

Home-Thoughts, from Abroad: A Pilot Qualitative Study of Korean Students Across Transnational Schooling Pathways

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This is a qualitative pilot study that explores the ways that Korean adolescents told and interpreted their schooling experiences across selective educational contexts in South Korea and the United States. Rather than treating the Korean and U.S. educational contexts as directly comparable national systems, this study places emphasis on three Korean students' experiences in the below contexts: Korean public school, Korean private schools, international schools, and U. S. private boarding schools. The data was gathered from online semi-structured interviews in English, video-recorded and analysed using an inductive, semantic-dominant reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes for interpretation emerged: participation as opportunity and pressure, educational support as relational and not national, and the reimagining of education outside of the academic competition. Participants often associated U.S. schooling contexts with greater discussion, flexibility, and opportunities for extracurricular involvement, but these perceptions were not uniform and were strongly mediated by class size, school selectivity, subject area, teacher approachability, and individual fit. Korean schooling, instead, was often described in terms of pressures of examination culture, shadow education and limited conceptions of success. The study does not justify general statements concerning either national system. Rather it presents a small, student-centred account of how experiences of cross-border schooling affected participants' notions of support, pressure, belonging, and what it means to be educated. Small sample qualitative evidence is more meaningfully interpreted using a more modest and pathway-specific framing than system level comparison.

Keywords: Korean adolescents, transnational schooling, educational migration, academic stress, school belonging, reflexive thematic analysis, pilot qualitative study

Introduction

Background and Rationale

Educational mobility for South Koreans in English-speaking countries has long been driven by more than individual desires. It is embedded in an educational culture frequently described as being marked by credential competition, shadow education and family strategies focused on mobility through academic success¹⁻⁴. Many families do not believe that formal schooling provides a complete form of 'education'. School, private tutoring, parental investment and institutional competition are all operating in an ecological system to shape students' daily lives and future prospects.

At the same time, the decision to pursue schooling abroad has been a significant feature of Korean educational migration. Research on Korean families and early study abroad has shown that overseas education is often imagined as a route to linguistic capital, global competitiveness, and alternative fu-

tures, even as it brings costs in family cohesion, emotional strain, and uneven adaptation^{5,6}. This makes educational transition between Korea and the United States not merely a shift between two school systems, but a movement across family strategies, institutional settings, and social expectations.

Existing studies have made some valuable contributions to the above problems. Studies in Korea have shown a connection among shadow education, academic inequality, stress, sleep deprivation and reduced subjective well-being for children and adolescents^{3,7-9}. Migration-focused studies have studied the psychosocial adjustment, isolation, transnational communication and the role of family restructuring for Korean adolescents studying abroad^{5,6}. Classroom-based studies have also revealed that participation, sense of belonging and science learning among Korean transnational students are influenced by identity, language, gender and local school environments rather than by national culture alone¹⁰⁻¹³.

However, a relatively small group of works has been produced that focuses on how students themselves tell and understand the differences in selected schooling paths across Korea and the United States. This gap is important because the students who move between these contexts are not typical cases.

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The paths of these schools are often international schools, private boarding schools or other selective institutions, and therefore cannot be simply compared with national education systems^{5,12}. When the sample size is small, this problem becomes even more severe: what can be rigorously studied is not the whole system of the nation, but rather how the participants make sense of the specific paths they have taken.

Research Purpose and Scope

Therefore, this study takes a deliberately narrower scope. Instead of asking which system is better, it asks how Korean adolescents with schooling experience in both Korea and the United States describe participation, support, pressure, and the meaning of education across selective school contexts. The study is exploratory rather than representative. Three online semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine how participants understood movement across Korean public or private schooling, international schooling, and U.S. boarding-school settings. In this way, the study offers a pilot, student-centered account of how participation, support, pressure, and educational purpose are understood across selective transnational schooling pathways.

