



Castledown

 OPEN ACCESS

Migration and Language Education

ISSN 2652-5984

<https://www.castledown.com/journals/mle/>

Migration and Language Education, 2 (1), 4-16 (2021)
<https://doi.org/10.29140/mle.v2n1.482>

Collaborative witnessing: A North Korean's immigration experience in South Korea



AMY HUTCHINSON ^a

^a *College of Southern Nevada, USA*
amyjy.hutchinson@gmail.com

Abstract

This article primarily focuses on a North Korean defector, JeongOk Lee, and her experience before and after defecting from North Korea to South Korea. Her personal struggles are illustrated through language difficulties, food terminology, and her teaching experience in both North and South Korea. Collaborative witnessing, a form of “relational ethnography,” is the methodology utilized in this article. In collaborative witnessing, the interview style is informal, and is considered more of a conversation and storytelling versus structured interviews. The theoretical framework utilized in this article is Young Kim’s (1988) theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation, which states that a person achieves intercultural transformation by being deculturized from one culture and acculturated to the new culture. JeongOk’s experiences highlight several aspects. North Korean defectors should be viewed through a lens of multiculturalism rather than focusing on the political or controversial issues regarding North Korean defectors. Therefore, these defectors should be considered immigrants. As such, South Koreans should be more aware of the experiences and hardships of North Korean defectors. Education can help in this area. By developing multicultural classes or lessons addressing the experiences of North Korean defectors, South Koreans will better understand North Korean defector needs and experiences, which will allow better integration into South Korean society. It is crucial for North Korean defectors to feel a sense of belonging in South Korea.

Keywords: corpus discourse analysis, sentiment analysis, Asianphobia, Covid-19, racism

Introduction

The Korean people have existed as a single country for over 5000 years. Even during the Japanese colonial period prior to the Korean War, Korea was one country. After the Korean War, South Korea evolved into an open door, capitalist, industrial, and democratic society while North Korea has

Copyright: © 2021 Amy Hutchinson. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within this paper.

remained a closed society with a communist ideology and dictatorship.

The Korean War (1950–1953) displaced millions of people as the frontline moved back and forth across the Korean peninsula. About 650,000 refugees came to South Korea, called “War Refugee Crossers to the South” (wo’llynam-p’inanmin) (Chung, 2008). As prospects for unification dwindled, South Koreans began to view the war refugees as “People Who Lost Their Hometown” (sirhyangmin) or “Separated Families” (isankajok) (Chung, 2008). This distinction caused a change in the way South Koreans viewed these refugees. Emphasis was placed on their current residency in the South and their image as victims of the war and division.

As economic difficulties and the famine occurred in North Korea, many people chose to leave the country in the mid 1990’s and beyond in search of food or work. Some of these defectors came to South Korea which noticeably increased the number of North Koreans in the country. Between 1990 and 1993, thirty-four North Koreans entered the south, and in 1994 alone, fifty-four entered (Chung, 2008). The North Korean famine that occurred in the 1990’s caused massive starvation and deaths in the country. This led to more North Koreans leaving the country in search of food, with an estimated 140,000 to 200,000 defectors crossing into China (Butdul, 1999). Most of these defectors were in hiding to avoid forced repatriation by the Chinese government and forced labor returning to North Korea. The number of North Koreans arriving in South Korea has increased dramatically since 1998. According to the Ministry of Unification (2021b), a total of over 33,000 North Koreans have defected and resettled in South Korea.

Although the South Korean government does not actively promote defection from North Korea, it does provide citizenship and financial assistance to anyone who is native to the entire Korean peninsula and its islands (Lim & Chung, 2006) through many newly developed policies. In addition to citizenship, North Korean refugees are provided settlement benefits, housing arrangements, vocational training, medical care, tuition support, employment assistance, and other tools to help them integrate into society (Ministry of Unification, 2021c). The Korean government provides the “Hanawon,” which is the principal center where North Korean defectors learn the capitalist way of life. Hanawon means “House of Unity.” North Korean defectors must immediately go to this center upon arrival in South Korea and remain there for three months to learn how to integrate into South Korean society (Choi, 2016). At the Hanawon, North Korean defectors learn about democracy, capitalism, culture, and language. (Choi, 2016). Financial assistance is given to North Korean defectors when they come to South Korea. The Korean government provides approximately \$7100 per household for relocations costs, up to \$22,400 per household for vocational training and employment incentives, up to \$13,700 per household for old age, disability, single parents, and long-term treatment, approximately \$14,300 for housing subsidy, 100% public school tuition, and 50% private school tuition (Ministry of Unification, 2021c). It is important to note that this financial assistance and the Hanawon are only available to North Korean defectors. Those immigrating to South Korea from other countries do not receive this assistance.

