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The Impact of Multicultural Education on the Learning Experience and Academic Achievement of Ethnic Minority Students

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Abstract: This study explored the effects of multicultural education on ethnic minority students', especailly Chosŏnjok (Korean-Chinese) elementary school students, learning experiences and academic performance. Based on interviews with teachers and analysis of standardized exam scores, the research compares two schools in a minority-concentrated region, one that implements multicultural practices and one that does not. In the multicultural school, students not only excelled in the primary-to-secondary school test (小升初) but also showed more motivation and confidence in class. Interviews with teachers pointed to the inclusiveness of our curricula and bilingual strategies that encourage deeper participation, while noting that the lack of cultural relevance in the control school consistently resulted in disengagement. By contrasting the assimilationist Chinese policy paradigm with the inclusive ones in many international contexts, this paper argues that culturally responsive pedagogy that focuses on equity is critical to achieving in diverse education settings. The findings indicate that ethnic minority pupils in mainstream Chinese schools could continue to struggle academically and emotionally without such fundamental reform.

Keywords: multicultural education, ethnic minority students, Chosŏnjok, culturally responsive teaching, China education policy

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

In recent years, classrooms across China have been slowly transforming as the number of ethnic minority students grows, especially in provinces like Jilin, Inner Mongolia, and Yunnan. Despite this demographic shift, China's national education system continues to operate largely through a Han-centric model. Most textbooks, lessons, and policies focus on standard Mandarin and Han cultural history, while minority languages and traditions are sidelined or even discouraged.

In particular, China's ethnic policy emphasizes MinZu TuanJie (ethnic unity) and assimilation into a singular national identity, often at the expense of minority languages and cultural expression [1]. While multiculturalism is discussed in academic circles, it is not systematically applied in Chinese public education. This creates a gap between students' lived cultural identities and what they see—or don't see—in school.

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In contrast, many countries like Canada, Australia, and Sweden have adopted multicultural education policies that promote the inclusion of minority histories, languages, and perspectives [2]. These countries see diversity not as a threat but as a resource for deeper learning and social cohesion. China's current top-down model, which often treats diversity as a problem to be managed, stands in contrast.

1.2. Basic structure of the thesis

This research explores how multicultural education—or the absence of it—impacts the learning experiences and academic achievement of ethnic minority elementary school students in China. Specifically, it focuses on Chosŏnjok (Korean-Chinese) communities, one of the country's largest and most linguistically distinct ethnic groups.

The study aims to compare academic outcomes between two types of schools in the same region, Chosŏnjok—one with multicultural practices and one without. Furthermore, by analyzing teacher perspectives, the research examines how curriculum and pedagogy influence student performance. Finally, the study ultimately aims to provide recommendations for more inclusive education policies grounded in real classroom experiences. Given the government's increasing focus on national integration, it's crucial to investigate whether policies that erase cultural difference might actually harm academic outcomes.

2. Domestic and international research status

While multicultural education has become a mainstream policy priority in many Western democracies, the Chinese government continues to take a fundamentally different stance. In countries like Canada, Sweden, and Australia, diversity is often viewed as a strength—something to be embraced and reflected in school curricula, pedagogy, and teacher training [2][3]. These countries actively promote intercultural dialogue and encourage students to explore their cultural identities alongside academic content.

In contrast, China has historically pursued an assimilationist model of ethnic integration. Although the state formally recognizes 55 ethnic minority groups, its policies often aim to unify all citizens under a singular national identity centered on Han Chinese culture [1][4]. As a result, many aspects of minority identity—language, religion, tradition—are either downplayed or actively discouraged in public education.

One clear example is the shift in so-called "bilingual education" in regions like Xinjiang and Tibet. While these programs were initially designed to preserve local languages alongside Mandarin, over time they have become Mandarin-dominant, leaving little space for indigenous languages in the classroom [5][6]. Similarly, history and civics curricula prioritize patriotic education and Han-centric narratives, with few if any references to minority perspectives [7].

This divergence in educational philosophy is critical. While many countries use multicultural education to promote inclusion and reduce educational inequality, China's top-down model tends to equate national unity with cultural uniformity. In that context, multicultural education—even in localized or experimental forms—remains an exception rather than the rule. Multicultural education has been widely analyzed in relation to student engagement and academic achievement in the world over. In Western contexts like Canada, Sweden, and Australia educational policies actively promote the representation of minority cultures within the school curriculum. These systems encourage intercultural dialogue, prepare teachers in cultural responsiveness, and create materials that recognize students' cultural backgrounds [2][3]. Evidence from these countries indicates that such initiatives enhance classroom participation, increase academic performance, and lower dropout rates for minority students [8].

