



TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING: REFLECTIONS AND DREAMS OF NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES IN SOUTH KOREA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn about the transformative learning experiences of North Korean refugee students in South Korean colleges and universities. Since the mid-1990s, most North Korean refugees have escaped from communist North Korea because of poverty and severe economic problems. They begin their journey on the new underground railroad in China, Mongolia, and southeast Asia. Some are able to gain asylum through South Korean embassies and consulates, but this is a risky method. In South Korea, many new refugees from North Korea expect abundant opportunities and a hospitable environment; however, many are faced with myriad challenges especially in education. North Korean refugees have a much higher university dropout rate in comparison to their South Korean peers; nevertheless, many hope that they can have a more promising future through education. This study examined the transformative learning experiences of 15 North Korean refugees by exploring past and present educational experiences and how they have shaped their visions for the future. Four types of data were collected including demographic surveys, timelines of primary life events, standardized, open-ended interviews, and journal entries.

Keywords: transformative learning, North Korean refugees, North Korean defectors, phenomenology

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since the mid-1990s, most North Korean refugees have escaped from North Korea as a result of economic problems and widespread poverty (Chung, B. H., 2009). The majority of North Korean refugees begin their journey on the new underground railroad which encompasses China, Mongolia, and countries in Southeast Asia. On the new underground railroad, North Korean refugees can sometimes gain asylum through the embassies and consulates of South Korea and other countries that accept North Korean refugees; however, the South Korean government does not actively encourage defection (Demick, 2010). The South Korean government grants citizenship to North Korean refugees, but citizenship does not equate to full integration into South Korean society (O, 2011). North Korean refugees who make it to South Korea are granted citizenship and other benefits (Song, 2012; Tanaka 2008) including settlement money, support for education, medical care, and employment assistance (Institute for Unification Education, 2010); however, benefits have steadily declined (Lankov, 2006).

There are approximately 28,133 North Korean refugees living in South Korea (Ministry of Unification, 2015). North Korean refugees go to South Korea with a spirit of hope and optimism. Unfortunately, many become frustrated and perplexed by the vastly different lifestyle in South Korea. According to Sheena Choi (2011), "In spite of 1,500 years of history as a unified country, shared ethnicity, language and culture, sixty years of living apart in a different political and economic system has created a gulf between the two Koreas" (p. 79). North Korean refugees often have immense difficulties transitioning from life in North Korea which is well known for its human rights abuses, oppressive government, and widespread poverty to life in South Korea which has a robust economy, a highly competitive education system, and cutting-edge technological developments. North Korean refugees experience numerous physical and psychological problems in South Korea (Choi, Park, & Joung, 2010; Lee, C. K. 2012; Lee, Y. H., et al., 2012), and some have developmental problems that were caused by malnutrition (Chung, B. H., 2009). Furthermore, they struggle to find secure and desirable jobs, and some turn to illegal activities (Lankov, 2006).



HIGHER EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

Education plays a vital role in South Korean society. North Korean refugees must adapt to a challenging and a highly competitive education system in South Korea. Families invest heavily in their children's education, especially in private tutoring (Kim & Jaffe, 2010). High rates of adolescent suicide in South Korea have been attributed to the ultracompetitive educational environment (Ness & Lin, 2013; Sistik 2013). North Korean refugee students face additional challenges since they must assimilate into a new culture and lifestyle that they are not accustomed to. They also have to determine which parts of their education in North Korea were based on fallacies and distorted ideological messages (Kim, Y. Y., 2009). In addition, many South Korean citizens have university degrees, but there are not enough desirable jobs even for well-qualified graduates (Strother, 2011). Gaining entrance into higher education in South Korea is a very competitive process (Ness & Lin, 2013). However, North Korean refugees are able to enter South Korean universities without going through the rigorous process that their South Korean peers must go through (O, 2011). The South Korean government provides full-tuition at public universities for North Korean refugees; at private universities, the government and the university share the cost.

According to Fuqua (2011), "Education is the foundation for assimilation of North Korean youth into the South Korean educational system and ultimately its labor force" (p. 79). North Korean refugees often have dreams of attaining a university education and realize the importance of education for having a better future. However, approximately half or more of all North Korean refugee students in university drop out, but statistical data is limited, and further research on the dropout rates is needed (Fackler, 2012). Some of the primary reasons that North Korean refugees withdraw from university include having low grades, the use of English in classes, having many job responsibilities, and stressful situations in general ("Hopes and Fears," 2008). North Korean refugees must put in many extra hours in their studies to be able to attain an academic level that is comparable to their South Korean peers (Song, 2012).

