

Nuances of racism in South Korean schools revealed

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An ADI researcher is calling for a rethink of multicultural education policies and nationalism in South Korea.

Alfred Deakin Institute's DECRA Fellow, Dr. Jessica Walton, has urged policy makers in South Korea to rethink their multicultural educational policies so children with a multi-ethnic background feel more accepted at school.

She argues that the issue is exacerbated by the way the country promotes its national identity.

Dr. Walton's research is revealed in a chapter of the forthcoming book, "Interrogating belonging for [young people](#) in schools," edited by Professor Christine Halse, Conjoint Professor with Deakin's Faculty of Arts and Education.

In the chapter, "'I am Korean': Contested belonging in a 'multicultural' Korea," Dr. Walton outlines the findings of her research into the friendships and relationships between Korean primary school children with mono-ethnic and multi-[ethnic backgrounds](#).

All the children could speak Korean fluently and had Korean names.

"The main difference that distinguished the multi-ethnic students from their peers was based on hierarchies of belonging, including whether or not they 'looked Korean', the country where their parents were from, and

their racialised [cultural background](#)," Dr. Walton said.

"As one of the students explained to me, 'If it doesn't show that you are from a different culture it is okay, but if it shows, those kids get bullied a lot and have a difficult time becoming friends with others'."

Dr. Walton said fear of potential exclusion affected whether the children allowed others to know about their backgrounds, even if they were comfortable having a parent who was not Korean.

"At school, children's relationships are characterised by 'uri', which can be described as a sense of togetherness or we-ness," she explained.

"'Uri' determines how children play and who with. For instance, during the class breaks and during lunch, mono-ethnic children had noticeably less interaction with multi-ethnic children.

"Mono-ethnic children played together and, if they wanted to be alone, their friends checked to make sure they were fine being alone, whereas multi-ethnic children who were marked as 'different' based on their [skin colour](#) tended to be alone."

Dr. Walton said that, in addition to multi-ethnic [children](#) with darker skin who were more severely excluded, there was another child with lighter skin who was regularly on the periphery.

"This [student](#)'s mother was from Russia, but Russia is not considered an ideal country, compared with having a lighter skin colour from a parent from the United States or a Western European country, such as Germany," she said.

"The student's interest in computers, rather than sport, accentuated his isolation and he had previously moved schools because he was being

bullied."

Dr. Walton said the student made considerable attempts to include himself in other students' games and tried to interact with them, laughing at their jokes.

"He and another boy developed a friendship while working on a project together and he described this boy as a friend. He didn't consider their friendship close.

"When asked who his best friend was, he said it was his cat."

As part of the research, the students were given disposable cameras and asked to take photos of the people, places and things that surrounded and were important to them.

The research also explored the students' friendship groups, their interests, hobbies, things they liked, worries, dreams, friends and family.

Dr. Walton said compared to the Korean mono-ethnic students, who took many pictures of friends, the isolated Korean multi-ethnic students, such as the Russian Korean student, took photos of themselves and objects they enjoyed playing with.

Despite being treated as the "other" at school, the multi-ethnic students felt they were Korean, stressing they had been born in the country, Dr. Walton said.

Their sense of Korean-ness was heightened by travel to their other parent's country of origin.

"These students have achieved the government's policy for multicultural assimilation. They speak the language fluently, were born and raised in

Korea and understand the cultural nuances, yet they don't 'belong'," Dr. Walton said.

"Significantly, they assert their Korean identity and challenge the parameters by which 'Korean-ness' is used to include and exclude.

"They do not need to prove their nationality, but what their assertion points to is the need for a broader conceptualisation at a policy level of Korean identity; one which emphasises what they have in common, rather than one based on racialised features and whether they look Korean."

Provided by Deakin University

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