Although the two Koreas share a common history, language, culture, and customs, the division of the Korean peninsula has gradually produced two different peoples. This difference has caused major obstacles to unification. It is almost impossible for North Korean citizens to move to South Korea due to tight restrictions placed on them by the North Korean government. Therefore, defectors continue to persist.

This article presents the story of a North Korean defector, JeongOk Lee, who escaped to China multiple times and came to South Korea in 2008. It presents an account of the difficulties JeongOk faced, whose identity is between “defector” and “immigrant.” The problems she faced in capitalist

South Korea are examined through her education, language, and occupational experiences. The data in this article is based on interviews and conversations over a 3-year period with JeongOk. The narrative reflection focuses on the daily survival struggle as an immigrant under a different language and new system.

Theoretical Framework

Young Kim's (1988) theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation is used as the theoretical framework guiding this study. Cross-cultural adaptation "is defined as the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or reestablish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments" (Kim, 2001, p. 31). Cross-cultural adaptation occurs in and through communication and will require at least a minimum level of acculturation to the host culture and deculturation from the native culture. As a result of cross-cultural adaptation, an individual will become increasingly fit in performance, psychologically healthier, and more intercultural in identity (Kim, 2001).

At the center of Kim's (1988) theory is the "stress-adaptation-growth dynamic" in which the immigrant develops an understanding of the communication system of the host society which causes changes in the immigrant's cultural identity and, ultimately, the process of cross-cultural adaptation. Therefore, cross-cultural adaptation is a fluid movement in which there is a continual back-and-forth and downward-and-upward movement that points to increasing adaptation and growth (Kim, 2001).

Kim (2001) presents five axioms that are proposed as a set of generalized principles of cross-cultural adaptation: 1) Cross-cultural adaptation involves both acculturation and deculturation with the end goal of assimilation. 2) The stress-adaptation-growth dynamic underlies the cross-cultural adaptation process. 3) The stress-adaptation-growth dynamic results in an intercultural transformation in the individual. 4) As the individual transitions through intercultural transformation, the severity of fluctuation in his or her stress-adaptation-growth dynamic is greatly reduced. 5) Intercultural transformation is evident through increased functional fitness, psychological health, and intercultural identity.

In the present study, North Koreans do not interact with foreigners due to their limited speaking ability. They do not have real interactions with other communities other than the Korean community. Therefore, foreign South Korean communities play a role in the integration process for North Korean defectors. After an adaptation period, these defectors must adapt and adjust themselves to their new South Korean environment.

Methodology

This article will employ methodologies of collaborative witnessing (Adams *et al.*, 2015). In collaborative witnessing, the interview style is informal, and is considered more of a conversation and storytelling rather than the strict question-and-answer format that is typical for interviews (Ellis & Rawicki, 2013). Collaborative witnessing is a form of autoethnography which, "[I]s a qualitative method...[that] offers nuanced, complex, and specific knowledge about particular lives, experiences, and relationships rather than general information about large groups of people" (Adams *et al.*, 2015, p. 20). Though it is focused upon the experiences of another person besides the researcher, collaborative witnessing is a method of autoethnography because the researcher does not consider themselves as removed, but rather as situated "in" the research (Ellis & Rawicki, 2013). In addition, the researcher develops personal, caring relationships with participants (Adams *et al.*, 2015; Ellis & Rawicki, 2013). Following the practice of collaborative witnessing, all these interviews were semi-structured (Adams *et al.*, 2015).

This methodology is appropriate for this context since I have built a personal relationship with the participant through the sharing of her stories from defecting from North Korea. This methodology, and autoethnographies in general, is a useful way of doing research that intertwines the personal with the cultural and thus grasps everyday-based experiences. Multiple North Korean defectors were contacted to participate in this study. However, most did not want to reveal their name or come public with fears of being sent back to North Korea. Many shared similar experiences as JeongOk with regards to hardships faced by language. Therefore, the decision was made to focus on a single-case study based on JeongOk's willingness to participate.

The Collaborative Process: History of our Conversations

The first interview with Ms. Lee, JeongOk took place in Seoul, South Korea, in her elementary school office where she worked. I met JeongOk for my Ph.D. course project. JeongOk first introduced herself, "My name is Lee, JeongOk. I was born in the North Hwanghae province of North Korea, Soosan county, in 1960. I was a high school teacher in North Korea" (J. Lee, personal communication, February 28, 2018). JeongOk attended Kim Hyong Jik University in Pyongyang. Her father was demoted from his position and relocated to South Hamgyong. As a result, JeongOk moved her school. JeongOk graduated from Hamnam University of Education. After graduation, JeongOk was married and had a daughter. During the North Korean famine, JeongOk separated from her husband and daughter and stayed with her grandparents (on her father's side) to take care of them. Since her family was broken, she decided to escape to China.

