

## MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN'S IDENTITY FORMATION IN SOUTH KOREA: IMPLICATIONS FOR TESOL

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### Abstract

*Multilingual children from multicultural families constitute a growing share of the South Korean student population, yet their linguistic resources and identities remain only partially recognized in mainstream schooling. This study synthesizes demographic and policy data, identity theory, and empirical research on Korean and international classrooms to examine how bilingual and multilingual learners in Korea negotiate identity within the education system. It outlines the sociocultural and policy context of multicultural education, analyses how family language practices, school norms, and teacher beliefs shape students' sense of belonging and academic trajectories, and reviews evidence on translanguaging and culturally sustaining pedagogy. The study concludes that prevailing monolingual norms and fragmented policy implementation limit equitable participation, and argues that TESOL-oriented reforms in teacher education, curriculum, and assessment are needed to position students' full linguistic repertoires as resources. Such changes are essential for advancing more inclusive and sustainable multilingual education in Korea, while offering insights applicable to TESOL and multilingual education in other contexts.*

**Keywords:** culturally sustaining pedagogy, language and identity, multicultural education, multilingualism, TESOL, translanguaging, South Korea

**JEL:** I21, I28, J15

### Introduction

South Korea's school system has undergone notable demographic shifts over the past two decades as a result of changes in migration policy, rising international marriages, and targeted economic and population initiatives. The number of foreign residents and multicultural households has steadily increased, supported by labor recruitment schemes and programs encouraging international marriage and family support (Korea.net, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2023). As a result,

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students from migrant and mixed nationality backgrounds now account for a growing share of school enrollment, with recent educational statistics indicating that the number of students from multicultural families has risen to roughly 3-4% of all students by the early 2020s (Ministry of Education, 2023). This growth has contributed to increased linguistic and cultural diversity across both urban and rural districts (Ministry of Education, 2023).

These changes are driven by both social and demographic factors. As Korea faces low birth rates and workforce shortages, policymakers have promoted migration and related integration policies as part of broader population and economic strategies (OECD, 2019). At the same time, local governments have established multicultural family support centers and related outreach programs to facilitate language acquisition, school adjustment, and family support (Ahn, Lee, & Jin, 2024). Nevertheless, the rapid pace of change has given rise to new educational challenges, particularly around identity development, academic achievement, and equal participation for bilingual and multilingual learners (Ahn, Lee, & Jin, 2024; Jin, 2025).

While government responses have produced expanded teacher training and increased resources for multicultural education, empirical studies document a persistent gap between legislative intent and everyday classroom practice. Major barriers remain, including language marginalization, monolingual and assimilationist expectations, and uneven program access across regions (Kang, 2016; Kim, 2009; UNESCO, 2003).

This paper adopts a conceptual and integrative review methodology, suited to questions that require synthesis across theoretical, policy, and empirical domains rather than the collection of new primary data. Sources were drawn from peer-reviewed studies, policy documents, and theoretical scholarship published primarily from 2000 onwards, with a focus on South Korea and comparable multilingual education contexts. Selection prioritized relevance to identity formation, translanguaging, multicultural education policy, and TESOL pedagogy. Sources were included when they directly addressed at least one of the paper's core themes, and excluded when they focused exclusively on monolingual populations with no transferable relevance.

The integrative review allows theoretical and empirical literature to be brought into dialogue, surfacing structural patterns that single-strand studies cannot easily reveal. This is particularly useful in the Korean TESOL context, where classroom-level research is unevenly distributed and policy has consistently moved ahead of school-based evidence. The approach has limitations as well. No original data were collected, so conclusions depend on the quality and coverage of existing sources, most of which are concentrated in urban settings. Rural and under-resourced contexts are less represented, and this may affect how applicable some

recommendations are outside metropolitan areas. Source selection also involves interpretive judgment, as in any review of this kind.

