarship has linked some Korean families' overseas education decisions to investment in English education and cosmopolitan aspirations². Other research has examined how university entrance competition, standardized testing, and private supplementary education influence educational choices³. Research with Korean high-school students has documented too about long study hours and distress⁴. U.S. secondary education is not the uniform student-centered model, and the research shows participation and teacher support vary depending on the context. A six-week diary study of U.S. high-school science classes by Patall et al.⁵ for example brought out reciprocal relationships among students' agentic engagement, perceived teacher autonomy support, and other types

of the engagement. Evidence of this type is relevant to the present study because it focuses attention on students' experiences within specific classrooms and not the one uniform pedagogical style. Research on students moving between educational systems can help explain how adolescents interpret different educational environments and understand themselves as learners. Adolescence is the relevant stage because schools are important contexts for intellectual, social-emotional, and identity development⁶. Moving between school environments during adolescence can require students to negotiate unfamiliar expectations about participation, achievement, teacher relationships, language, and belonging. There are empirical studies looking at Korean adolescents adjusting to U.S. middle and K-12 schools^{7,8}, Korean adolescents studying abroad and returning to Korea⁹, and international secondary students in Australia and Canada^{10,11}. Although considerable research examines acculturation, language, social integration, and re-entry, less attention has been paid to how students who have experienced both Korean and U.S. secondary education interpret educational expectations, describe adaptation over time, and connect these experiences to their learner identity. This study is not looking at which national system is more effective, but how adolescents make sense of educational transi-

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tion across the two contexts. Students moving between educational systems may encounter different classroom expectations and patterns of interaction. The research before has described adjustment difficulties linked with moving into unfamiliar educational environments, such as adapting to more discussion-oriented and participatory classroom expectations. This study focuses on how Korean students with experience in South Korean and U.S. education describe these transitions for them. The guiding research question is: How do Korean students with experience in both South Korean and U.S. secondary education describe and interpret their educational transitions across the two contexts? Three subordinate questions guide the analysis: How do participants describe differences in classroom participation, academic expectations, and relationships with teachers across their educational experiences? How do participants describe adapting to these differences over time? How do participants understand their learner identity in relation to experiences across the two educational contexts? This study looks at the students who studied in South Korea and the United States. It examines participants' subjective interpretations of their experiences rather than attempting to characterize either national education system as a whole. Educational practices can be different a lot by school type, class size, teacher, and local context. The qualitative interview design has an aim to provide exploratory, context-specific insight. Two complementary theoretical perspectives guide the interpretation of participants' experiences. These perspectives are Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and acculturation theory. Cultural capital gives explanation to how students enter educational environments with previously developed habits, expectations, and ways of interacting, and how the different settings may value different forms of participation, communication, and academic behavior¹². In this study, this perspective is used to interpret participants' accounts of classroom participation, academic expectations, and relationships with teachers. The acculturation theory helps as well by giving the related perspective on how individuals negotiate unfamiliar cultural and social expectations when moving between contexts¹³. It has the relevance to participants' descriptions of adapting over time to different classroom styles and institutional expectations. The two perspectives give the study a way for looking at the expectations participants encountered and how they described responding to them. They give too a framework for interpreting learner identity, understood here as how participants describe themselves as students. The study has the semi-structured interviews with Korean students who had experience in South Korean and U.S. secondary education. This format provided a consistent set of broad topics while allowing participants to explain their experiences in their own words. Interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke¹⁴. It looked towards patterns in participants' descriptions of educational

expectations, adaptation, and learner identity across the two contexts.

Literature Review

The empirical research is giving the base to look at Korean adolescents' cross-system educational experiences. Evidence comes from studies of Korean academic pressure and shadow education, classroom participation and teacher relationships, international-secondary-student adjustment, and transnational identity. These literatures are useful for seeing the participants' accounts, but they show too why doing the Korea-versus-U.S. comparison is insufficient. The review uses the national context as the background, and is focusing on processes that are more directly connected to the study's research questions.