JeongOk's ordeal regarding language differentiation between North and South Korea's Korean language has distinctive points. Numerous times she mentioned foreign language difficulties during our interviews and conversations. Through our conversations, I realized that her everyday life in South Korea shares parallels to an immigrant story. I realized how many foreign words are used in the South Korean language. Many English words and foreign words are naturally used in common South Korean conversation, and many South Koreans do not even realize they are using this many foreign words. To me, JeongOk is no longer a North Korean defector. I view her as an immigrant from a different country who immigrated to South Korea.

Defecting from North Korea

JeongOk Lee made the decision to defect from North Korea due to economic difficulties and famine. In 1994 during the famine, JeongOk had to quit her teaching job to pursue trading goods which could give her family more income. In North Korea, private trading is illegal under the communist law. In 1997, the North Korean government caught her family illegally keeping family assets obtained from personal trading. Her family was broken at this moment. JeongOk's father did not want to be a burden for their family, so he committed suicide. Her mother died of an illness three years later. In 1999, JeongOk first escaped to China. On April 12, 2000, the Chinese police caught her and sent her back to North Korea where she was detained in the Chŏngjin Concentration camp, a hard labor camp. After being released from the camp, she escaped at the train station when the North Korean police were not there at that moment. In May 2002, the Chinese police [Gongan] caught JeongOk and sent her back to the North Korean Chŏngjin Concentration Camp. After another attempt to escape and a return to the concentration camp, JeongOk escaped again with her daughter to China in November, 2002. In 2007, JeongOk made the decision to go to South Korea. From Beijing, China, she traveled by bus to the China-Thailand border and then walked into Thailand. She was detained at a Thailand jail for 6 months. After her release she successfully made it to South Korea in January, 2008. Upon arrival, JeongOk was vetted by the Korean national security, and placed into the Hanawon. JeongOk comments on her decision to leave North Korea:

I was a teacher in North Korea. Teaching was my dream job. My love for teaching came at an early age from my experience teaching my siblings growing up. At this point I realized my passion for teaching. My dream came true after the teacher's college graduation. I enjoyed every day as a teacher. I felt satisfaction when my former student visited me after their military duty. However, the arduous march in North Korea destroyed my dreams. With a monthly salary, I could only buy 2kg of rice, and the situation drove me to the field where I had to make money by doing business, and I went to the front line to make a living. North Korea banned private business at that time. The North Korean government took all my property and my father committed suicide, so this opened my eyes to the reality of North Korea, and I couldn't live there anymore. (J. Lee, personal Communication, March 2, 2018)

Language Difficulties

Just like many other countries and regions, there are different dialects and accents across the Korean peninsula. Due to over 70 years of separation, the North Korean language and South Korean language have both evolved in different ways. Sometimes even native English speakers can have trouble understanding other native English speakers from different parts of their own country. Therefore, it is no surprise how difficult it must be for the average North Korean defector, who has likely zero contact with South Korea, to properly communicate with South Koreans. They have trouble engaging in meaningful conversations and understanding the context (Chung & Cho, 2008). The distinct North Korean dialect and intonation may identify that they came from North Korea, which results in discrimination from the members of South Korean society (Kim, 2005). This hampers their ability to become integrated into society since South Koreans were given anticommunism education before the 1990's.

One of the biggest differences between the two versions of Korean is the use of English loanwords in South Korea, a result of Western influence that has not been able to reach North Korea. Instead, North Korea adopts Russian loanwords. Immigrants in other countries also experience similar difficulties with language pronunciation and loanwords that come from different languages. Part of the difficulty is due to the education they receive in the areas of loanwords, which may not be practical or sufficient.

JeongOk experienced difficulties with the use of these English loanwords while in South Korea. JeongOk said, "I was afraid to go inside a 커피숍 [coffee shop] because that English word 'coffee shop' seemed like a place for only special people. Later I knew it was a place for coffee" (J. Lee, personal communication, March 2, 2018). I had to ask her, "You never knew the words like coffee or shop?" She replied "I learned Russian as a foreign language when I was in school in North Korea. I never learned English." I said, "But you can see what's inside of the coffee shop," Lee sighed lightly, and said, "It didn't matter, it still looked like it was only for special people." I was curious about English words that she did not know. "What else were you embarrassed by because of foreign language words?" she had to think of the words for a few seconds, "Even country names like 호주 [Australia], we called 오스트랄리아 [Australia]. We never referred to it as 호주 [Australia] in North Korea. Can you imagine how I felt? I was completely blocked out."

In the beginning, JeongOk could read the Korean letters on the coffee shop sign but did not understand what the place was. As a result, she did not believe she belonged there or was able to get in. She felt a mental block. After she knew it was a coffee shop, her body still refused to get inside. Ten years later, she was comfortable going into the coffee shop with friends, however she was not quite comfortable enough to go in there by herself.