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

Transformative learning theory is rooted in the work of Kuhn (1962), Freire (1970), and Habermas (1971) and has further been developed in recent decades (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). According to Cranton and Taylor (2012), "Transformative learning theory is based on the notion that we interpret our experiences in our own way, and that how we see the world is a result of our perceptions of our experiences" (p. 5). Transformative learning focuses on experiences, especially past experiences which are the "primary medium" of transformation (Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p. 35). Furthermore, transformative learning often emerges as a result of negative or traumatic experiences (Taylor and Cranton, 2013). These experiences may include divorce, moving, illness, war, death, and other traumatic situations (Mezirow, 1990). Through the process of transformative learning, people can transform their lives and how they perceive the world around them (Erichsen, 2011).

The process of critical reflection is central to transformative learning (Cranton and Roy, 2003). Critical reflection can be achieved through reading, listening to the views of other people, developing solutions for problems, and evaluating personal beliefs and ideas (Mezirow, 1997). The goal of the critical reflection process is to develop more understanding and clarity of past experiences (Cranton and Roy, 2003). Through critical reflection, an individual can proceed through the stages of transformative learning; however, critical reflection alone does not lead to transformation (Taylor, 1994). Mezirow (1991) defined 10 stages of the transformative learning process:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination



3. Critically assessing assumptions
4. Recognizing a connection between the transformative process and one's discontent
5. Exploring opportunities for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills to implement one's plan
8. Developing confidence in new roles and relationships
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. Reintegrating into one's life on the foundation of conditions which are dictated by one's new perspective

Taylor (1994) stated that the transformative process “seems to provide understanding into how a person makes meaning of new cultural experiences and at the same time integrates the new learning into a more inclusive and discriminating world view” (p. 400). Transformative learning can be particularly helpful to refugees who have experienced trauma and adversities in their lives. Traumatic experiences of the past can trigger transformative learning (Mezirow, 1981). According to Billet and Onsando (2009), refugees who have moved to another country or location can have new opportunities and improve their lives through education and the transformative learning process. North Korean refugees generally experience many traumatic and difficult experiences during their time in North Korea and on the new underground railroad. Even many of their experiences in South Korea can be incredibly challenging and frustrating.

METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

What primary themes emerge from the educational life experiences of North Korean refugees in South Korea?

There is limited research on the educational experiences of North Korean refugee students studying at South Korean colleges and universities (Lee, C. K. 2012). It is important to examine the past and present educational experiences of North Korean refugees and how these experiences have impacted their adaptation in South Korea. Additional research on the educational experiences of North Korean refugees is warranted (Yoo, E. H., 2012). Furthermore, the university dropout rate of North Korean refugees in South Korea is very high in comparison to the South Korean student population (Fackler, 2012). It is vital to learn more about the barriers that are inhibiting academic success among North Korean refugee students studying in South Korean colleges and universities. In addition, it is critical to explore how educational experiences connect to the transformative learning process.

How do North Korean refugees perceive the future role of education in their lives in South Korea?

It is essential to conduct further research on the educational experiences of North Korean refugees to help them adapt in the South Korean education system (Chung, Y. J., 2010) and so that changes can be made to better accommodate them in the future. North Korean refugees lack the educational background needed to be competitive and successful in South Korean society. Past and present educational experiences may also have an impact on how the participants perceive the future role of education in their lives.

Research Design and Data Collection

A phenomenological design was chosen for this study because it is imperative to learn about the shared experiences of North Korean refugees. In some cases, the memories of refugees may have faded or they may exaggerate or even lie about some of the participants' past experiences. Learning



about the shared experiences, helps the research gain more reliability. Many individual details of stories may differ, but the commonalities may help to build a more accurate picture of their past experiences. According to Moustakas (1994), “Phenomenology is concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved” (p. 58). Four types of data were collected including a demographic survey, a timeline of primary life events, standardized, open-ended interviews, and journal entries. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) and Polkinghorne (1989) recommend having between five and 25 participants in a phenomenological study.

Participants

Participants were chosen through criterion, purposive, and snowball sampling. There were 15 participants in this study, including the pilot participant. All of the participants in this study are North Korean refugees in their twenties. One participant did not state her age, but it can be implied that she is in her twenties. Of the participants, 11 were male and four were female. The participants lived in North Korea for at least 10 years and South Korea for at least three years. In addition, all of the participants were enrolled in college or university except for one who was planning to begin his first semester of university in the upcoming semester. One of the participants, one is from Ryanggang Province and 13 are from North Hamgyeong Province. One participant did not state her province.