Literature Review

Educational Pressure and Shadow Education in South Korea

South Korean education is often situated in a so-called “education fever”, and academic achievements are viewed as essential for social mobility and increased competition is present both within and outside of schools. Baker et al.¹ have proposed the idea that shadow education is a worldwide phenomenon and, according to Lee et al.⁴, in South Korea, policy responses to shadow education have repeatedly failed to curb the demand because this demand is connected to other issues such as credentialism and high-stakes competition. Choi and Park³ have also shown that shadow education is deeply connected to educational inequality, and Byun et al.² believe that Korean institutional characteristics, such as a standardised curriculum, extensive test preparation, and widespread private tutoring, mould the manifestation of cultural capital in a way that differs from that in some Western countries.

The literature above suggests that students’ perceptions of Korean education are unlikely to be limited to classroom pedagogy alone. Their accounts are also shaped by after-school academies, social expectations, and the organization of opportunity. This helps explain why well-being becomes central to comparative narratives about schooling. Noh et al.⁸ linked extra-school tutoring time to somatic symptoms and reduced weekday sleep among Korean adolescents. Choi et

al.⁷ found that academic stress mediated the relationship between achievement and subjective well-being, while perceived fairness from parents and teachers buffered some of the harm caused by stress. Park and Kim’s qualitative study⁹ of Korean high school students also found that adolescents develop both positive and negative ways of coping with excessive academic pressure. More recently, Liu et al.¹⁴ found that positive teacher-student relationships were significantly associated with learning engagement among Korean middle school students, indicating that relational support remains an important part of how students experience even highly competitive educational environments.

Recent empirical work sharpens this picture by showing how out-of-school academic demands are connected to sleep, stress, and school adjustment. Noh et al. found that extracurricular tutoring time was associated with larger weekday-to-weekend sleep differences among Korean adolescents¹⁵, while Hwang reported that both the amount and perceived burden of private tutoring were associated with higher academic stress among upper-elementary students¹⁶. Kim revealed that academic stress negatively predicted school adaptation in secondary school students, mediated by grit and learning flow¹⁷, Cha reported that parental achievement pressure had a negative impact on secondary school students’ school adjustment, which was mediated by academic stress, and the effect of which was moderated by peer attachment¹⁸. These studies collectively indicate that educational pressure is a multi-layered phenomenon created by overlapping demands of tutoring, family expectations, sleep, peer relationships, and the process of school adjustment.

Cross-national evidence also suggests that the effects of academic socialization in Korea are not necessarily the same in every context. In this regard, Zhang et al. compared Korean youth in South Korea, China, and the United States and found that parental academic socialization was associated with youth adjustment in context-specific ways¹⁹. This is particularly true of transnational students, who have their experiences of academic pressure mediated by family expectations and by the institutional contexts they enter.

Other recent primary studies further link academic stress with adaptation and well-being. Academic stress was associated with negative school adjustment among Korean adolescents, and resilience acted as a buffer between academic stress and negative school adjustment outcomes²⁰. With data from six waves of Korean panel data, Park and Kim also found that school adjustment experiences, such as involvement in school activities and peer and teacher relationships, mediated the relationship between parental involvement and academic outcomes²¹. The findings mirror and reinforce the idea that academic pressure is not just about the classroom but also about family expectations, personal resources, and relationships in the school.

Transnational Educational Migration and Family Strategy

On the U. S. and transnational side of the literature, research has also demonstrated that study abroad is often not simply an individual educational decision, but part of a broader family migration strategy. In English-speaking countries, Finch and Kim⁵ described *kirogi* families as split-household projects that are focused on the education of children. Jeong et al.²² examined the renegotiation of care and family unity by mothers in Korean transnational families. Kim and Okazaki²³ explored the psychosocial adjustment of early study abroad students without family members and identified vulnerability, language-related stress, and limited support-seeking as significant features of transition. Kim²⁴ discovered that unaccompanied Korean adolescents in the United States frequently had unstable relationships and unfamiliar sociocultural environments, while Kim⁶ posited that transnational communication was essential to the process of educational migration for these students in spite of feelings of loneliness and strain.

The migration literature mentioned is also applicable to this study; thus, the comparison of education systems here will not be limited to purely pedagogical aspects. The study life in the United States is also a form of living away from home and often involves adjusting to a new family structure. Therefore, what students believe is better or worse may be influenced by curriculum and classroom organization, as well as factors such as a sense of belonging, comfort with language, emotional support, and other social environments in their lives outside of school.