Food Naming Difficulties

Both North Korea and South Korea share similarities and differences when it comes to food. Although both countries use red pepper in their food, the same dish in North Korea is less spicy compared to South Korea. JeongOk stated that beef is used much less frequently in North Korea whereas South Koreans eat almost any kind of meat that is available to them. This is evident in the dumpling styles that each country uses. Because food can sometimes be scarce in North Korea, food preparation in North Korea is more about preservation versus style. For instance, beef or chicken may be boiled to maximize the quantity. Noodles in both countries are different. The noodles in North Korea are made from corn compared to wheat flour that is used in South Korea. JeongOk stated that the kimchi in North Korea is more watery and “white” while the kimchi in South Korea is spicier with a deeper flavor. Other nontraditional foods like 부대 찌개 [Budaee Jjigae] had their origins in the South during the Korean war. Foods such as pizza are very limited in North Korea since this is part of the Western influence that has not yet penetrated their whole country.

Food names were also confusing for JeongOk. This topic came up in our conversations. Lee said “Lots of signs on the street in South Korea are written in foreign languages, especially English words in the Korean alphabet. For me there was no way to find out what that place was.” I was more curious what other signs confused her. “What other names didn’t you get?” She answered, “Almost all of them on the street. Car centers, chicken, 삼겹살 [fresh pork belly], pizza.” I had to ask her, “Hold on, chicken and fresh pork belly? How is it possible not to know those words? Oh, chicken is 닭 [dak]. I got it. But how about fresh pork belly? That is pork. Just meat? Nobody eats fresh pork belly in North Korea?” She let out one small sigh, “In North Korea, we almost always boil the meat. No barbeque. Think about it. What is the best way to share a little bit of the meat for a big family? Boiling is the best way for us.” I wanted to clarify about the chicken, so I asked, “How about chicken? Never had fried chicken?” JeongOk immediately replied again, “We always boil it. We only have chicken one or two times a year. It is rare to eat just 닭 [chicken].”

JeongOk shared her struggles learning the names of vegetables when she pursued a job as a caretaker. As part of the caretaker education, JeongOk had to learn nutrition classes that were very difficult for her. My assumption was that she had difficulty with the professional terminology, however I was surprised to hear she had difficulty with vegetable names. She said, “Well if there are ten vegetables, I would only know four of them. The other food names I did not know were celery, chicory, bok choy, hot dogs, sausage, etc. So, I kept asking the lady sitting next to me. She said to write down everything and ask her after the class. I did” (J. Lee, personal communication, December 28, 2020). I said that it can be annoying going back and forth with each other, however it sounds like the person who helped her was a nice person. JeongOk responded, “Sure she was nice. At that time, that education center was in Dongdaemun. She took me to the supermarket called HomePlus and taught me the vegetables one by one. A new world opened up for me. By the way, I knew some of the vegetables already. They were called different names in China. For example, celery is called jinchaee in China.” I asked her if North Korea had celery or it had a different name. She replied, “There is no celery in North Korea.” When I asked what vegetables she usually eats in North Korea, she replied, “Cucumbers, spinach, onions, carrots, radish, bean sprouts.” These vegetables are also the main vegetables in South Korea. Newer vegetables from the Western world in South Korea have been available after the Korean War.

JeongOk’s Teaching Experience in North Korea and South Korea

Cultural barriers and societal challenges can hinder occupational integration of former North Korean teachers into the South Korean educational system (Kim, 2018). Immigrant teachers face several

obstacles when they attempt to reintegrate themselves into a professional community in a new society. Such challenges can be categorized as follows, “(1) related to employment, (2) linked to professional integration into the school culture and the teaching team, (3) related to non-recognition of competencies acquired in their countries of origin, and (4) related to the teaching task” (Niyubahwe, Mukamurera & Jutras, 2013, p. 283). Research has attributed these problems to cultural and linguistic barriers (Schmidth, 2010; Smyth & Kum, 2010). In order to understand these cultural barriers and societal challenges to occupational integration, it is important to understand the difference between the education systems of both North and South Korea.

Education system in North Korea

JeongOk explained the North Korean education system, “Elementary school is six years, middle school is three years, and high school is three years. In North Korea, the education system changes frequently” (J. Lee, personal communication, March 2, 2018). The grade levels in North Korea in 2021 are different from what JeongOk experienced when she was a student in the late 1960’s. According to the Ministry of Unification (2021a), K-12 education now includes upper kindergarten through high school (1 year of kindergarten, 5 years of elementary, 3 years of middle school, 3 years of high school). Students aged 7 to 11 years old are in elementary school, and students aged 12 to 14 years old are in junior high school. Students aged 15 to 17 years are in high school. It is important to note that a class of students will have the same homeroom teacher from upper kindergarten throughout elementary school. This same class of students will get a new teacher starting in junior high and will have this same homeroom teacher all the way through high school. Unlike the US, North Korea does not have any private K-12 schools. Whether or not a student attends college depends on three factors: grades, social status, and the homeroom teacher’s opinion.