RESULTS

Data analysis procedures involved examining descriptions of educational experiences and significant statements. In addition, textural and structural descriptions were created which developed into the essence of the phenomenon- the shared educational experiences of the participants. Primary themes relating to educational experiences in South Korea that emerged include trying to adapt in South Korea, keeping up in a competitive education system, a gap between us and them, the importance of age in society, lack of basic knowledge, and language differences. Two major themes relating to the future role of education developed including education for a better future and reunification dreams.

Educational Experiences in South Korea

Trying to Adapt in South Korea

All of the participants explained various challenges that they had while trying to assimilate into South Korean society. Some participants mentioned having more difficulties in the adaptation process in comparison to other North Korean refugee peers. North Korean refugees must assimilate into a new way of life; they must transition from life in a restrictive communist country to life in a capitalist country which rewards innovation and entrepreneurship. The adaptation process is also a transformative learning process- North Korean refugees must learn about a new government system, cultural practices, social norms, educational differences, and myriad other aspects of society. They also reflect on their past experiences while trying to make sense of their new lives. Although the participants had promising plans for their lives in South Korea, they were faced with immense disappointment and tremendous challenges. Participants also mentioned that they struggled to discern fact from fiction in South Korea. Many things that they learned in North Korea especially in relation to the government, social issues, history, and the world around them, were not accurate. Some of the participants remarked that while they were in North Korea they were able to learn about other countries, including South Korea, through smuggled DVDs and other information that seeped into the country. However, they still were uncertain if what they were seeing was accurate.

Keeping Up in a Competitive Education System



Education plays a central role in South Korean society. The high school graduation rate is roughly 98% (Lee, R., 2011). South Korean students are notorious for spending many hours studying at private academies (Ness & Lin, 2013). This rigorous education system can be daunting to North Korean refugees who often lack rudimentary knowledge. Participants stated that they felt incredibly challenged and overwhelmed. One participant remarked that the South Korean education system is “very liberal and free,” but he struggled to adapt and compete with South Korean peers. Another participant mentioned that the South Korean education system is “so fast like a machine.” He struggled to keep up with his studies. He also commented that he had to relearn what he already had been taught in North Korea by “fixing” his “wrong” North Korean mind. In addition, he had to study very quickly, prepare for tests, and “continue, continue, continue.” Another participant stated that no matter how hard he tries, it will never be sufficient in South Korea. He also said that university is challenging for all students in South Korea, but North Korean refugees have to work even harder just to get a passing grade in their classes. Furthermore, he mentioned having to continuously compete with his South Korean counterparts for the rest of his life. Trying to adapt to the South Korean education system can be excessively intimidating and perplexing for North Korean refugee students who are not academically prepared for the challenges.

A Gap between Us and Them

Several participants highlighted a gap that exists between North Korean refugees and South Korean people. One participant stated that the gap is too wide, and that South Korean people do not understand this. Another participant said, “It was very hard at first. I had to study very hard. Everything was hard, especially understanding the culture. I could not really study in North Korea which made studying in South Korea very difficult.” In addition, some participants noted that South Korean students are accustomed to going to private academies after school and on the weekends to help them stay competitive in the education system. Several mentioned not being able to afford these academies. Parents in South Korea invest heavily in their children’s education. Some private academies and other educational centers provide free classes for North Korean refugees, but many still struggle even after taking these classes. Some mentioned that it was difficult for them to attend these free classes because of schedule conflicts. Participants felt as if the divide between North Koreans and South Koreans is too large, and finding common ground can be incredibly difficult.

The Importance of Age in Society

North Korean refugees often have to take primary, middle, and high school classes as adults. Confucianism dominates South Korean society, and age is very important in the social hierarchy. This also applies to the classroom. Friendships generally develop with people who are the same age. One participant stated that his classmates are younger than him, so he cannot develop friendships with them. Most of the students are a similar age in South Korean university classes. Males who have completed their compulsory military service are generally a couple of years older than the female students, but most of the students are roughly the same age. In traditional university classes, it is important to have a good social network which can also be helpful in the future job market. This is challenging for many North Korean refugees though since some of them are older than their South Korean peers and may not develop as many friendships in university because of age barriers.