Recent studies have also shifted attention toward how Korean transnational youth interpret identity and belonging in everyday settings. In a qualitative case study of a Korean transnational adolescent in the United States, Pang found that identity was negotiated differently across family, school, and community contexts and was closely tied to linguistic and cultural investment²⁵. Jo, Richardson, and de Jong similarly showed how bilingualism, emotion, and belonging were intertwined in the experiences of a second-generation Korean American adolescent²⁶. These studies complement earlier migration research by showing that cross-border education is not only a process of adaptation to a new school but also a process through which adolescents reinterpret who they are and where they belong.

More direct evidence on Korean cross-border schooling also supports this pathway-sensitive approach. Lee and Lee's qualitative study of Korean adolescents who had studied abroad documented both gains from overseas experience and difficulties of readjustment after returning to Korea, including challenges involving belonging and national identity²⁷. At the postsecondary level, Shin and Lee found that Korean students in Canada and the United States negotiated identity and bilingualism differently depending on local peer and institutional

contexts²⁸, while Park and Chung showed how institutional settings could reshape a Korean heritage-language student's linguistic and cultural identity over time²⁹. Although the latter studies involve older students, together they reinforce the broader point that transnational educational experiences are mediated by local institutions, language practices, and social belonging.

Participation, Belonging, and Identity Across School Contexts

A third body of literature deals with participation, sense of belonging and identity in schools. Archambault et al.¹⁰ found that teacher-student relationships and a sense of belonging to the school are closely related for immigrant-background adolescents, but these associations vary among students and change over time. Ryu's classroom-based studies are especially suitable for this. Ryu¹¹ found that Korean immigrant adolescents were often reluctant to participate in discussions in science classes with rich discourse, and their classroom participation was influenced by factors such as identity and immigrant experiences rather than personality traits. Ryu¹² found, through a case study of a Korean transnational girl, that family background, language position and school structure all influenced whether a student viewed herself as a learner or not. Ryu¹³ has also found that Korean transnational girls in high-level science classes have to deal with the problem of intersectional identity arising from race, language and gender under the pressure of the model minority stereotype and classroom expectations. Moser and his colleagues³⁰ have also put forward that in the broader context of teaching, a student's participation in whole-class discussion is not only an individual trait but is also organised by teaching practices and interactional norms.

Recent primary research further supports a relational interpretation of participation and support. Ialuna, Civitillo, and Jugert found that student-reported closeness with teachers was positively associated with school belonging in ethnically diverse classrooms³¹, while Bobba et al. found longitudinally that fair and supportive teacher-student relationships predicted decreases in academic futility among adolescents with immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds³². In South Korea, Yoo identified reciprocal longitudinal associations between student life satisfaction and teacher-student relationships³³, and Cui, Jeong, and Lee found that learner-centered teaching was positively associated with school-life satisfaction through self-efficacy and classroom attitudes³⁴. These findings reinforce the idea that support and participation are experienced through concrete relationships and classroom arrangements rather than as fixed properties of a national education system.

Korean panel research also shows that relational experiences are not limited to teacher accessibility. Perceived rela-

tionships with peers and teachers were directly linked to adolescents' life satisfaction, with self-esteem as a mediator between the two³⁵. Peer relationships also have been positively related to life satisfaction among Korean adolescents, according to Lim's study³⁶. These studies provide an additional dimension of well-being to the current study's relational view of support and indicate that students' appraisals of schooling are influenced by a broader relational network of experiences.

Extracurricular Opportunity and Educational Well-Being

A smaller but relevant body of recent Korean research also highlights the role of activities outside narrow academic competition. Using data from 2,384 ninth-grade students, Ko and Oh found that satisfaction with youth activities was positively associated with happiness and that academic engagement partially mediated this relationship³⁷. In a longitudinal study, Kim found that club participation, exercise time, and conversation with parents were associated with adolescents' happiness trajectories³⁸. These findings do not establish that one national system provides better extracurricular opportunities. They do, however, support examining sports, clubs, and other non-academic domains as meaningful parts of how adolescents evaluate educational well-being and the purposes of schooling.