To be a teacher in North Korea one must meet a certain set of criteria. Teacher applicants must come from a good family background, and examples include a soldier, officer, a Labor Party executive, activist for independence from the Imperial Japanese, etc. Teacher applicants must have excellent school records and evaluations. Teacher applicants must have a character and personality conducive to being an effective teacher and should be recommended by the two homeroom teachers with a good family background. “Everybody has different dreams to become a teacher, but they must have a good GPA, good college entrance test scores, and must be good at studying. They must also have a good family background. If they are missing any of these, then they cannot become a teacher” (J. Lee, personal communication, March 2, 2018). Regarding grades, JeongOk said the following, “There are two big sections on the report card. Grades and teacher evaluations, on a scale of 10. With the teaching evaluation there are 3 possible scores – best, average, and fail. A teacher needs to score ‘best’ all through the entire K-12. Even if there is one ‘average’ and the rest is ‘best,’ this student cannot apply to teachers’ college. Usually, students with good grades have a good personality (J. Lee, personal communication, March 2, 2018).

During JeongOk’s time as a teacher, teachers had huge responsibilities, even more than parents, and sometimes these teachers would take on a parent’s role. Teachers take care of students for all the school years until they graduate. “I communicated the communist party’s words, took care of the kids (students) like what the party wanted, and I taught students well to be good citizens. The teachers in Korean schools did the parents’ part for our kids (students). We used to teach everything including parenting. Actual parents trust teachers that much and they did not add or change any of the teacher’s words at home. A teacher’s job includes educating kids’ ethics, friendships, personalities, everything. Even future goals” (J. Lee, personal communication, March 2, 2018). JeongOk remembered from her time as a student in the 1970s in North Korea that teachers received even more respect than doctors. When she was actively teaching in the 1980s, this level of respect

was even greater. At this time as a teacher, she was fully satisfied and had high self-esteem.

During our interview, I asked her why she became a teacher. “Teaching was my dream job. The image of a teacher to me was like God when I was little. They do not need to eat, they do not need to go to the restroom, and they know everything. I wanted to be that person” (J. Lee, personal communication, March 2, 2018). She had her opinions about teachers. “Compared to South Korea, North Koreans’ respect for teachers, 교권 [teacher’s authority], and teacher’s humanism is way higher.” My next question was about how to become a teacher. “There are some policies of the Party and the delivery, but there are some expectations that we raise the children well according to the Party’s intentions as a teacher. In North Korea, the teacher even played the role of parents. We only sent kids to school and our teachers taught them all. The parents did not pay any attention to their children and left everything to the teacher.” I asked her what she meant by the role of parents. Are school teachers responsible for life habits, morals, customs, companionship, and personality? She replied, “Yes. Teachers take care of all the lifestyles and attitudes and personality. In North Korea, children were fed and sent to school, and everything was left to the teacher. The parents entrusted everything to the student’s future.” I asked if teachers were in charge of the students’ future jobs. She responded, “Yes. We discussed it together, but when the teacher told us to do this, both the parents and students all followed” (J. Lee, personal communication, March 2, 2018).

There are differences in the educational system between North and South Korea. For those who grew up speaking Korean, there are differences in how language is used in North and South Korea, especially in textbooks. This is one of the reasons why North Korean children struggle at South Korean schools. South Korea seeks “self-fulfillment by emphasizing the essential value of education, and the interests and competence of the individual, in the democratic educational ideology” (Park, 2010, p. 409). In North Korea, much of the curriculum is devoted to the official biographies of the Kim leadership, which teaches children to love and respect their leaders. North Korea concentrates on “the construction of a socialistic society and practical values, seeking [to engage each citizen in] recollectivism to contribute to the party and revolution” (Park, 2010, p. 409). As a result, North Korean children who enter South Korea arrive with a lack of basic knowledge they would normally be taught in elementary or middle schools. Fortunately, there are schools in South Korea that help young North Koreans adjust to the education system and the way of life in South Korea. JeongOk was able to obtain employment at one of these special schools after a few other brief occupations.

I asked JeongOk to explain the difference between the North and South Korean school systems. JeongOk said, “South Korean schools have good equipment, a good education system, computers, TVs, and projectors. This equipment is in South Korean classrooms. We had a teaching seminar once that all teachers from North Korea attended. We observed the class and we were matched with a teacher from North Korea and one from South Korea for one-to-one mentoring. My mentor was a teacher from Yeouido Middle School, and I asked the teacher to show me around the school. There were computers in the teacher’s offices. We did not have that in North Korea. I wished so badly that we had them. It seems like North Korea is 100 years behind.” (J. Lee, personal communication, March 2, 2018).