The paper is structured into sections addressing conceptual and theoretical foundations, the Korean sociocultural and educational context, identity formation processes, educator attitudes and classroom practices, TESOL pedagogical implications, and a concluding discussion of research gaps and future directions. This paper addresses three interrelated aims. First, it examines how bilingual and multilingual learners in South Korea negotiate identity within the education system. Second, it identifies the policy-practice gaps that limit equitable participation for students from multicultural families. Third, it formulates TESOL-oriented pedagogical and institutional recommendations grounded in existing scholarship. Three questions guide the analysis: (1) How do family language practices, school norms, and teacher beliefs shape multilingual learners' identity formation in Korea? (2) What are the principal barriers to equitable multilingual education at institutional and classroom levels? (3) What TESOL interventions does the existing evidence support for more inclusive educational outcomes?

Although the analysis centers on South Korea, the challenges identified resonate with multilingual education contexts across Europe. Like Korea, many European education systems face tensions between historically assimilationist traditions and contemporary inclusive policy aspirations as they respond to increasing linguistic diversity. The translanguaging frameworks and teacher education recommendations discussed in this paper, therefore, offer transferable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to align classroom practice with multilingual realities across diverse sociolinguistic contexts.

## **Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations**

### ***Key Definitions and Theoretical Foundations***

Bilingualism is typically defined as the regular use of two languages by an individual, while multilingualism extends this concept to encompass three or more languages (García, 2009; Bhatia & Ritchie, 2013). More recent work, however, argues that this distinction is often artificial in practice and that "bilingualism" and "multilingualism" can be treated as part of a single continuum of using multiple languages across contexts (Genesee, 2016). Both constructs are now understood as dynamic, context-sensitive competencies. Speakers often achieve different levels of proficiency and employ various languages for specific social or academic purposes (Baker, 2011). These concepts are particularly significant in Korea, where many learners use Korean in public settings but maintain heritage or additional languages at home. The degree to which these practices are supported depends on family resources and on how schools recognize or

marginalize linguistic diversity within policy and daily interactions (Kim, 2020; García, 2009).

Theories of identity development have also evolved with research on multilingualism. Erikson's (1968) framework sees adolescence as a central stage for negotiating personal and social identities, while more recent models by Phinney (1992) and Cross (1991) conceptualize identity among ethnic and linguistic minorities as an ongoing, multidimensional process. In Korea, this means bilingual and multilingual youth form identities at the intersection of home language practices, school norms, and institutional expectations that often privilege Korean as the primary medium for academic success (Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020). These dynamics highlight the need for theoretical perspectives that connect language, identity, and power in Korean schools, which are introduced in the following section.

### *Language, Identity, and Pedagogy in the Korean Context*

Several theoretical frameworks clarify the relationships among language, identity, and educational practice. Social identity theory, Norton (2000), emphasizes that language learning is closely tied to how students are positioned within and across social groups. In Korean multicultural classrooms, students' language choices reflect not only family background but also how they are perceived by peers and teachers, as competent or limited, included or marginalized (Ahn, Lee & Jin, 2024; Kang, 2016; Shin & Seong, 2018).

Hierarchical norms and an emphasis on social cohesion in Korean schools can create barriers for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds and limit the impact of multicultural education reforms (Kim, 2020; Kang, 2016). Critical pedagogy, as developed by Freire (1970), argues that meaningful education begins with the lived experiences and languages of learners. From this perspective, classroom practices that silence minority languages or treat them as deficits reproduce wider patterns of inequality, whereas practices that validate students' linguistic repertoires can support both academic learning and critical awareness (Freire, 1970; García, 2009). Applied in Korea, this approach advocates treating minority languages and cultures as resources, not obstacles, and designs instruction to foster both engagement and equity. In South Korean EFL classrooms, however, English-only language policies have often generated a sense of "teacher guilt" around using Korean and constrained teachers' willingness to draw on their full linguistic repertoires, even when they perceive clear benefits for multilingual learners (Rabidge, 2019). In practical terms, these perspectives converge in everyday literacy events such as read-alouds, writing tasks, and literature circles, where students take up, contest, or renegotiate identities through their participation and use of multiple languages.