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By comparison, China will have a more assimilation-focused model of education. While 55 ethnic minority groups are officially recognized in the country, the national curriculum and language policy have increasingly favored Mandarin and Han cultural norms. This lack of space for minority languages has been associated with decreased potential for space in the classroom and diminished sense of connection students experience to their own cultural identity [1][4][5].

Research evidence indicates that this separation of students' cultural background from the cultures they encounter at school can result in lower engagement, lowered self-esteem, and poor academic performance especially in younger age groups [6][7]. In Chosŏnjok communities, students struggle when the content in the classroom does not reflect their linguistic or cultural reality because of the absence of inclusive bilingual or culturally relevant teaching.

While multicultural education in some countries may lead to more equitable learning opportunities and greater empowerment among students, in China there is a clear relationship between a lack of multicultural educational practices and academic disengagement and underachievement. This commitment highlighted the need for context-sensitive, inclusive approaches to education, particularly for ethnic minority populations.

3. Empirical research on the impact of multicultural education

3.1. Research methods

This study conducted in-depth interviews with ten elementary school teachers from two public schools in a Chosŏnjok-majority district. School A applies a multicultural approach, incorporating Korean language instruction, cultural celebrations, and local oral histories into its curriculum. School B follows the standard national curriculum in Mandarin with no adaptation to local culture.

Teachers at School A generally reported higher levels of student engagement. One Chinese language teacher noted that reading comprehension improved when texts included Korean-Chinese names, foods, or customs. Another teacher described students as "more confident" during class presentations when they could draw from their family's background. Several teachers emphasized that allowing students to use their home language (Korean) when brainstorming or discussing ideas helped them develop more complex responses in Mandarin later on.

Teachers at School B, by contrast, described low participation and poor comprehension, especially among first-generation Chosŏnjok students. Many noted that students rarely spoke up during lessons and showed signs of boredom or frustration. One teacher shared that without training or materials relevant to the students' backgrounds, "it feels like teaching through a wall." The lack of culturally relevant content seemed to distance students from the learning process itself.

Across both schools, a common theme emerged: when students could see their identity reflected in school, they were more likely to engage actively. When they didn't, learning felt alien, and motivation suffered.

4. Multidimensional analysis of multicultural education

4.1. The relationship between multicultural education and academic performance

To measure academic performance, this study collected and compared the results of the Xiao Sheng Chu (小升初) primary-to-secondary school test—administered at the end of sixth grade in both schools. The exam, scored out of 300, serves as a key indicator for middle school placement.

- School A (multicultural program; n = 120): 253.64 / 300
- School B (no multicultural program; n = 80): 234.72 / 300

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The average difference of 18.92 points is considerable, especially given the similarity in student demographics between the two schools. School A's use of bilingual support, local culture in curriculum, and culturally responsive pedagogy seems to correlate with better outcomes.

This gap can be understood through sociocultural learning theory, which emphasizes that children learn best when instruction connects with their social and cultural context [9]. When lessons are rooted in what students already know from home or community, they can build knowledge more effectively.

In addition, culturally relevant pedagogy [10] supports the idea that academic success and cultural affirmation are not contradictory. Rather, they reinforce one another. Students in School A didn't just perform better—they also seemed to enjoy learning more.

The significant score gap between School A and School B—253.64 vs. 234.72 out of 300—indicates more than just test preparation. Teachers in School A repeatedly noted that students who saw their own culture, language, and family traditions reflected in the classroom were more confident and active. This observation is consistent with the idea that multicultural education encourages higher levels of intrinsic motivation, which can directly influence performance [11].

Moreover, the inclusive environment of School A helped students feel safe enough to ask questions, make mistakes, and contribute to discussions. This kind of classroom climate is strongly associated with deeper learning and academic persistence. In contrast, School B's rigid adherence to a one-size-fits-all curriculum seemed to create a sense of alienation, especially among Chosŏnjok students who spoke Korean dialects at home but rarely saw their culture mentioned in class.

While causation can't be claimed definitively from this data alone, the clear correlation supports existing research showing that culturally relevant teaching methods are associated with improved academic outcomes for minority students [12].