JeongOk’s Teaching Experience in South Korea

JeongOk described how she was initially treated in South Korea, “I told you why I defected from North Korea. I left, but the education I received from North Korea and my life are all in there from the bottom of my heart. However, in South Korea, we are treated as traitors who have committed sins in North Korea, and they do not see us as talents that can be used for the future. This is very frustrating and upsetting” (J. Lee, personal communication, March 2, 2018). Despite getting into the

best teachers' college in North Korea, JeongOk was not able to teach immediately in South Korea like other South Korean graduates from the teacher's college. Teachers who defect from North Korea are not given the same title of "teacher" in South Korea and are not given the same social level of respect. This lack of respect caused JeongOk to experience even lower self-esteem.

Professional identity is a theme that emerged from my interviews with JeongOk. Through this experience, JeongOk lost her professional identity. A primary way for immigrants to regain their professional identity is by completing the licensure process (Kim, 2018). As of 2013, approximately 50 North Korean defectors were working in South Korea with the same professional role they had in North Korea, but these roles do not pertain to teaching (Han, Kang, & Park *et al.*, 2013). However, the North Korean teaching license is not acknowledged in South Korea, so former North Korean teachers cannot take the teachers' licensing exam in South Korea (Kim, 2018). The first issue is that there is currently no systematic way of evaluating and hiring former North Korean teachers for full-time teaching jobs in South Korea, and a second issue is whether students want teachers from North Korea (Kim, 2018).

JeongOk taught mathematics to North Korean children in an elementary school in June 2013 in South Korea. When I asked her if she had any language difficulties teaching the children, she replied, "The math terminology in South Korea is different from North Korea, so it was hard for me to adjust to these new words" (J. Lee, personal communication December 28, 2020). I asked if there are any examples where North Korean student defectors have trouble with the terminology. JeongOk said, "Kids adapt quickly. I had to replace my old terms with the new terms." JeongOk is no longer at this school, and I asked why. She answered, "Fewer and fewer North Korean students come to that elementary school." JeongOk is only able to teach students who were born outside of South Korea. She said that because of this, she had to teach at three different schools in order to have enough students. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, all the schools closed, so she decided to quit.

JeongOk described her next teaching opportunity "I found a job in which the parents were asking for someone to teach their 7-year-old North Korean child." After not getting the full respect from South Koreans and not considered a real teacher, JeongOk thought she had a chance to change at least one person's life through this tutoring opportunity. Getting this opportunity would help raise her self-esteem. When I asked her to explain her experience, she replied, "In the beginning, I thought I was supposed to be a private teacher, but in reality, they wanted a nanny. The child's personality was hard to handle, but I was born to be a teacher. My ego never allowed me to be treated that way. I was hurt. I gave up my teaching ego little by little, and the parents also changed their attitude little by little. I will just stay there until the next new business" (J. Lee, personal communication December 28, 2020). JeongOk can still have an opportunity to affect one student's life even though it is not in the capacity of what she originally expected. When I asked her to clarify what she meant by the "next business," she replied, "There are many schools in South Korea that enroll North Korean students, however there are not many alternative schools for kindergarten. I'm trying to start a kindergarten in Gangwon-do with a Catholic sister. Whatever kids learn between the ages of 3 and 8 years lasts a lifetime. Most of the young children who have North Korean parents miss this important time. I'm going to go there and teach those little ones. Teaching is my calling" (J. Lee, personal communication December 28, 2020). JeongOk's passion is clearly rooted in teaching. However, it is important to note that she has a heart for North Korean children since she understands the hardships they must face since she has lived there and defected.

JeongOk's Cross-Cultural Adaptation

JeongOk has not fully adjusted to South Korean society. When she reads a newspaper, she still needs

a dictionary since certain words are different from North Korea. To this day she does not want to go into a coffee shop by herself since it still seems awkward to her. JeongOk's dislike for pizza has not changed. Although JeongOk still faces some struggles, she is getting better. She is slowly assimilating to life in South Korea, and this will continue over time.

Discussion

A North Korean defector's decision to resettle in South Korea over other foreign countries may appear as the most obvious or easiest decision, however this is not the case. Integrating into South Korean society is a challenge for North Korean refugees (Lee, 2012). Since the beginning, North Koreans often deal with various forms of alienation, discrimination, and are viewed as suspicious in South Korea. As a result, North Korean refugees often face problems related to education, employment, and adapting socially (Lankov, 2006). Although North Korean refugees share a common ethnicity with South Korea, historical, ideological, political, and economic differences do exist. The everyday life experiences of North Korean refugees and others living in North Korea may not be known to South Koreans.