Contemporary TESOL research supports these principles through the frameworks of translanguaging and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Baker, 2011; García, 2009; Hamman Ortiz et al., 2025). These approaches advocate for instruction that values and integrates students' full linguistic repertoires, offering alternatives to monolingual models and supporting both identity development and academic participation. Translanguaging views bilingual and multilingual learners as drawing on an integrated repertoire of linguistic resources rather than switching between separate, bounded languages, and it encourages teachers to design tasks that deliberately invite students to use all of their languages for meaning making, collaboration, and identity work (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García, 2009; García & Li Wei, 2014). In multilingual classrooms, translanguaging practices such as bilingual group discussions, multilingual drafting, and strategic use of home languages in content learning can increase participation, deepen comprehension, and affirm students' identities as competent language users (García, 2009).

Culturally sustaining pedagogy extends this perspective by arguing that schools should actively sustain, rather than merely tolerate, the languages and cultural practices of minoritized communities while also providing access to dominant forms of knowledge and power (Baker, 2011). In the Korean context, this entails integrating students' heritage languages and cultural knowledge into mainstream curricula and school life so that bilingual and multilingual learners see their full repertoires reflected and valued, rather than being expected to assimilate to monolingual Korean norms (Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020).

## **Sociocultural and Educational Context in South Korea**

### ***Demographic Overview***

Over the past decade, South Korea's schools have seen increasing linguistic and cultural diversity. Government statistics indicate that students from multicultural families now comprise close to 4% of the total elementary, middle, and high school population, with enrollments rising steadily since the late 2010s (Rainbow Youth Foundation, 2024). These students are predominantly of Korean Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Chinese, and other Asian backgrounds, with considerable variation in family histories and migration pathways (Ministry of Education, 2023). Their distribution across the country is uneven: metropolitan areas such as Seoul and Busan enroll large numbers of multicultural students and generally have more extensive policy support, whereas many smaller towns and rural districts continue to lack specialized staff and resources to address multilingual and cultural needs (Ministry of Education, 2023; Kang, 2016).

### ***Social Perceptions and Barriers***

Attitudes toward multicultural families differ by region, age cohort, and community exposure. National data and policy analyses indicate that larger cities enroll higher proportions of students from multicultural families and offer more extensive support services, while concerns about social cohesion and academic competition remain more pronounced in rural areas with less experience of diversity (Ministry of Education, 2023; Kang, 2016). In schools with limited exposure to diversity, studies note that stereotypes and deficit perspectives are more common, contributing to marginalization of heritage language speakers and greater risks of social isolation for multicultural adolescents (Ahn, Lee, & Jin, 2024; Kang, 2016).

### ***Policy and International Comparison***

Since the 2010s, several policy reforms have sought to extend multicultural education beyond metropolitan centers. The Ministry of Education has supported multicultural education through targeted funding and teacher training initiatives, including policies that direct additional resources to schools in regions with higher concentrations of multicultural students (Kang, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2023).

Nationwide, the Multicultural Family Support Act provides the legislative basis for many inclusive programs, but schools report uneven implementation, with rural districts continuing to face challenges related to staffing, material development, and access to specialized programming (Kang, 2016; Ministry of Government Legislation, 2016). In comparison, countries such as Canada and Australia have developed more fully institutionalized models that embed heritage languages and pluralistic perspectives within mainstream instructional practice and school policy, which offers useful benchmarks for Korea's ongoing development (Skutnabb Kangas & Torres-Guzmán, 2006; UNESCO, 2003).

## **Identity Formation Processes in Multicultural Children**

### ***Policy Context and Institutional Gaps***

South Korea has developed policy instruments such as the Multicultural Family Support Act and specialized language initiatives to address the needs of multicultural students, increasing institutional awareness and basic infrastructure, particularly in urban areas (Kang, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2023; Ministry of Government Legislation, 2016). These efforts have expanded formal recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity but remain only partially

integrated into everyday instruction and school culture (Kang, 2016). Because many supports function as supplementary programs rather than core components of the curriculum, multilingual learners continue to encounter uneven access to resources and recognition across schools, which shapes the conditions under which they negotiate identity in everyday classroom life (Kang, 2016; Skutnabb Kangas & Torres-Guzmán, 2006; UNESCO, 2003).