Korean Educational Culture

Research traditionally on South Korean schooling brings out the repeated mentions of intense competition around academic achievement and university admission, but the more recent work shows a varied picture of how adolescents experience the pressures. Using national Korean adolescent survey data, Park, Jang, and Lee¹⁵ found that academic concerns were prominent stressors, and the patterns varied by educational level, gender, socioeconomic status, and other characteristics. In qualitative interviews with senior high-school students preparing for college entrance examinations, Park and Kim¹⁶ got to find multiple ways adolescents coped with academic stress. Choi et al.¹⁷ likewise found as well that academic stress was linked to poorer school adjustment among 674 Korean adolescents, with resilience moderating that relationship. More recent panel research has linked as well parental achievement pressure and school adjustment through self-esteem and self-regulated learning processes¹⁸. It gives support for the relevance of academic pressure and shows too substantial individual and contextual variation. Private supplementary education, or shadow education, is another important part of this context. Jung and Jung¹⁹ did the documenting of students' experiences of accelerated learning inside the Korean shadow education, and then Noh et al.²⁰ linked longer extra-school tutoring time with shorter weekday sleep and somatic symptoms in panel data. A later longitudinal analysis as well connected extracurricular tutoring schedules with differences between weekday and weekend sleep²¹. The consequences of private education, though, are not reducible to a simple harmful-versus-beneficial contrast. Kim, Jang, and Kim²² found that greater exposure to classmates receiving private tutoring was getting linked with depressive symptoms through social and academic mechanisms, whereas Yoo²³

found that parental spending on shadow education did not consistently predict academic achievement during the COVID-19 period. Byun et al.²⁴ further reported greater behavioral disengagement among students with sustained shadow-education participation. Findings like these are pointing to the private education intersecting with workload, peer comparison, sleep, engagement, and family resources in different ways. Research on relationships and engagement makes more complications for the idea that Korean classrooms are uniformly hierarchical or passive. The study by Shin and Chang²⁵ found distinct profiles of teacher and peer relational support among South Korean early adolescents, with higher relational support associated with stronger academic engagement. In an experimental longitudinal study, Reeve, Cheon, and Yu²⁶ found that an autonomy-supportive teaching intervention increased agentic engagement among Korean middle- and high-school students. Korea's OECD average as well was higher than average in mathematics, reading, and science in PISA 2022²⁷. It all comes as one to show a setting in which examination pressure and private tutoring can be important, but that teacher support, student agency, school type, and individual resources matter too. The present study is, as such, using this literature as context for participants' accounts.

U.S. Educational Pedagogy

Research on the U.S. secondary classrooms gives out evidence for the importance of student agency and participation. In a six-week diary study of 208 U.S. high-school science students, Patall et al.⁵ found reciprocal relationships among agentic engagement, perceived teacher autonomy support, psychological need satisfaction, and other forms of engagement. This study is relevant because it shows that participation is not a fixed classroom trait. The students and teachers can give influence to one another's classroom experiences over time. This is consistent with the need to interpret the present participants' accounts of speaking, participation, and teacher interaction as experiences of particular classrooms. The wider looking secondary-school research shows too about teacher relationships and engagement varying in the schools and by different teachers. Roorda, Jorgensen, and Koomen²⁸ found that secondary students reported different relationship quality with different teachers, as opposed to having the one uniform teacher-student pattern across a school. In a longitudinal study of 5,382 adolescents, Engels et al.²⁹ found that teacher closeness was linking with stronger school engagement, but the conflict was matching up with disengagement. Bayram Özdemir and Özdemir³⁰ like this too identified different trajectories in adolescents' perceptions of teacher relationships over time. Although these studies were conducted in different national settings, they give the useful evidence that teacher-student relationships are dynamic and locally variable. For the

present study, this literature gives a way to identify dimensions of educational experience, which are student agency, classroom participation, teacher support, and relationship quality. Differences in school type, subject, teacher practice, resources, and local context mean that students can come up against the very different educational environments within the same country. This methodological caution is important when interpreting participants' descriptions of their own U.S. school experiences.