North Korean defectors struggle to acclimate to South Korea's language, culture, politics, lifestyle, and capitalist society (Yang, 2018). Many South Koreans study overseas and acquire new languages, so North Koreans are pressured to adopt this global knowledge and experience (Jung, Dalton & Willis, 2017). JeongOk experienced difficulties in the on-the-job culture in South Korea. The Korean language utilizes English words like "coffee shop," "eye-shopping," and "car center" that can be difficult for North Koreans to get accustomed to as demonstrated in JeongOk's conversations. In addition, South Korea is an ethnically homogenous nation. South Korea's road to multiculturalism is very slow and gradual, and large-scale immigration to South Korea is a fairly recent phenomenon (Yang, 2018). "Woo-lee" [us] in Korean is a term commonly used to seclude the North Korean defectors who are considered as "nahm" [the others]. (Yang, 2018). This leaves many North Korean defectors feeling alienated and isolated in South Korean society. This feeling of isolation makes it difficult for North Korean defectors to build relationships or associate with South Koreans (Kim & Lee, 2013). JeongOk also experienced these hardships when adjusting to life in South Korea.

What can be done to help North Koreans acclimate to living in South Korea? First, we need to create receptive atmospheres among South Koreans. Friendships with South Korean peers can help North Koreans better adapt, especially among adolescent North Koreans (Jang *et al.*, 2018). This was illustrated when JeongOk received assistance from her peers to learn vegetable terminology. More opportunities like this should be created to allow North and South Korean peers to interact.

Although the Hanawon is important to help North Korean defectors integrate into South Korean society, this program should be expanded. Hanawon only lasts 3 months. More time is needed to further help with the integration. Although the knowledge learned at Hanawon is crucial to help defectors see the contrast between North and South Korea, it is not enough to make the new South Koreans feel welcome and equal (Kang, 2015). The Hanawon does not adequately address the cultural shock the defectors face, many of whom are not used to the overwhelming choices available to them in a capitalist country (Lee, 2019). The Hanawon should inform the defectors about the obstacles North Koreans face, which would dramatically reduce the frustration and disappointment North Koreans feel upon leaving the Hanawon (Kang, 2015). Therefore, the Hanawon should provide more realistic and practical education and training that includes language differences, work culture, and aid in employment. In addition, there needs to be social support through institutions such as a church, local NGO, school, or local community for North Korean refugees to build their South Korean national identity and positive social network. South Koreans also need to change their view

of North Korean defectors in South Korea due to their past anticommunism education.

Learning about North Korean people through the lens of multiculturalism could help promote better integration in South Korean society (Lee & Lee, 2019). This requires learning about multiculturalism including culturally sensitive approaches to problem assessment and intervention while paying close attention to language (Quiros, 2012). North Korean refugees are not typically viewed through a lens of multiculturalism since they are officially South Korean citizens. (Lee, 2011). The challenges North Korean refugees face when integrating into South Korean society are very similar to the challenges other immigrants face (Lee, 2011). For South Koreans to be more accepting and understanding of North Korean refugees, emphasizing the everyday experiences of North Korean refugees is critical. Instead of judgement and denigration, differences in lifestyles and culture should be addressed in a way that promotes understanding and better integration (Lee & Lee, 2019). North and South Korean people can find more commonalities through examining similarities in culture and everyday life. Education is one way to convey this. Through education South Koreans can develop more awareness and not just view North Korean people as enemies from a bizarre country or as unfamiliar foreigners. (Lee & Lee, 2019). Although North Korean refugees and other immigrants living in South Korea have a responsibility to learn about South Korean culture and language, it is also important for South Koreans to learn about the diverse people and cultures who are coming to South Korea (Lee & Lee, 2019). By taking a multicultural approach to learning about the experiences of North Korean refugees, political and divisive attitudes towards these defectors can be eliminated. JeongOk emerged as an immigrant who was able to integrate into South Korean society.

Conclusion

This article primarily focused on JeongOk's experience before and after defecting from North Korea to South Korea. JeongOk's experience highlights several aspects. North Korean refugees should be viewed through a lens of multiculturalism rather than focusing on the political or controversial issues regarding North Korean defectors. As such, South Koreans should be more aware of the experiences and hardships of North Korean refugees. Education can help in this area. By developing multicultural classes or lessons addressing the experiences of North Korean refugees, South Koreans will better understand North Korean refugee needs and experiences, which will allow better integration into South Korean society (Lee & Lee, 2019). It is crucial for North Korean refugees to feel a sense of belonging in South Korea (Yu *et al.*, 2012). JeongOk is gradually approaching cross-cultural adaptation by progressing through the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic (Kim, 1988). She is in the process of deculturization from North Korea and acculturation to South Korea, moving toward intercultural transformation. There is still hope for unification on the Korean peninsula. Once this occurs then the integration might be simplified if everyone has education regarding North Korean refugees.

References

- Adams, T. E., Jones, S.H., & Ellis, C. (2015). *Autoethnography*. Oxford University Press.
- Butdul, J. (1999). *Tuman'gang u'l ko'no'on saramdu'l [People who crossed the River Tuman]*. Cheongto Publishing.
- Choi, H. Y. (2016, March 1). Experts: *Three months training for N. Korea defectors not enough*. NK News - North Korea News. <https://www.nknews.org/2016/03/experts-three-months-training-for-n-korea-defectors-not-enough/>
- Chung, B. H. (2008). Between defector and migrant: Identities and strategies of North Koreans in South Korea. *Korean Studies*, 1–27.