### ***Empirical Patterns in Korean Research***

Empirical studies in Korea and other contexts suggest that maintaining a heritage or home language is associated with higher self-esteem, stronger family relationships, and more positive academic attitudes among multilingual adolescents (Cho et al., 2004; De Houwer, 2007; Phinney, 1992; Valdés, 2005). These studies also indicate that bilingual and biliterate development can support a more coherent sense of identity and higher educational aspirations compared to rapid shift to a single dominant language (García, 2009; Valdés, 2005). Longitudinal research using national panel data in Korea, such as the Multicultural Adolescents Panel Study (MAPS), further shows that social and family environments that support multicultural adolescents' linguistic and cultural backgrounds are linked to better mental health and school adjustment outcomes over time (Ahn et al., 2024).

Heritage language maintenance and supportive family relationships are consistently associated with positive identity development and stronger educational outcomes across the studies reviewed (Cho et al., 2004; Phinney, 1992; Valdés, 2005). Recent longitudinal and classroom-based studies in Korea and internationally also show that identity formation depends on institutional supports, peer relationships, and teacher attitudes toward linguistic diversity (Ahn et al., 2024; García, 2009; Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020; Shin & Seong, 2018). Ahn et al. (2024), drawing on a sample of 1,443 middle school students, found that both peer relations and school adjustment declined gradually across the three-year study period, while multicultural family support services produced intermittent reductions in acculturative stress at specific time points, with no significant effect on peer relations at any point. This pattern underscores that broader structural and social factors shape multilingual adolescents' school experiences in ways that targeted institutional programs alone cannot reverse.

Teacher perceptions and recognition of linguistic diversity exert a clear influence on these patterns. Studies of Korean and international classrooms show that when teachers affirm students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and adopt translanguaging friendly practices, learners report higher engagement, more positive self-descriptions, and a stronger sense of belonging, whereas pressure to conform to strict monolingual norms is associated with reluctance to use home

languages and feelings of marginalization (García, 2009; Hamman Ortiz et al., 2025; Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020; Shin & Seong, 2018).

Research on multilingual and migrant students in other contexts similarly indicates that digital technologies and online platforms support a wide range of literacy practices, such as heritage language reading and writing, digital storytelling, and participation in fanfiction communities, through which young people construct multifaceted identities, maintain transnational connections, and express themselves in ways that may be constrained in offline settings (Black, 2006; Lam, 2009). The rapid expansion of online and hybrid learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the importance of these digital spaces for multilingual students' everyday literacy practices and identity work (Hamman Ortiz et al., 2025). In this sense, social media use, participation in online language communities, and engagement in online education environments create important literacy spaces that enable codeswitching, experimentation with voice, and the performance of hybrid linguistic repertoires (Black, 2006; Lam, 2009).

Survey and qualitative data from Korea also underline the critical role of parental involvement in identity formation. National reports on multicultural families describe gradual improvements in family integration, including reductions in reported cultural conflicts and increased participation in family support programs, even as many households continue to face economic and linguistic challenges (Korean Women's Development Institute, 2021). These findings underscore the importance of supportive peer environments, constructive media representations, and family school partnerships for positive identity formation among multicultural adolescents (Ahn et al., 2024; Phinney, 1992; Valdés, 2005). For bilingual and multilingual learners in Korea, identity formation is shaped by the interplay of family language practices, institutional supports, peer and teacher relationships, and digital literacy environments (García, 2009; Black, 2006; Lam, 2009). Sustained support for heritage languages, combined with teacher training, inclusive digital literacy initiatives, and deliberate efforts to strengthen peer and family relationships, remains crucial for fostering positive academic and identity outcomes for multicultural students in Korea (Ahn et al., 2024; Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020).