International Student Adaptation

The earlier international-student research identified language proficiency, social support, acculturative stress, and classroom expectations as the important points to educational adjustment, but much of that literature was looking at university students^{31–34}. Secondary-school studies in more recent times give evidence that adolescent transitions involve a wider set of school and family processes. Kang and Kim⁷ followed the four Korean early-study-abroad students through repeated interviews and classroom observations in U.S. middle schools and documented challenges involving learning experiences, English proficiency, school belonging, and support across family, peer, and school contexts. Choi and Kim⁸ used narrative inquiry to examine Korean youths' K-12 experiences in the United States. Most directly, Lee and Lee⁹ interviewed 12 Korean adolescents who had studied in English-speaking countries and later returned to Korea. In it the participants talked about the language barriers, peer and teacher relationships, homesickness, academic readjustment, and family circumstances as parts of their transitions. There is the research as well with other international secondary populations, and it makes the similar conclusions about the importance of context. Lindner and Margetts³⁵, as an example, studied 116 Chinese international secondary students and 10 teachers in Australia and found a gap between students' expectations for friendship and their opportunities to form relationships with local peers. Wong and Hyde¹⁰ identified academic, socio-cultural, language, and help-seeking challenges in interviews with 17 Chinese secondary students in Australia. In Ontario, Schecter and Merecoulias³⁶ documented difficulties involving second-language socialization and academic adjustment. Lou's longitudinal Canadian research¹¹ found that social integration reflected not only language competence but also classroom organization, peer dynamics, educator practices, and different forms of social capital. A study coming later emphasized reciprocal adaptation among students, parents, homestay hosts, educators, and agents as opposed putting the responsibility for adaptation only on the student³⁷. Liu and Desai-Trilokekar³⁸ additionally showed that racism and institutional climate can become part of international secondary students' school experiences. The area is currently studied well but

there is room for more analytic focus. Existing work often examines acculturative stress, language, peer relationships, social integration, or return adjustment within one host-country or migration setting. The present study asks how Korean students with direct experience of both South Korean and U.S. secondary education interpret educational expectations across the two contexts, how they describe adapting to those expectations over time, and how they connect those experiences to their learner identity.

Transnational Student Identity

Transnational educational experience can become too part of how students understand themselves as learners. In this study, hybrid educational identity refers to participants' descriptions of combining learning practices, attitudes, and ideas about academic success that they associated with both educational contexts. It is the analytical description, and not a claim that all mobile students develop the same fixed bi-cultural identity. Bourdieu's cultural capital perspective¹² helps interpret how students enter new settings with previously developed habits and expectations, while Marginson's self-formation perspective³⁹ emphasizes students' active role in interpreting and reshaping themselves through international education. The empirical research coming recently puts support on a process-oriented transnational identity happening. Fitzsimons⁴⁰ found that students in international schools drew on national, transnational, and cosmopolitan forms of identification in different ways. Cruz et al.⁴¹ showed how 19 students in international schools across China, India, and the United Arab Emirates connected global learning, diversity, belonging, and identity. A point giving relevance to the present study is coming from Kim and Seo⁴² who interviewed 18 Korean secondary-school third-culture students living abroad. They were finding language demands, educational differences, cultural capital, mobility, and adaptation strategies as parts of an evolving identity-formation process. Pang⁴³ showed as well that a Korean transnational adolescent negotiated language and identity across family, school, community, and cultural contexts. Longitudinal work shows too that identity reconstruction can continue across educational transitions. Hou et al.⁴⁴ followed 19 transnational students from international schools into higher education and found that earlier international-school experiences informed later agency, belonging, and self-formation. These studies do not demonstrate that crossing educational systems automatically produces a 'hybrid' identity. They bring out instead a need for looking at how students selectively retain, modify, and combine practices across contexts. Acculturation theory¹³ complements this perspective by focusing attention on the negotiation of unfamiliar cultural expectations. Together, cultural capital, acculturation, and self-formation provide a framework for interpreting par-

ticipants' descriptions of discipline, participation, teacher interaction, and definitions of academic success without assuming uniform outcomes.

Methods

Research design

This study uses an exploratory qualitative design to examine how Korean students interpreted experiences across different educational settings. Semi-structured interviews supported in-depth accounts while maintaining consistent topics across participants. The interview guide was organized around domains informed by the literature and research questions. These included classroom participation, academic expectations and pressure, relationships with teachers, adaptation to educational transition, and learner identity. These domains were used as sensitizing concepts to guide questioning. Coding was conducted on the full dataset in the analysis, and the final themes came out of the comparison and refinement of patterns in participants' accounts.

Participants

A purposive sample got used for the study of 12 Korean students aged 16–20. All participants had attended middle school and/or high school in both South Korea and the United States. Participant characteristics and educational backgrounds get summarized in Table 1. Age at transition was included in the interview guide, but verified individual transition ages were not available in the participant summary used for this manuscript. Accordingly, the study reports participants' current ages and years of U.S. schooling without estimating age at transition from these variables. This missing information limits analysis of whether participants' experiences differed by age at transition.

