

English fever and international schools in South Korea: Global models reshaping local education

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Abstract

South Korea's education system is undergoing a significant transformation driven largely by the phenomenon known as English fever. This has led to a rapid increase in the number of international schools and the adoption of global curricula such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP). These programs prioritize bilingualism, critical thinking, and global citizenship, often delivered primarily in English. Many families see these options as essential for preparing their children to compete in a globalized world, offering pathways to prestigious universities and competitive careers both domestically and internationally. However, access to these international schools and global curricula tends to be limited to wealthier families, which deepens social inequality and reinforces existing educational divides. At the same time, both students and teachers face challenges in adapting to these new systems, including the increased pressure to perform in bilingual settings and the difficulty of balancing traditional expectations with international standards. English proficiency has thus become a crucial form of cultural capital, shaping not only academic success but also social status. Meanwhile, the rise of English-medium education raises concerns about preserving Korean cultural identity and maintaining social cohesion amid rapid internationalization. As a result, South Korea faces the complex task of expanding access to high-quality bilingual education while maintaining the preservation of its cultural heritage. This ongoing transformation is reshaping how education and success are understood in the country, opening new opportunities but also prompting critical discussions about social inequality, identity, and the future direction of the nation's education system.

Keywords: English Fever, international school, bilingualism, global curriculum, social inequality

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1. Introduction

As children, we learn the rules on the nature of life that sticks with us for a long time. We are taught that strangers are dangerous and that belief is something we naturally uphold throughout our entire life. A country's educational system acts the same way. It is a system that for some countries, is so entrenched in national history and culture, that understanding it (and the values it upholds) requires a deep understanding of its background. In this constantly evolving world, it is the educational system that constantly stays to be one of the most crucial factors in keeping up with educating the new generation with the essential and correct knowledge.

A country's educational system is like a living tree. Its branches grow when new reforms are made yet old, withering, sick bits are pruned (capturing the nature of faulty methods being discarded for new). A tree changes in the face of new seasons, representing the new trends being incorporated into the curriculum. Old trends fall out, and new trends always appear. Most importantly, the fruit, the success, is molded by factors that come before all these branches grow, the root and its soil. The roots and soil is the culture and changing history that sets the course for how the tree grows. Understanding this allows us to see how various countries' have differing curriculums and explains why some are so drastically different from the others. As different eras come and go, the demands of what is to be expected from the curriculums also evolve. In Europe, being geographical neighbors as well as the emergence of numerous super powers, made it natural for countries to learn the language of neighboring countries in their schools. Learning French or English became the norm in many European countries and even became a luxury in some Asian countries (Eurostat, 2024). In America, long after the English colonized and became the majority, Spanish began to make an emergence in the American curriculum. As America borders Mexico (a Spanish speaking South American country) and receives a lot of people from Mexico, learning Spanish to interact with the growing Hispanic-Latino community became vital. One of the biggest changes we saw, globally, is the surge in the need to speak English. As America emerged from the dust of the second world war and waltzed into its golden era of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, it soon found itself not only to be the world's most powerful economy and military, it had also embedded itself deep into the heart of the global trade market. The entire world quickly became dependent on the American dollar, American aid, and the American economy. America leading the world would lead to a beginning in demand of education in America. This would start a chain reaction that would soon culminate to "English Fever." Learning English suddenly became trending while actually studying in America became the dream. This surge impacted the educational system of nations all across the globe (Ives et al., 2016–2019).

The modern South Korean education system, through an increase in demand of international schools and global curriculums, currently undergoes a vital change spearheaded by a phenomenon called "English fever." English proficiency allows students to undergo such programs yet as more time passes, that privilege falls more and more into the hands of affluent families. Disparities such as this highlights the glaring problems of social inequality and further reinforces a divide between those privileged enough to benefit from the system and those who aren't. These glaring issues have led to a debated dilemma between the pursuit of global competitiveness and the preservation of Korean culture. This study examines how the growth of international education influences South Korea's student experiences, academic culture, and societal perceptions, whilst looking into the uncertain social dynamic and future it brings.

Background - Korea was one of the countries that was affected by English fever. Like many other countries, the demand for an English education enveloped Korea. After the numerous conflicts and having to build up everything from devastation, the Korean economy saw a huge surge in the late 1900s as it found a seat for itself in the global market. Being able to provide goods at a lower cost than Japan whilst lacking the infamy that

cheaply-produced Chinese products had helped secure Korea's future as it continued to rise in the ranks of the world economy. The Korean people soon realized that America was not only a huge part of Korea's success, it was also an affluent land of rich opportunities, a belief that would be reinforced for generations to come.

The English language not only lingered in the people's dreams, it also planted its roots within the Korean educational system. People paid extra just to provide their children the chance to learn English. The Korean curriculum would eventually grow the branches and leaves of a new English course for almost every school nation-wide. Although it didn't make the entire population fluent in English, the importance of the subject, its uses, and prestigious status when being proficient at it was solidified into Korean society. Coupled with the appearances of international schools in Korea, the curriculum would soon be called into question in ways it hasn't before (N.R., 2022).