## **Educator Attitudes, Classroom Practice, and Institutional Supports**

### ***Teacher Beliefs and Professional Practice***

Policy changes in recent years have required Korean teachers to develop multicultural competence, but research indicates that many still report limited preparation for teaching bilingual and multilingual students (Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020; Shin & Seong, 2018). Even those with positive attitudes toward diversity express concerns about differentiating instruction, effectively communicating

with families from various backgrounds, and managing bias in competitive, exam-driven environments. These concerns can be heightened when teachers have few concrete models of multilingual pedagogy or limited access to colleagues with relevant expertise, which may lead multicultural education to be perceived as an additional responsibility rather than an integral dimension of everyday classroom practice. Kim (2020) further confirms that both novice and experienced teachers in Korea lack practical training in managing linguistically diverse classrooms, with in-service programs addressing general multicultural theory but providing few concrete strategies for supporting multiethnic students across subject areas, regions, or cultural backgrounds. Such challenges are often reinforced at the institutional level, where monolingual norms predominate and multilingual learners are still frequently positioned as exceptional rather than typical members of the classroom community (García, 2009; Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020; Shin & Seong, 2018).

Despite these constraints, some teachers are seeking additional training and building collaborative partnerships with families. Qualitative and classroom-based studies in Korea identify a gradual shift in teacher identity among those who actively reflect on their practice and engage in ongoing professional learning aimed at integrating students' full linguistic repertoires (Kim, 2020; Shin & Seong, 2018). In such cases, teachers begin to treat multilingualism as a normal feature of their classrooms rather than as a problem to be managed, and experiment with translanguaging oriented tasks, more flexible grouping arrangements, and more dialogic forms of communication with parents (García, 2009; Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020; Shin & Seong, 2018). These shifts are uneven and context dependent. Where they do occur, sustained professional development, collegial networks, and institutional backing appear to be the enabling conditions (Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020; Shin & Seong, 2018).

### *Classroom and Institutional Practices*

Current research underscores a persistent gap between multicultural education policy and everyday pedagogical practice in Korea. Korean-only instruction and standardized curriculum routines remain prevalent in many schools, often requiring multilingual students to conform to dominant linguistic norms and limiting opportunities to use home languages (Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020). These patterns mean that some students from multicultural families hide aspects of their linguistic identity or avoid using their home languages at school to escape stigma or peer pressure, highlighting the importance of classroom climates that actively value linguistic diversity (Kang, 2016; Ahn et al., 2024). Kim (2020) similarly documents that multicultural programs in Korean middle and high schools have been largely confined to non-core, extracurricular contexts, and that Korean-only

remedial language classes, rather than facilitating inclusion, often reinforced peer separation between multiethnic and Korean-background students. At the same time, work on South Korean elementary EFL classrooms shows that English-only discourses can also constrain teachers, producing “teacher guilt” around using Korean and narrowing the space for translanguaging practices that might otherwise support multilingual learners (Rabbidge, 2019).

There are, however, documented cases of successful translanguaging practice. Research on Korean and international classrooms has shown that when teachers deliberately integrate students’ home languages into content learning and classroom interaction, multilingual learners demonstrate higher participation, stronger identity affirmation, and improved academic engagement (García, 2009; Shin & Seong, 2018). Studies of multilingual classroom pedagogy similarly highlight how planned translanguaging and plurilingual strategies can mediate understanding, reduce language anxiety, and support active classroom participation, positioning students’ full repertoires as legitimate resources for learning rather than problems to be managed (García & Li, 2014; Ulum, 2024; Karpava, 2026). In such classrooms, teachers scaffold students’ use of multiple languages in group work and whole-class activities so that original contributions are preserved while products are made accessible to all, resulting in increased participation, improved oral language skills, and higher levels of mutual respect between Korean-background and non-Korean-background students (García, 2009; Shin & Seong, 2018; Karpava, 2026).

Assessment for multilingual learners presents additional challenges in the Korean context. Standardized tests typically prioritize monolingual Korean proficiency, which can disadvantage students who excel in other languages or whose content mastery is not easily measured through Korean alone (Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020). Some schools and teachers have begun experimenting with portfolio-based and performance assessments, as well as classroom translanguaging practices, that allow for heritage-language components or multilingual projects. Emerging classroom studies and teacher reports indicate that such approaches can better capture the competencies of bilingual and multilingual learners and support more equitable academic outcomes, especially when assessment is explicitly aligned with translanguaging-informed and plurilingual pedagogies (García & Li, 2014; Ojha et al., 2024; Karpava, 2026).