Data collection

Data were collected through 12 semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. Interviews happened on Zoom or in person, and all interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim. The interview guide is provided in Appendix A. Follow-up probes were used when clarification or elaboration was needed.

Procedure and Data analysis

Participants were recruited through online Korean student communities. Consent procedures happened first and then the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analysis of the transcripts used the reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke¹⁴. Analysis began with repeated

Table 1 Participant characteristics and educational backgrounds.

Participant	Age	Gender	Korean School Type	U.S. School Type	Years Studying in U.S.
P1	17	F	Public	Public	2
P2	18	M	Public	Private	3
P3	16	F	International	Public	1
P4	19	M	Public	Public	4
P5	18	F	International	Private	2
P6	17	M	Public	Public	1
P7	20	F	Public	Private	5
P8	18	M	International	Public	2
P9	17	F	Public	Public	1
P10	19	M	Public	Private	3
P11	18	F	International	Public	2
P12	16	M	Public	Public	1

readings of the transcripts to become familiar with participants' accounts and identify meaningful features of the data. Initial codes were assigned to sections of the transcripts relating to participants' educational experiences, and coding was conducted across the full dataset. The codes got compared and grouped into the patterns of meaning. Candidate themes were developed by examining relationships among codes and comparing similarities and differences across emerging patterns. Review of themes against coded excerpts happened, and then they got tested against the dataset and revised to make better coherence and distinction. The final themes were then defined and named in relation to the research questions and participants' accounts. NVivo qualitative analysis software (version not recorded in the available study documentation) was used to organize transcripts and thematic categories. Appendix B gives out the examples of how selected excerpts were coded and connected to the final themes. The interview guide got organized by wide areas of educational experience, but they were not seen as predetermined final themes. Codes were compared across interview questions and participants, and candidate themes were developed from recurring patterns of meaning across the dataset. Research questions and literature informed the big sensitizing domains, and the coding and theme development proceeded iteratively across the full dataset, so it means the analysis was hybrid.

Ethical considerations

The participants all got the information about the purpose of the study and the interview procedures before taking part. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study. All participants provided informed consent.

For participants under the age of 18, parental consent was also obtained before participation. This high-school student research project did not undergo institutional review board (IRB) or other institutional ethics review. Interview data were anonymized for analysis and reporting, and identifying information was not included in the analysis. Participants were assigned identification codes (P1–P12), which are used throughout the manuscript and in the presentation of interview excerpts. The study has several limitations. The purposive sample of 12 participants was intended to provide in-depth exploratory accounts rather than statistical generalizability, and the sample is too small for meaningful subgroup analysis by age, school type, or years of U.S. schooling. Recruitment through online student communities may also have introduced selection bias. Because the study relies on retrospective self-report, participants' accounts may be affected by recall or social-desirability bias. In addition, the study documentation available for this revision does not contain verified information about interview language or whether quotations were translated or lightly edited; these details have therefore not been inferred retrospectively. The comparison in this study is based on participants' experiences within particular schools rather than a direct comparison of the South Korean and U.S. education systems as a whole. Participants attended different school types in both countries, including public, private, and international schools, and educational practices may vary across schools, teachers, regions, and institutional settings. References to Korean and U.S. educational experiences therefore describe patterns in participants' accounts rather than uniform characteristics of either national education system.

Results

The four major themes were classroom participation differences, academic pressure and evaluation, student-teacher relationships, and the development of hybrid educational identities. The themes represented recurring patterns across the interviews.