It's in the nature of economics that dictates that a shift in the demand for English leads to a higher price of obtaining that service (Universities UK, 2024). Not only did the English speakers around the world realize this but also the parents of children around the world. As English wormed its way into not only becoming a requirement for being accomplished but also a social status of its own, prices for learning English soared (BridgeUniverse, 2025). This was apparent in Korea, a country long plagued with an income-inequality that used this opportunity to show bare its fangs. Being able to speak and even be proficient at it became a high standard of its own. Korean parents were able to flaunt their wealth based on how well their children were academically achieved and English had been added to the near top of that pile. Receiving a private education for English studies became a luxury and a privilege. The disparity of the ability to speak English between children not being able to afford private educators and children that are privileged enough to be able to receive it became apparent. It is a debated problem that concerns the parents and children that watch as their affluent peers receive an education they cannot (Asia Society Korea, 2022).

Research Question - This study aims to understand how international schools and South Korea's focus on English education can affect student experiences, academic outcomes, and social perceptions. Driven by widespread "English fever," many families choose international schools and global programs like the International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP), believing English proficiency is essential for success. Furthermore, English has become a form of cultural capital, reinforcing social hierarchies and raising concerns about fairness and the preservation of Korean cultural identity. The rise of English-medium education also creates tensions amid globalization, challenging traditional values and social cohesion. Hence, our research question is:

How do international schools and South Korea's emphasis on English education influence student experiences, academic outcomes, and social perceptions?

2. Parental Choices: Motivations Behind the Preference for International Schools in South Korea

In South Korea, a quiet but powerful shift is happening in how families think about education. More and more parents are choosing to send their children to international schools, not just because it sounds trendy, but because the choice reflects something deeper: hopes, dreams, and sometimes quiet worries about what's best for their kids.

Doors to a Bigger World - For many parents, the appeal of international schools starts with a simple but powerful idea: a better future. These schools offer instruction in English and follow global programs like the International Baccalaureate (IB) or Advanced Placement (AP). This is not just about learning a foreign language, it's about preparing for a world that's more competitive, unpredictable and connected. Parents see these schools as a stepping stone. Maybe it's a path to a top university overseas or landing a job with an international company. But, it's about giving their children a sense of confidence and adaptability skills they'll need no matter where life takes them. In a country where education is often seen as the gateway to success, many South Korean parents are willing to invest heavily in their financial, emotional or even mentally, because International schools represent that opportunity.

Escaping the Pressure Cooker - For some parents, the decision isn't only about ambition, it's also about escape. South Korea's education system is famously intense. Kids often study late into the night, attend extra classes, and prepare endlessly for make-or-break exams. While the system has produced impressive academic results, it can come at a cost of burnout, anxiety, and a growing fear of failure. So, when parents look at international schools, they see something refreshing. These schools often emphasize **creativity over memorization, exploration over repetition**, and well-being over relentless competition. For many families, that shift feels like a breath of fresh air, a chance for their children to actually enjoy learning again. and that matters, because behind every report card and university application is a kid who just wants to feel curious, capable, and okay.

It's about more than just a Grades - At the end of the day, most parents want the same thing: **for their children to be happy, successful, and resilient**. Choosing an international school isn't just about chasing elite degrees or high-powered careers. It's about nurturing well-rounded kids who know how to think, adapt, and care for themselves and for others. Of course, not every family has the same access to these schools. Tuition costs are high, and spaces are limited. That reality has sparked growing conversations about fairness, about who gets to dream big, and who gets left behind. Still, for the families who make the leap, international schools represent more than just a classroom. They're a symbol of possibility, of care, and of a deep parental hope that their children can grow up not just smart, but whole.

Curriculum Differences: IB/AP and Bilingualism versus Korea's Exam-Focused National Curriculum - Being one of the countries that have maintained great education competitiveness around the world, South Korea reflects a commitment in persevering academic growth and development, as well as a tradition of morality in its national curriculum. These emphasized values also translate to other international curriculums around the world, including the International Baccalaureate programme, commonly referred to as the IB, and the Advanced Placement (AP). As to the rapid globalization of education in South Korea, these global curriculums are often positioned in stark contrast to South Korea's receptive learning. South Korea's education fervor is undeniably one valuable asset for the main driving force to boost economic and social development. However, its 'receptive learning', where the teaching methods are emphasized on traditional, exam-focused and monolingual instructions, have raised concerns and are seen to have diminishing prospects for future success. Receptive learning mainly refers to students who receive knowledge without forming their own critical thinking, where knowledge is only passed down through textbooks of one-way lectures.

Additionally, for the most part, education is largely delivered in Korean, with English taught as a compulsory subject from elementary school (Primary 3) onwards. English instruction within the national system is typically grammar-focused and geared toward achieving high scores on standardized tests, most notably the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT, or Suneung). This high-stakes exam culture fosters rote memorization, intense competition, and a narrow definition of academic success (Byun & Kim, 2011). While English proficiency is highly valued, the national curriculum's approach often limits students' opportunities for authentic language use and communicative competence. English is rather treated as an academic hurdle instead of a tool for global engagement. Hence, bilingualism is rarely achieved through this system's mechanism (Park, 2009).