### *Summary of Challenges and Practices*

While many multicultural initiatives in Korea are concentrated in urban centers or remain supplementary, recent studies demonstrate positive effects from asset based and inclusive approaches. The most effective strategies integrate heritage languages and student background into normal classroom activities

rather than treating them as ancillary or special. Even limited opportunities for translanguaging can support student participation and identity formation when supported by reflective teaching practice and institutional backing (García, 2009; Kim, 2020; Shin & Seong, 2018). Research on Korean classrooms shows that when teachers design group tasks and whole class activities that deliberately incorporate students' home languages into content learning, multilingual learners display higher engagement, stronger identity affirmation, and more collaborative peer relationships (Kim, 2020; Shin & Seong, 2018).

Taken together, these patterns suggest that effective practice in Korean multilingual classrooms requires more than isolated multicultural events or remedial language support; it depends on systematic integration of students' languages and experiences into everyday instruction. Approaches such as structured translanguaging routines, portfolio and performance-based assessment, and planned collaboration with families and community organizations help align classroom activities with learners' identities and long-term academic goals (García, 2009; Ahn, Lee, & Jin, 2024; Valdés, 2005). When these elements are present, multilingual learners are more likely to experience themselves as legitimate members of the classroom community rather than as peripheral or temporary participants.

## **TESOL Pedagogical Implications and Policy Recommendations**

### ***Translanguaging and Heritage Language Integration***

TESOL research identifies translanguaging and culturally sustaining pedagogy as effective methods for supporting participation and identity development among multilingual learners (García, 2009; Baker, 2011). In South Korean elementary EFL classrooms, Rabbidge (2019) similarly argues that embracing translanguaging as a central classroom stance allows teachers to move beyond deficit narratives about L1 use and to recognize both teachers and students as bilingual or emergent bilingual users of their full linguistic repertoires. Evidence from Korean and international classrooms shows that collaborative group work and flexible language use can improve student engagement and foster more positive relationships between schools and families when students' full linguistic repertoires are treated as resources (García, 2009; Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020).

Heritage language integration works best when schools implement it across the curriculum rather than confining it to isolated language arts or after school programs. Activities that use students' home languages for academic content and peer mentoring support both language gains and a sense of cultural belonging (Valdés, 2005; Skutnabb Kangas & Torres-Guzmán, 2006). Evidence from Korean and international studies shows that these practices strengthen learner confidence and academic achievement (García, 2009; Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020).

### ***Persistent Barriers***

Despite the expansion of multicultural policies, structural barriers persist in Korean schools. Teachers frequently report difficulties balancing curricular standards with linguistically diverse classroom needs, which can lead to reluctance to implement bilingual or translanguaging approaches (Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020). There remains a shortage of bilingual educators and culturally relevant materials, especially outside large cities, and multilingual learners are often positioned as exceptional rather than typical members of the classroom community (Kang, 2016). At the policy level, inconsistent implementation and ongoing program fragmentation limit the sustained effectiveness of multicultural initiatives, with many programs remaining short term or supplementary rather than core components of instruction (Kang, 2016; OECD, 2018).

### ***Actionable Recommendations***

A coordinated policy and practice shift is needed to address persistent barriers in Korean multicultural and multilingual education. Integrating translanguaging principles into TESOL teacher preparation and in-service professional development should be prioritized so that explicit training and ongoing learning opportunities emphasize effective practice for linguistically diverse classrooms (García, 2009; Kim, 2020; Shin & Seong, 2018). Increased funding and institutional incentives are also needed to support curriculum innovation, particularly policies that foster sustained collaboration between schools, families, and community organizations in producing culturally relevant materials (Kang, 2016; Korean Women's Development Institute, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2023).