Further recent studies broaden this evidence. Yuh found that satisfaction with youth activities was associated with happiness among Korean middle and high school students through sense of community³⁹, while Kim, Shin, and Park reported that leisure-time physical activity moderated the relationship between academic helplessness and life satisfaction⁴⁰. Other Korean studies show that school adjustment and life satisfaction are also shaped by self-regulation in gaming⁴¹, digital citizenship and digital-life experiences⁴², and experiences of stigma and self-esteem among out-of-school youth⁴³. Together, this literature supports treating educational well-being as multidimensional and connected to academic, relational, and non-academic domains.

Conceptual Orientation

The present study is guided by a student-centered and pathway-sensitive view of schooling experience. In this orientation, participation, support, pressure, and belonging are treated as relationally and institutionally mediated experiences rather than as fixed national traits. This framing makes it possible to take participants' comparisons seriously without turning them into claims about entire national systems.

Taken together, the literature suggests three main points for the present study. First, educational pressure in Korea is institutionally and culturally organized rather than merely individually perceived. Second, movement into U.S. schooling

is closely tied to selective transnational pathways and family strategies. Third, participation, support, and belonging are locally experienced and relationally mediated rather than fixed national properties. What remains less explored is how students themselves narrate these perceived contrasts as a coherent comparative account when their trajectories cross selective schooling contexts. This paper therefore uses a small exploratory design to investigate how participants make sense of the educational paths they have lived, rather than attempting to compare entire national systems.

Methodology

Research Design

This study is designed as an exploratory pilot qualitative study. The aim was not to produce representative claims about the Korean and U.S. education systems as such, but to examine how a small group of Korean adolescents narrated experiences across specific school contexts they had encountered. A qualitative method was chosen because the central concern of the study was meaning-making: how participants interpreted participation, support, pressure, and educational purpose across school settings. Given the small sample, this study is best understood as a focused analytic account of selective transnational schooling experiences rather than as a generalizable comparison.

Participants and Sampling

All of the participants were older teenagers in their late teens at the time of the interview and had studied in both South Korea and the United States. Across the three cases, participants had attended Korean public or private schools, an international school in Seoul, and private boarding schools in the United States. One of the participants attended Korean public school in early adolescence, moved to an international school, and then moved to the U. S. Boarding School. Another moved from Korean elementary and public middle schools to an international school and then to a U. S. Private Boarding School. The third described a path of Korean elementary and junior high school education, international school experience, and U. S. Boarding-school Study. These paths are significant because they indicate that the comparative accounts of participants were influenced by more than just country, but also by school type, class size, curriculum selection, and age at the time of transfer.

Convenience and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants in an accessible student network. It was suitable for a small exploratory project looking at a particular educational pathway but was not designed to yield a representative sample. The study does not claim to represent Korean ado-

lescents as a whole, Korean students in U.S. public schools generally, or all Korean international students, since the participants were selectively mobile students with relatively uncommon school trajectories.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through online, video-recorded semi-structured interviews conducted in English. The interviews lasted between 10 and 30 minutes and were subsequently transcribed verbatim. Online interviewing was used because recent qualitative methods research has shown that video interviews can be a valid and analytically useful mode of data collection when researchers are transparent about rapport, interaction, and recording conditions^{44–46}. The interview guide asked participants to describe their educational backgrounds, classroom experiences, relationships with teachers and peers, perceptions of academic pressure, and how learning across different settings had shaped their views of education. The appendix includes a guide to the interview which was condensed to minimize identifiable detail; it does not include interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

The study used inductive, semantic-dominant reflexive thematic analysis⁴⁷. The transcripts were read multiple times to become familiar with the schooling path and the language of the respective participants. Initial experiential codes were then manually created, paying attention to the frequent descriptions of participation, support, pressure, extracurricular opportunity, identity, and purpose in education. These codes were analysed in respect of each other in order to find the convergence or contradiction between them. Analytic notes and short coding memos were used across the three cases to refine candidate patterns. Themes were developed by asking what interpretive patterns the participants' narratives supported. As the sample was small, depth, tension and patterned contrast are emphasized over saturation.