Classroom Participation Differences

This theme brings out how participants described expectations for speaking and contributing in the classrooms they attended. Several participants associated their Korean classrooms with more teacher-directed interaction and their U.S. classrooms with greater expectations for verbal participation. The quotations below illustrate these perceived differences. *“In Korea, the teacher talks most of the time and we just take note.” (P3) “Students don’t really speak unless the teacher asks directly.” (P6)* Participants commonly contrasted their Korean classroom experiences with their U.S. classroom experiences. Several described Korean classrooms as more teacher-directed

and reported having fewer opportunities or expectations to speak, while describing their U.S. classrooms as more interactive and discussion-oriented. Some participants also said that participation was formally included in grading in their U.S. schools. This contrast appears in the following excerpts: *“In the U.S., participation is part of your grade, so you have to speak.”* (P2) *“Teachers expect you to share your opinion, even if it’s not perfect.”* (P9) Several participants described the transition between these participation norms as difficult at first, with uncertainty easing over time. The following excerpts illustrate this early adjustment: *“At first, I didn’t know when to speak. It felt disrespectful to interrupt.”* (P1) *“Sometimes I stayed silent even when I knew the answer.”* (P8)

Taken together, these accounts suggest that some participants associated their prior classroom experiences with initial hesitation to speak in their U.S. classes. Most participants as the time was passing said they became more comfortable with the participation expectations they encountered and more willing to express their ideas in class. These reports describe adaptation within the particular educational settings participants experienced; they do not establish that either national education system directly caused changes in students’ learning behavior. Participants did not experience greater classroom participation as uniformly positive. Expectations for some to speak created uncertainty or a different kind of pressure, particularly during the early stages of transition. P2, for example, described participation as something students “have to” do because it contributes to the grade, while P1 and P8 described uncertainty and hesitation about when to speak. These accounts make the contrast between passive and participatory classrooms more complicated and hint that the same classroom expectation could be experienced as both an opportunity and an adjustment challenge.

Academic Pressure and Evaluation

The participants give descriptions of differences in how they experienced academic pressure and evaluation between their Korean and U.S. schools. Several of them made associations to their Korean schooling with competition and examination preparation with worries about needing high test scores, such as linked to the CSAT. These accounts reflected participants’ own school experiences as opposed to being a claim that all Korean secondary schools place identical emphasis on these practices. The following excerpts point to this pattern: *“Everything in Korea feels like it leads to one big test.”* (P8)

“You study all day, and after school you still go to hagwon.” (P5) These comments reflect how some participants associated their Korean school experiences with examination preparation, long study schedules, and private supplementary education. One participant also connected these study demands with fatigue, reflecting an individual experience rather than a

uniform effect for all Korean students. P11 described this fatigue directly: *“I was always tired because I studied late every night.”* (P11) Some participants associated the study schedules they experienced in Korea with stress or fatigue. Several of them in contrast described assessment in their U.S. schools as more distributed across homework, projects, participation, and tests. These accounts point out that participants experienced different forms of academic pressure across their particular schools rather than demonstrating that one national system is inherently more or less stressful than the other. P4 and P10 described this contrast as follows: *“In the U.S., grades come from homework, projects, and participation, not just one test.”* (P4)

“It feels less stressful because everything is spread out.” (P10) Although several participants described their U.S. school experiences as less dominated by a single high-stakes examination, this did not mean that they experienced little academic pressure. Some instead described pressure as distributed across assignments, projects, participation, extracurricular activities, and ongoing deadlines. The contrast in participants’ accounts was therefore more about the form and source of pressure than the presence or absence of academic stress.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Participants talked as well about their relationships with teachers in the schools they went to. Several characterized their Korean school experiences as more formal or hierarchical and said they were less likely to question teachers or seek clarification. These descriptions reflect the interaction norms participants encountered in particular classrooms as opposed to being the uniform feature of all Korean schools. P6 and P7 described this formality in the following terms: *“You show respect by listening, not by asking questions.”* (P6) *“Teachers are strict and you don’t talk to them casually.”* (P7) These comments suggest that some participants experienced clearer boundaries between teachers and students in their Korean schools. Some said too about them feeling uncomfortable asking for clarification when they did not understand something. This pattern is interpreted as part of their school experiences rather than as a characteristic of Korean classrooms generally. P5 described this reluctance to seek clarification: *“In Korea, I wouldn’t ask questions even if I was confused.”* (P5) Several participants, in contrast, described teachers in their U.S. schools as more informal and approachable. They reported feeling more comfortable asking questions or seeking help in those settings. P2 and P12 described this greater accessibility as follows:

“Teachers in the U.S. are easier to talk to and more like mentors.” (P2)

“You can stay after class and ask questions freely.” (P12)

Several participants described greater access to teachers and more encouragement to ask questions in their U.S. schools. Some also connected these experiences with becoming more comfortable seeking help over time. P9 described this change directly:

"I feel more comfortable asking for help now." (P9) Participants across these accounts described different expectations for communicating with teachers in the schools they attended. Several associated greater formality with their Korean experiences and more open dialogue with their U.S. experiences. Over time, many said they became more comfortable interacting with teachers in the settings they encountered.