At the same time, education authorities should implement systematic and responsive evaluation mechanisms that allow schools to incorporate parent and student feedback into program design and ensure that multicultural education initiatives remain adaptive and effective (Kang, 2016; OECD, 2018). Detailed case studies from schools where inclusive practice is already working remain scarce. Producing and sharing these would give other schools a practical basis for adaptation rather than having to start from scratch (Baker, 2011; García, 2009; Kim, 2020).

## **Discussion**

### ***Synthesis of Findings***

A consistent picture emerges across the three aims of this study. Monolingual norms, fragmented policy implementation, and inadequate teacher preparation continue to undermine Korea's multicultural education framework. Heritage

language maintenance and translanguaging-friendly classroom practices are linked to stronger identity outcomes and higher student engagement, yet these approaches remain the exception rather than the norm in most Korean schools (García, 2009; Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020; Shin & Seong, 2018).

Identity formation is not shaped by language policy alone. It reflects the intersection of family language practices, institutional supports, teacher attitudes, and digital environments. Longitudinal evidence shows that peer relations and school adjustment declined over time for multicultural students, and that targeted support programs provided only intermittent relief, pointing to structural barriers that surface-level interventions cannot resolve (Ahn et al., 2024). Where teachers deliberately integrated translanguaging into their classroom practice, even modest and sustained shifts produced meaningful gains in student participation and identity affirmation (García, 2009; Shin & Seong, 2018).

Reform in Korean TESOL must therefore be systemic. Translanguaging, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and heritage language recognition need to be embedded in teacher preparation, curriculum design, and assessment. They cannot continue to function as optional additions to mainstream practice (Baker, 2011; García, 2009; Kim, 2020).

### *Limitations*

The integrative approach adopted here allows patterns across theory, policy, and classroom practice to surface together. This is a genuine strength in a field where evidence is unevenly distributed and policy has consistently moved ahead of school-based research. However, the analysis depends entirely on the quality and coverage of existing sources. Most Korean studies consulted focus on urban and metropolitan settings, and rural and under-resourced schools are considerably less represented in the literature. Some recommendations may therefore not transfer as directly to those contexts. Source selection also involves interpretive judgments that cannot be fully eliminated. These constraints mark the boundaries of what this review can confirm rather than undermining its conclusions.

### *Directions for Future Research*

Several priorities stand out. Longitudinal studies tracking multilingual learners across key educational transitions remain rare in Korea. Expanding the Multicultural Adolescents Panel Study and building school-based longitudinal research alongside it would begin to address this directly (Ahn et al., 2024; Kang, 2016). Mixed-methods designs combining classroom observation, teacher interviews, and digital media analysis would better capture how students navigate linguistic and cultural boundaries across offline and online spaces (Black, 2006;

Lam, 2009). Participatory and action research involving families and communities outside major cities is especially needed, given how underrepresented those contexts currently are in the literature (Kang, 2016; Kim, 2020). Finally, systematic evaluation of how teacher education programs incorporate multilingual and identity-oriented content would clarify which institutional supports actually enable inclusive practice at scale (García, 2009; OECD, 2018).

## Conclusion

Research on educational reform in Korea indicates that progress toward inclusive multicultural and multilingual education has been substantial, yet significant gaps persist between policy intentions and classroom practice. Identity theory, sociolinguistics, and empirical evaluation converge on the need for targeted teacher development, curriculum redesign, and sustained institutional commitment to support language diversity and equitable outcomes for all learners.

For Korea to achieve more consistent and effective TESOL practice, the integration of students' home languages and cultural backgrounds must become a structural feature of educational policy and everyday school life. Advancing this goal requires continuous professional learning, inclusive curriculum development, and systematic feedback mechanisms that involve families and communities in school decision making. These actions will better align national goals with classroom realities and support the ongoing development of a culturally responsive and equitable education system. Finally, the issues examined in this paper, including policy–practice gaps, translanguaging, and heritage language integration, are not unique to Korea but resonate with challenges in many other multilingual education systems. The insights offered here may therefore inform research, policy, and TESOL practice in diverse sociolinguistic contexts where schools are working to serve multilingual learners more effectively.

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