Ethical Considerations

The project was carried out as a low-risk, school-based student research study and not as a university-based, IRB-approved research programme. All the participants were in their late teens at the time of the interview. Before each interview, the reasons for the study, the voluntary nature of taking part, the right to refuse to answer or leave the interview at any time, and that the interview would be conducted online and recorded by video were all explained to the participants. Verbal informed consent was obtained from the subjects of the study. To reduce identifiability, school names and other traceable information have been omitted or generalised as much as possible, and the

participants are referred to as Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3. One interview mentioned a past health problem; due to the risk of increased identifiability, this kind of data is used sparingly and only when directly related to the study of well-being and extracurricular life.

Findings

Based on the interview data, three interpretive themes were created. These themes are not necessarily representative of national education systems in general. Rather, they record patterned ways that the participants described their movement between selective school contexts in Korea and in the United States.

Participation as Both Opportunity and Pressure

In all the interviews, U. S. schooling contexts tended to be related to greater discussion, questioning, and observable student interaction. Participant 1 described Korean classrooms as settings where students “just sit there, take notes, and listen to the teacher,” while in the United States, students “get to engage a little more.” Participant 3 also indicated that the U. S. classrooms had smaller class sizes, more questions, and greater active participation with the teacher. These accounts indicate that discussion-based classrooms were felt to provide opportunities for engagement and voice. Yet at the same time, it was not always empowering to participate. Participant 2 felt that speaking out and giving opinions in classrooms was highly promoted in the USA, particularly in humanities and language classes, but was not necessarily viewed positively. Rather, it may seem burdensome and stressful to be asked to express personal opinions. Significant here is not just the characterization of American classrooms as more participatory, but that participation itself had mixed meanings. The importance of it varied by subject area, personality, and comfort with public expression and previous classroom socialization. In this way the interviews indicate that participation was not so much a national characteristic as a local classroom practice that some students were more comfortable engaging in than others.

Educational Support as Relational Rather Than National

These interviews suggest that educational support was experienced less as a national feature than as a relational one. Participants seldom conveyed an abstract description of the meaning of support. Rather, they spoke of the ‘accessibility’ of teachers and peers, the ‘visibility’ of student difficulty and how personal school relationships felt. Participant 3 indicated that with U. S. schooling, the teachers in smaller classes would know when a student was having trouble and would initiate a

call to speak with them directly. Overall, the participant 1 was not decisively inclined towards any national context, but was still convinced that teachers in Korea were more difficult to approach because of less personal interaction in the classroom. By contrast, Participant 2 felt neither meaningfully supported in either environment and specifically indicated that the support was more based on the school or the teacher than country. These accounts collectively indicate that support was a function of class size, teacher availability, peer culture and whether students felt recognized. The interviews illustrate that support became meaningful not because one national system was more supportive than another, but because support was sustained through personal and institutionally enabled relationships.

Reimagining Education Beyond Academic Competition

The strongest cross-case pattern was not pedagogy itself, but the meaning of education. This indicates that cross-border schooling was not only important because of the different schooling styles that they were exposed to, but also because of the way in which they viewed schooling itself. Academic pressure, after-school academies, and a limited understanding of success in school were repeatedly mentioned as defining features of schooling in Korea. Participant 3 described Korea as being run by academies, being awake all the time, and thinking that school was the most important thing. Participant 1 talked about how Korean schooling is something he or she had to do, and not something that was clear or something he or she could self-direct. However, these stories were not all idyllic depictions of U. S. schooling. Participant 2 felt that neither of these systems had facilitated the process of interest discovery or stabilisation of an educational identity. But throughout the interviews, U. S. contexts were more commonly linked to subject choice, extracurriculars, sports, and an understanding that learning may involve more than one future, that it may involve well-being, that it may involve education for the self. The conversation around sports and health by participant 3 and the thought by participant 1 that U.S. schooling makes education more tangible implies that transnational movement can inspire adolescents to rethink the purpose of education. A key tension across cases is thus not which system is better, but how students balance pressure and flexibility, structure and fit, achievement and more general self-development when using their border-crossing experiences.