- Chung, J. K. & Cho, J. A. (2008). Issues in the integration education for North Korean refugees and South Korean hosts. *Korean Psychological Association, 14*, 487–518.
- Ellis, C. & Rawicki, J. (2013). Collaborative witnessing during the Holocaust: An exemplar of relational autoethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry, 19*(5), 366–380.
- Jung, K., Dalton, B. & Willis, J. 2017. The onward migration of North Korean refugees to Australia: In search of cosmopolitan habitus. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 9*(3), 1–20. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v9i3.5506>
- Kang, J. M. (July, 2015). What Hanawon doesn't teach North Korea defectors. NK News. Retrieved from <https://www.nknews.org/2015/07/what-hanawon-doesnt-teach-north-korean-defectors/>
- Kim, M. R. (2005). The effect of the adjustment stress and social support on the depressive symptoms of the North Korea defectors. *Korean Academy of Social Welfare, 57*, 193–217.
- Kim, Y. (1988). Communication and cross-cultural adaptation. Multilingual Matters.
- Kim, Y. Y. (2001). Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation. Sage.
- Kim, M. & Lee, D. (2013). Adaptation of North Korean adolescent refugees to South Korean society: a review of literature, *Journal of Rehabilitation Psychology, 20*(1), pp. 39–64.
- Kim, Y. Y. (2018). Occupational integration and challenges faced by former North Korean Teachers in South Korea, *International Migration, 56*(6), pp. 67–82.
- Lankov, A. (2006). Bitter taste of paradise: North Korean refugees in South Korea. *Journal of East Asian Studies, 6*(1), 105–137.
- Lee, C. K. (2012). The educational life histories of a group of North Korean defector university students in South Korea. In L. Demirdjian (Ed.), *Education, refugees, and asylum seekers* (pp. 38–77). Continuum.
- Lee, S. J. (2011). Education for young North Korean migrants: South Koreans' ambivalent "others" and the challenges of belonging. *The Review of Korean Studies, 14*(1), 89–112.
- Lee, J. H. (2019). *The psychology behind discrimination against North Korean defectors in South Korea*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://thenurj.com/2019/05/30/the-psychology-behind-discrimination-against-north-korean-defectors-in-south-korea/>
- Lee, A. R. & Lee, J. (2019). From a multicultural lens: Developing a university course in South Korea to examine the experiences of North Koreans. *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy, 16*(1), 45–62.
- Lim, H. & Chung, Y. C. (2006). The political and human rights issues surrounding North Korea defectors. *The review of Korean studies, 9*(1), 87–116.
- Ministry of Unification. (2021a). *Education system inquiry: North Korean residents life*. Retrieved from https://unikorea.go.kr/nkhr/current/life/living/education/%3Bjsessionid=x+X7w3Y3VvCI2nb0795sYSlf.unikorea21?boardId=bbs_0000000000000079&mode=view&cntId=53086&category=&pageIdx=
- Ministry of Unification. (2021b). *Number of North Korean refugees entering South Korea*. Retrieved from https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/
- Ministry of Unification. (2021c). *Support system*. Retrieved from <https://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/NKDefectorsPolicy/settlement/System/>
- Niyubahwe, A., Mukamurera, J. & Jutras, F. (2013). Professional integration of immigrant teachers in the school system: a literature review. *McGill Journal of Education, 48*(2), 279–296.
- Park, S. W. (2010). Change of education and perspective for integration of South Korea and North Korea. *Tonilchönryak (Strategy of Unification), 10*(3), 403–436.
- Quiros, L. (2012) Raising the voice: Teaching through a multicultural lens, *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 32*(5), 518–531. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2012.724047>
- Schmidt, C. (2010). Systemic discrimination as a barrier for immigrant teachers. *Diaspora, Indigenous and Minority Education, 4*(4), 235–252.

- Smyth, G. & Kum, H. (2010). "When they don't use it they lose it": Professionals, deprofessionalization and reprofessionalization: the case of refugee teachers in Scotland. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 23(4), 504–522.
- Yang, J. (2018). Struggles of resettlement: North Koreans in South Korea. American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/international/pi/2018/09/north-koreans-resettlement>
- Yu, S. E., Eom, J. S., & Jeon, W. T. (2012). The factors affecting the development of national identity as South Korean in North Korean refugees living in South Korea. *Korean Neuropsychiatric Association*, 9, 209–216.

Author biodata

Amy Hutchinson has a background in communication studies with a master's degree from the University of Southern California. Amy's talent is to draw out stories from others utilizing collaborative witnessing. As a Korean American, her research interests include multicultural experiences and Korean culture in the global world. Amy obtained her Ph.D. from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.