Hybrid Educational Identity

Participants talked as well about the changes in how they understood themselves as students after experiencing schooling in the two countries. As opposed to describing one educational context as replacing the other, many said they combined practices they associated with the two settings. Some connected, for example, disciplined study habits with their Korean experiences and greater willingness to speak in class with their U.S. experiences. P4 and P10 described this combination as follows:

"I kept my Korean study habits but became more confident speaking." (P4)

"I still work hard like in Korea, but I share my ideas more." (P10) These accounts suggest that participants did not simply abandon earlier learning practices when adapting to new expectations. Instead, several described combining practices from both educational contexts in ways they considered useful. Because the study is based on retrospective interviews, these accounts reflect participants' own explanations of their adaptation rather than demonstrating that exposure to a particular national system produced a specific learning style. Participants also described differences in how they understood academic success across their educational experiences. Some associated their Korean schooling with high test scores and measurable achievement, while describing their U.S. experiences as placing more value on participation, understanding, or personal expression. These descriptions reflect the values participants perceived in the particular schools they attended. P1 and P11 described these different ideas of success as follows:

"Before, success was just getting high scores." (P1)

"Now I think understanding is more important than memorizing." (P11) Several participants said their ideas about academic success had broadened across their educational experiences. Rather than treating this as a direct effect of either national system, the analysis interprets these statements as participants' retrospective accounts of how they made sense of experiences in different school environments. Their comments

also contributed to the theme of learner identity, because participants described combining practices and values they associated with both contexts.

"I became both more disciplined and more expressive." (P7)

"I feel like I learned two different ways of being a student." (P3) These accounts when brought together show how participants described negotiating expectations across different educational settings rather than simply adapting to one system and rejecting the other. Several described a learner identity that combined qualities they associated with both contexts, such as discipline, participation, confidence, and self-expression. The findings therefore concern how these students interpreted their particular cross-context experiences, not how South Korean or U.S. education uniformly shapes student identity. The term hybrid educational identity is used here to describe this combination rather than to suggest that participants developed identical or fixed bicultural identities. Participants described different ways of retaining practices they valued from earlier schooling while becoming more comfortable with different forms of participation, teacher interaction, and academic success. Viewed through the study's theoretical framework, these accounts can be interpreted as participants negotiating previously developed forms of educational cultural capital while adapting to unfamiliar expectations. The theme therefore emphasizes participants' own descriptions of learner self-formation across educational contexts rather than assuming that movement between national systems automatically produces a particular identity.

Conclusion

This exploratory qualitative study examined how 12 Korean students interpreted educational experiences across South Korean and U.S. secondary settings. Participants described recurring differences in classroom participation, academic pressure, teacher interaction, and learner identity, while also showing variation in how those expectations were experienced. These patterns reflect participants' retrospective accounts of particular schools rather than direct evidence about either national education system as a whole.

Across the themes, several participants described becoming more comfortable with unfamiliar participation and teacher-interaction expectations and combining practices they associated with both contexts. The hybrid educational identity theme captures participants' descriptions of retaining some established study practices while adopting other ways of participating and defining academic success. Because the study is retrospective and cross-sectional, these accounts cannot establish that educational context caused the reported changes.

The findings may be useful to educators supporting students who move between educational settings by highlighting the

importance of individual differences in participation norms, teacher communication, and academic expectations. Future research could follow students longitudinally before and after transition and examine variation by age at transition, school type, language proficiency, and duration of exposure using larger or mixed-method samples.

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Appendix A – Interview Guide

Thank you for participating in this study. The purpose of this research is to understand how Korean students experience and interpret differences between South Korean and U.S. education systems.

Your responses will remain confidential, and you may choose not to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. With your permission, this interview will be audio recorded for research purposes.

Section 1: Background Information

Can you briefly describe your educational background (schools attended in Korea and the U.S.)?

At what age did you move between the two education systems?

Section 2: Classroom Experience

How would you describe a typical classroom experience in South Korea?

How would you describe a typical classroom experience in the United States?

What differences did you notice in classroom participation between the two systems?