Discussion

The value of this study lies in the kind of claim it makes. The data, however, do not allow direct conclusions to be drawn about the Korean and U. S. education systems as a whole, as there were only three participants, all of whom were part of selective pathways in international or private boarding school

contexts. Rather, the interviews can be seen as students' descriptions of the meaning of specific school settings, as determined by school type, class size, age of transition, and pathway selectivity. From this vantage point, the results suggest that the differences in education are not so much national as the experiences of differences in particular institutional and relational settings. This is particularly significant since the three participants in both countries did not follow typical public school routes. More recent studies of Korean adolescents who have returned from study abroad also indicate that cross-border schooling can lead to rewarding experiences and adjustment problems, thus underscoring the value of analyzing mobility in terms of certain trajectories rather than national differences alone²⁷.

In this context, the study provides some valuable insights. First, the results question any celebratory interpretation of participation-based pedagogies. Schooling contexts in the U.S. were frequently characterized as more interactive and discussion-focused, but these features did not lead to a single student response. Talking and openness were a source of stimulation for certain participants. Others said that they were pressured or felt unsupported. This is in line with Ryu's work¹¹⁻¹³, which suggests that the participation of Korean transnational students is shaped by identity, comfort, previous socialization experiences, and local classroom conditions. Participation should thus not be viewed as a necessary precondition for any democratic or student-centred success, but as an experience with both affordances and demands. Recent Korean evidence also indicates that learner-centred teaching may be linked to school-life satisfaction via self-efficacy and classroom attitudes³⁴, and the current interviews reveal that participatory practices can still be experienced differently by individual students.

Secondly, the results indicate that support should be thought of as a relational rather than national phenomenon. The most convincing support stories in the interviews related to teacher observation of students, small class sizes that allow interaction and peers as collaborators instead of competitors. This reframing is important as it allows one national context to not be romanticized over the other. The finding that the participant 2 felt that support was more to do with school and teacher, as opposed to country, is particularly pertinent here. The results suggest that rather than asking the question "Is Korea more supportive than the USA?" a more accurate question is "What are the local conditions that make support legible and meaningful to students in transition across school cultures?" This relational interpretation aligns with recent research that relates teacher proximity and supportive teacher-student interactions to feelings of school belonging, reduced academic futility and increased life satisfaction³¹⁻³³.

Third, one of the most analytically generative findings relates to students' re-imaginings of education itself. In these

interviews comparisons between Korea and the United States were frequently comparisons between different conceptions of educational value. Examinations, hagwon routines, and a pressure-laden social pathway were more associated with Korean contexts. Flexibility, extra-curricular life, and opportunity structures were more likely to be linked to contexts in the U. S. Even here, however, participants' stories defied simple dichotomies. One participant explicitly rejected both systems, and another indicated that motivation and stress were partially age-specific and not nationally determined. This tension provides the analytic value of the narratives. It wasn't just a question of whether or not the students were opting for one system versus the other, but a matter of applying cross-border experiences to challenge and reevaluate their own conceptions of what is and is not learning, success, health, and future potential. Recent Korean research also finds a link between both satisfaction with youth activities and club participation and exercise, and adolescent happiness^{37,38}, confirming a wider perspective of educational well-being, rather than a national scope of problem.

These findings have modest but important implications. Support should not be limited to language support and academic guidance for educators working with transnational or recently mobile adolescents. Student perceptions of livability in a school can be influenced by participation norms, teacher availability, school belonging, and access to non-academic domains (sports, arts, etc.). The study highlights the need for claim/evidence alignment for researchers. Small sample qualitative work can be valuable if it is used as a means of seeing the narrative as a situated interpretation rather than a proxy for a national truth.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. One of the most prominent deficiencies of the sample was its small size. The three interviews do not necessarily capture the diversity of Korean students' experiences in Korea and the United States. The participants were also situated in selective educational pathways, such as international and private boarding schools, and thus the results are particularly influenced by school selectivity, class size and access to certain school resources.