Lack of Basic Knowledge

Participants discussed the struggles that they faced because they did not have the rudimentary knowledge needed to understand basic concepts in their classes in South Korea. Fundamental classes include Korean, science, math, social studies, and English. One student said that he had to take primary, middle school, and high school classes in his first six months in South Korea, but he could



not understand what he was studying. Another participant remarked that he had graduated from high school in North Korea, but his basic knowledge was so low that he still had a difficulties keeping up with South Korean students who were at the same grade level. The participants completed varying levels of education in North Korea ranging from minimal elementary education to high school graduation. Even if North Korean refugees went to school in North Korea, the knowledge gained is not comparable in South Korea. Furthermore, North Korean fundamental classes often include ideological lessons that have no value in South Korean society.

Language Differences

Many North Korean refugees struggle with the Korean language in South Korea. There are major dialect differences between the Korean used in both countries. One participant stated that the first major problem that he faced upon arrival in South Korea was understanding the Korean used. Participants also mentioned feeling uncomfortable when they use their North Korean accents which are discernable to South Korean people. The South Korean form of the Korean language uses many words from other languages, especially English. In addition, many university courses require partial or full use of English in the classroom and many jobs require English proficiency. Foreign words are generally not used in North Korea with the exception of some Russian phrases. Another participant stated, "It is unfair because South Korean people start learning English when they are young. Some North Korean refugees never studied English." Learning a new language can be very time consuming. Learning the language of South Korea can be difficult for North Korean refugees who are exposed to many new things and are trying to adapt to a new way of life.

The Future

Education for a Better Future

All of the participants discussed the importance of education in their lives. Most of the participants have definitive dreams about their future which are often rooted in education. They also hope that education will help them to attain their professional and personal goals. Six of the participants mentioned that they want to get a graduate degree, and three want to study or work in another country. Several participants discussed their desired occupations in the future which include the following: a university professor, a Chinese teacher, a physical therapist, a writer, a teacher, a businessman, a florist, a position in a trading company, an electronic engineer, and a Wall Street worker.

Reunification Dreams

Eleven of the participants discussed the importance of reunification between North and South Korea. They provided examples of how they want to create a better future for a unified Korea. Most of the participants' responses relate to developing ways in which they can build a connection between North and South Korean people and help North Koreans adapt to a new lifestyle. Most of the participants have a strong desire to help North Korean people and also hope for reunification. Some of the responses that emerged that connect to education include:

"I want to build a school for North Korean children in the future after reunification. This has been my dream for awhile."

"I want to teach South Korean people about reunification and the similarities of North and South Korean people. We are actually more similar than different. We are all people and do many of the same things every day. We all have the same feelings."



“I want to build my own college after reunification and teach the North Korean people about medicine since the North Korean healthcare system is poor.”

“I want to write a book about North Korean refugees’ lives after they come to South Korea. I want to assist new North Korean refugees and be a bridge for North and South Korean people so that they can get to know each other.”

“I want to help North Korean people through my teaching. I want to work to help close the education gap between North and South Korea.”

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Central themes pertaining to educational life experiences in South Korea that developed include trying to adapt in South Korea, keeping up in a competitive education system, a gap between us and them, the importance of age in society, lack of basic knowledge, and language differences. All of the participants commented that they had adaptation problems in South Korea, especially in the education system, and for most of them these problems were severe. Two primary themes developed that related to the future role of education in the participants’ lives including education for a better future and reunification dreams. The participants emphasized the importance of education in their future lives. Furthermore, the majority of the participants want to be involved in the future reunification of North and South Korea. Some of the participants also highlighted their role in this process as teachers or professors.

This study is rooted in the transformative learning theory. According to Cranton and Taylor (2012), “Transformative learning theory is based on the notion that we interpret our experiences in our own way, and that how we see the world is a result of our perceptions of our experiences” (p. 5). Taylor (1994) stated that when people go to another culture for a long period of time, they generally experience a transformation. “It occurs out of necessity for survival and out of a need to relieve the stress and anxiety often experienced as the stranger struggles to meet basic needs” (Taylor, 1994, p. 389). It can be incredibly difficult for general immigrants to adapt to a new culture, but this process can be even more challenging for refugee populations who live with many traumatic memories. The participants discussed myriad challenges that they faced during the adaptation process in South Korea. They struggle to compete in the education system, and they feel that there is a gap between North Korean refugees and South Koreans which makes it very difficult to assimilate and acculturate. They lack basic knowledge needed to succeed in the education system. In addition, North Korean refugees may have difficulties determining fact from fiction since their education in North Korea included ideological lessons that are based on fallacies. The challenges of the adaptation process are further intensified by language barriers; moreover, North Korean refugees struggle to develop friendships and networks due to age differences with their classmates. There are numerous challenges in the transformative learning process.