4.2. The role of teachers and curriculum

One of the most striking differences between the two schools was how teachers viewed their role. Teachers in School A described themselves as cultural mediators as well as educators. They had received at least one semester of professional training in multicultural pedagogy and had access to materials that reflected both Han and minority narratives. Several mentioned creating units on Korean-Chinese (Chosŏnjok) festivals or writing assignments where students interviewed grandparents in their home language.

In contrast, teachers in School B mostly followed the textbook line-by-line. There were no professional development opportunities specific to cultural sensitivity, and lesson planning was strictly standardized. One teacher even admitted feeling unsure about how to approach cultural topics: *"I'm afraid of saying the wrong thing, so I just avoid it."*

The curriculum gap was also evident in the textbooks. School A had supplementary readers, including stories from ethnic minority writers, while School B relied only on state-issued materials, which are often criticized for presenting a Han-centric version of history and literature [7].

4.3. Challenges in multicultural education implementation

Despite the positive results in School A, teachers there also expressed concerns about sustainability. Some felt pressure to prioritize standardized test prep over culturally rich content, especially in upper grades. Others mentioned the lack of institutional support when trying to create or translate culturally appropriate materials on their own.

In School B, resistance came from both administrative constraints and teacher uncertainty. Without clear policy guidelines or consistent training, many educators hesitated to experiment with alternative teaching methods.

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These challenges are not unique to China. Studies in the U.S. and Europe also highlight teacher discomfort and institutional inertia as major barriers to implementing effective multicultural education [3][13]. However, in China's highly centralized education system, the absence of national-level policy promoting multicultural education makes local efforts especially difficult to sustain.

5. Evaluation of multicultural education outcomes

5.1. Key indicators for assessing multicultural education effectiveness

The findings from both qualitative and quantitative data suggest that multicultural education positively influences several key indicators:

- Academic Performance: As shown through the primary-to-secondary school test (小升初) results.
- Classroom Engagement: Teachers in School A reported more frequent student participation and initiative.
- Cultural Identity Development: Students in School A showed stronger pride in their Chosŏnjok heritage and greater willingness to use their home language academically.
- Teacher Satisfaction: Teachers felt more connected to their students and more effective in their roles.

These indicators align with broader definitions of educational equity, which include not only test scores but also emotional and cultural well-being [8].

5.2. Measuring long-term impacts on society and labor markets

Though this study focuses on elementary school, the long-term implications are worth noting. Research shows that students who receive culturally affirming education are more likely to stay in school, pursue higher education, and perform better in the labor market [14]. For Chosŏnjok students, who often face barriers in both urban and rural labor environments, early educational inclusion may serve as a protective factor.

More broadly, multicultural education contributes to social cohesion by reducing prejudice and promoting cross-cultural understanding. In a diverse society, such outcomes are not optional—they're necessary for sustainable development.

6. Future directions and challenges in multicultural education

6.1. The evolution of multicultural education in the digital age

As digital learning tools become more accessible, new opportunities emerge to integrate minority cultures into mainstream education. Platforms like online libraries, community-submitted video content, and AI-powered translation tools could allow minority students to learn in both their home language and Mandarin. However, digital gaps remain a problem. In many rural or ethnic minority regions, internet access is still unreliable, and few local materials are digitized.

Future developments must prioritize inclusive content creation. Otherwise, digital learning may simply replicate the same biases found in traditional classrooms.

6.2. Policy recommendations for sustainable and inclusive education

To promote sustainable and inclusive education, policy recommendations focus on three key areas. First, teacher training programs should integrate multicultural education as a mandatory course rather than an elective. Second, schools must receive dedicated funding to develop or acquire culturally relevant textbooks and media. Finally, fostering community involvement through partnerships

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between schools and local cultural organizations can facilitate curriculum co-design, ensuring a more inclusive learning environment.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how multicultural education influences ethnic minority students' academic achievement and classroom experiences in the context of Chinese elementary schools, specifically among Chosŏnjok students. Through both teacher interviews and analysis of 小升初 exam results, the research demonstrates that inclusive, culturally responsive education has significant benefits—not just in test scores, but in identity formation, classroom engagement, and teacher efficacy.

However, such progress is uneven and fragile. In the absence of national policy support, efforts rely too heavily on individual teachers or school administrators. For multicultural education to become the norm rather than the exception, systemic change is necessary—starting from how teachers are trained to how textbooks are chosen.

In a country as large and diverse as China, true educational equity cannot be achieved through assimilation alone. Recognizing and valuing the cultural assets of ethnic minority students is not just a moral imperative—it's an academic one.

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