The interviews were carried out on the internet and were fairly short. While online video interviewing is a valid qualitative approach, the shorter interviews limit our ability to examine broader issues of longer-term identity development, family relationships, and adjustment over time. The study has also a retrospective self-report design, which can lead to current emotional or current school status affecting the way past experiences are recalled and told. Further, some of the nuances of reflection or emotional expression may not have been captured as the interviews were conducted in English and not the

first language of those interviewed.

Further, the project was conducted as a school-based student research study rather than as a larger formally resourced research project. This means that there was no direct observation, follow up interviews or participant validation rounds. These limitations indicate that the results should be interpreted as exploratory rather than being representative. There are opportunities for future research to expand upon this study by using a larger and more varied sample, adding students in public-school pathways and perhaps cases of other migration arrangements.

Conclusion

In this study, there is no definite comparison between the Korean and U. S. education systems. Rather, it provides a micro perspective of how the school experience was told by Korean youth through selective transnational routes.

In this pilot sample, contexts in the U. S. tended to be linked to discussion and flexibility, with wider opportunities outside of the academic sphere, while contexts in Korea were more often linked to pressures of examination culture, shadow education and a narrow focus on academic competition. But these contrasts could never be purely national. These differences were mediated by school type, class size, teacher relationships, peer relationships, and individual fit. Most importantly, cross-border schooling prompted participants to reflect on what education was for. In this way, this paper is not a judgment of which national education system is better, but a modest account of how young people make meaning from learning across different countries.

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Appendix

Participant Schooling Pathways (Anonymized)

Participant	Schooling in Korea	Schooling in the United States	Analytic significance
Participant 1	Korean public schooling; later international schooling in Seoul	U.S. boarding-school context	Illustrates shift from lecture-oriented classrooms to smaller, discussion-based settings and stronger reflection on educational purpose.
Participant 2	Korean private/public elementary and middle schooling; international schooling	U.S. private boarding-school context	Offers the strongest counterpoint to celebratory interpretations of U.S. schooling; emphasizes variability by teacher and school.
Participant 3	Korean elementary and middle schooling; international schooling	U.S. boarding-school context	Highlights pressure, health, sports, and the broadening of educational meaning beyond academics alone.

Support provided by visibility (Participant 3): Participant 3 indicated that there was some type of support provided when teachers saw participants struggling in the classroom, and sometimes when they contacted participants directly, it felt more real.

Education not for competition (Participant 3): Participant 3 described how in Korea “academics were everything,” but in the United States sports and multiple pathways allowed for a wider sense of education than just one exam track.

Educational meaning and reflection (Participant 1): Participant 1 reported that in Korea, education was something that had to be done and in the United States, one could more easily come to appreciate what teachers were doing and think about the purpose of education consciously.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Can you describe the kinds of schools you attended in Korea and in the United States?
2. What did classroom participation feel like in those different school settings?
3. How, if at all, did your relationships with teachers differ across schools?
4. What kinds of support from teachers or peers felt meaningful to you?
5. How did your sense of academic pressure change across school contexts?
6. What role did after-school study, tutoring, extracurricular activities, or sports play in your life in each setting?
7. Did these experiences change how you understood success, learning, or the purpose of education?
8. What advice would you give to other Korean students considering study abroad or cross-border schooling?

Selected Supporting Excerpts

Participation and engagement (Participant 1): Participant 1 explained that there is more participation in the United States, and that in Korea, students “just sit there, listen to the teacher, take notes, . . .”

Participation and interaction (Participant 3): Participant 3 connected the American classes with smaller classes, more questions and more interaction with teachers, compared to the Korean classrooms where students mostly wrote things down and did not interrupt the class.

Participation as pressure (Participant 2): Participant 2 said that it didn’t just feel good to be in a class that taught through discussion, sometimes it felt stressful instead of creative or supportive.

Subject-specific variation (Participant 2): Participant 2 highlighted that the difference in participation was more apparent in subjects within the humanities and language group than in mathematics, indicating that there was a subject area mediation of the perceived experience of classroom style.

Support as relational (Participant 2): Participant 2 said that support was “more the school or the teachers” and didn’t seem to be related to country, thus directly challenging the national comparison.