The process of transformative learning begins in North Korea when individuals are questioning the world around them and considering the possibility of escaping. Many North Korean citizens have had access to foreign movies and television shows. Some may have had access to other materials that were smuggled in from China. Exposure to outside information may result in the questioning of reality. The transformative learning process also continues on the new underground railroad as the refugees experience new situations. Taylor and Cranton (2013) state that the events leading to transformation are often traumatic which is the case for many North Korean citizens in North Korea and for North Korean refugees on the new underground railroad who are often living in hiding and have to move carefully to avoid arrest and repatriation by the Chinese government or North Korean agents. Although there are many traumatic experiences, these events lead to new perspectives.



Refugees have to examine their beliefs, develop goals to be able to adapt to a new society, and educate themselves (Morrice, 2012). Morrice (2012) stated that “Becoming a refugee is therefore a source of deep learning as they confront unexpected changes in their life plans and the need to reshape their lives and reconstruct their identities” (p. 227). Life in South Korea can be a major challenge since the refugees have to adapt to a new lifestyle and education system that they are not accustomed to. Their education in North Korea likely did not adequately teach them about the world around them. Many of the lessons that they learned about South Korea are inaccurate. The culture shock that they experience is probably incomprehensible to most people today who have access to the Internet and other educational resources. Morrice (2012) added that refugees also have to “unlearn and let go of much of who and what they were. A significant part of their experience involved learning to accept that their cultural capital was not recognized and had little, if any, exchange value” (p. 266). Additionally, refugees’ previous knowledge often has little value in the new country (Morrice, 2012). In South Korea, North Korean refugees realize that their educational background is insufficient, and they have to discard many of the things that they learned in North Korea that were inaccurate. This transformative learning process continues as the refugees reflect on their past experiences and must adapt to a society that seems drastically foreign to them. Although the refugees struggle to assimilate and acculturate into the new society, they are also in a new environment which can provide positive opportunities and learning experiences that they never had before. The participants expanded on the importance of education in their future lives. In addition, participants discussed their desire to help in the reunification process, and some expressed an interest in educating others.

This study is beneficial to policy makers, administrators, and educators in South Korea. South Koreans often have difficulties understanding the challenges of North Korean refugees (Harden, 2009). In addition, many studies on North Korean refugees are only written in Korea. Non-Korean researchers may be interested in conducting research on North Korean refugees, but this is difficult due to the limited studies in English. Furthermore, English tutoring programs for North Korean refugees that are conducted by Native English speakers are becoming more popular in South Korea. It is beneficial for tutors to learn more about the educational needs and experiences of North Korean refugees. North Korean refugees also live in Russia, Japan, the Philippines, the United States, Singapore, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and other European countries (International Crisis Group 2006; Lee, C. K., 2012; Tanaka 2008). English studies pertaining to North Korean refugees are beneficial to those who assist North Korean refugees in these countries. Additionally, it is vital for humanitarian and religious workers on the new underground railroad to learn more about the educational experiences and needs of North Korean refugees.

CONCLUSION

North Korean refugees experience transformative learning during their lives in North Korea, on the new underground railroad, and in South Korea. In the near or distant future, North and South Korea may reunify which makes it critical for South Korea to gain more insight into the lives of North Korean refugees. According to Lankov (2006), the testimonies of North Korean refugees provide “persistent and deep distinctions between the peoples of the two Koreas” (p. 131). It is vital to learn more about the educational experiences of North Korean refugees in order to better assist new waves of refugees and to prepare for the possibility of reunification. There are tremendous differences between North and South Korea, yet there are commonalities in the everyday lives of the people. Learning about the educational experiences of North Korean refugees can help bridge the divide between North and South Koreans.

It is also critical for future research to be conducted on the experiences of North Korean refugees in South Korean higher education. There is a dearth of research on this population and additional research should examine the reasons why North Korean refugees are withdrawing from university.



Furthermore, research should examine the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators of North Korean refugees studying at South Korean colleges and universities. Gaining more insight into the experiences and perspectives, both past and present, of North Korean refugees, can help administrators, educators, volunteers, and other stakeholders to better understand the challenges that North Korean refugees face so that policies can be developed or reassessed to better accommodate them.

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