Section 3: Academic Pressure and Expectations

How would you compare the level of academic pressure in Korea and the U.S.?

What types of assessments or evaluations did you experience in each system?

Which system did you find more challenging, and why?

Section 4: Relationships and Support

How would you describe your relationships with teachers in each system?

Did you feel supported academically and personally? Why or why not?

Section 5: Adaptation and Identity

What challenges did you face when transitioning between the two systems?

How did studying in both countries influence your attitude toward learning?

Do you think your educational experiences have shaped your identity as a student? If so, how?

Section 6: Reflection

If you could combine aspects of both systems, what would your ideal education system look like?

Appendix B – Thematic Analysis

Appendix B provides selected examples from the iterative thematic analysis described in the Methods. Table B1 shows how individual excerpts were assigned initial codes and grouped into broader categories and final themes. The examples are illustrative rather than a complete record of coding across the dataset.

Table B1. Illustrative coding examples from the reflexive thematic analysis.

Participant	Context	Excerpt	Initial Code	Category	Theme
P3	Korea	"In Korea, the teacher talks most of the time and we just take notes."	passive learning	classroom structure	Classroom Participation Differences
P6	Korea	"Students don't really speak unless the teacher asks directly."	limited participation	classroom norms	Classroom Participation Differences
P1	U.S.	"At first, I didn't know when to speak. It felt disrespectful to interrupt."	participation anxiety	cultural adjustment	Classroom Participation Differences
P9	U.S.	"Teachers expect you to share your opinion even if it's not perfect."	expectation to participate	participation norms	Classroom Participation Differences
P8	Korea	"Sometimes I stayed silent even when I knew the answer."	hesitation to speak	confidence barrier	Classroom Participation Differences
P2	U.S.	"In the U.S., if you don't talk, it feels like you're not doing enough."	participation pressure	assessment expectations	Classroom Participation Differences
P8	Korea	"Everything in Korea feels it leads to one big test."	exam pressure	high-stakes testing	Academic Pressure and Evaluation
P5	Korea	"You study all day, and after school you still go to hagwon."	extended study hours	academic workload	Academic Pressure and Evaluation
P11	Korea	"I was always tired because I studied late every night."	fatigue from studying	Study-related fatigue	Academic Pressure and Evaluation
P4	U.S.	"In the U.S., grades come from projects and homework too."	diverse assessment	evaluation diversity	Academic Pressure and Evaluation
P10	U.S.	"It feels less stressful because everything is spread out."	distributed pressure	assessment structure	Academic Pressure and Evaluation
P7	Korea	"In Korea, even small mistakes feel very serious."	fear of failure	academic culture	Academic Pressure and Evaluation
P6	Korea	"You show respect by listening, not by asking questions."	indirect communication	hierarchy	Student-Teacher Relationships
P7	Korea	"Teachers are strict and you don't talk to them casually."	formal relationship	authority structure	Student-Teacher Relationships
P2	U.S.	"Teachers in the U.S. are easier to talk to and more like mentors."	approachable teachers	support system	Student-Teacher Relationships
P12	U.S.	"You can stay after class and ask questions freely."	access to teacher support	academic support	Student-Teacher Relationships
P9	U.S.	"I feel more comfortable asking for help now."	increased help-seeking	student confidence	Student-Teacher Relationships
P5	Korea	"In Korea, I wouldn't ask questions even if I was confused."	reluctance to seek help	communication norms	Student-Teacher Relationships
P4	Both	"I kept my Korean study habits but became more confident speaking."	integration of traits	identity adaptation	Hybrid Educational Identity
P10	Both	"I still work hard like in Korea, but I share my ideas more."	balanced learning style	identity integration	Hybrid Educational Identity
P1	Korea	"Before, success was just getting high scores."	narrow success definition	academic values	Hybrid Educational Identity
P11	U.S.	"Now I think understanding is more important than memorizing."	shift in learning perspective	learning beliefs	Hybrid Educational Identity
P7	Both	"I became both more disciplined and more expressive."	dual identity traits	identity development	Hybrid Educational Identity
P3	Both	"I feel like I learned two different ways of being a student."	dual-system awareness	identity formation	Hybrid Educational Identity
P2	U.S.	"In the U.S., participation is part of your grade, so you have to speak."	participation pressure	assessment expectations	Classroom Participation Differences