The Rise of International Curriculum: IB and AP in South Korea - In response to the growing parental demand for global competitiveness and holistic education, international curriculums such as IB and AP have been introduced in not only private international schools, but more recently, have as well expanded its reach to select public schools. These programs are commonly described as a multicultural curriculum, characterized by their emphasis on inquiry-based learning, critical thinking, and the development of bilingual or multilingual proficiency.

The International Baccalaureate (IB)

The International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes has constantly gained unprecedented momentum in the Asia Pacific, including South Korea. With a presence in 158 countries and across 5,284 schools worldwide, South

Korea's model collaboration between the IB and public education authorities to make IB education accessible in the Korean language reflects a geared integration of a more global, holistic approach that nurtures essential capabilities in today's economy. The IB PYP and IBDP is taught in English, and each area of subject integrates global current events and the different perspectives of various cultures and communities. This global perspective is designed to become global citizens, fostering students' ability to effortlessly collaborate with people from various cultures and backgrounds.

The IB Diploma Programme (IBDP) in particular, is a two-year program that requires students to study six subjects across diverse disciplines. Students are required to complete its core curriculum, including an Extended Essay, participate in Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS), and engage with Theory of Knowledge (TOK), a framework intended to broaden student's educational experience, that transcends a mere textbook learning. These assessments include essays, oral presentations, and research projects. Hence, a defining feature of the IB is its commitment to encourage students into thinking more critically, communicate effectively in multiple languages, and to acknowledge and foster diverse perspectives, embedded from intercultural understanding. In South Korea, some IB World Schools and public pilot programs offer dual-language instruction, enabling students to take courses in both Korean and English (Yoon, 2023).

Advanced Placement (AP)

On the other hand, the AP program, developed by the College Board in the United States, offers college-level courses and exams in specific subjects, primarily taught in English. While AP does not have a structured bilingual component like IB, it provides students with opportunities to engage deeply with academic content in English, thereby enhancing their proficiency.

Comparative Analysis: Bilingualism and Educational Outcomes - The differences between these curriculums are pronounced, particularly in their pedagogical approaches to language and learning:

Feature	International Baccalaureate (IB)	Advanced Placement (AP)	Korea's National Curriculum
Structure	Comprehensive program with six subject groups and core components (Theory of Knowledge, Extended Essay, CAS)	Individual courses in specific subjects; students choose which to take	Grade-based curriculum with prescribed subjects and content
Curriculum Focus	Inquiry-based learning, interdisciplinary approach, global perspectives	Subject-specific college-level content and exams	Content mastery, preparation for national exams
Language of Instruction	Primarily English, with options for bilingual instruction	English	Primarily Korean; English taught as a foreign language subject
Bilingualism	Supports bilingual education through dual-language options	Limited focus on bilingualism; language courses available	English taught as a subject; limited bilingual instruction
Assessment	Combination of internal assessments and external exams, including essays and projects	External standardized exams per course, mainly multiple-choice and essays	National standardized exams focused on knowledge recall and problem-solving
Flexibility	Students select subjects across six groups with core requirements	Students select individual courses according to interest and goals	Fixed curriculum with limited elective options
Global Recognition	Recognized internationally for university admissions	Recognized primarily in the US and some other countries	Recognized nationally; university admission based on national exam results

Pedagogical Approach	Emphasizes inquiry, critical thinking, and student-centered learning	Focuses on advanced content knowledge and exam preparation	Teacher-led instruction with emphasis on content delivery and exam readiness
Student Experience	Includes creativity, activity, service components alongside academics	Focuses on academic rigor in specific subjects	High emphasis on exam preparation and academic achievement
Accessibility	Available mainly in private/international schools and select public programs; associated costs vary	Available in some public and private schools; exam fees apply	Universal access through public education; private tutoring common

As seen from the table above, IBDP’s bilingual model offers a clear departure from the exam-driven Korean system. Though language proficiency and multilingualism play an important role in both national and international curriculum, within the Korean National Curriculum, students are taught most of their courses in Korean. Contrastingly, by taking a conversational approach to instruction, curriculums such as the IB and AP helps students to become naturally proficient in the English language.

The Korean National Curriculum had made it their goal to develop new competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration skills in teaching and learning. However, there have still been ongoing critiques regarding Korea’s national exams that mostly assess receptive learning abilities rather than critical or creative thinking capabilities. As such, there are discrepancies between the education goals and final outcomes. With the increasing interconnectedness of global economies and industries across the world, this escalates to a growing need for individuals to possess both local insights and global perspectives.

With this education paradigm shift in Korea, there has been an ongoing discussion regarding the introduction of international curriculums, such as the IB, in Korean public schools. By requiring coursework in two languages and embedding global perspectives throughout the curriculum, the International Baccalaureate not only enhances English proficiency but also supports the maintenance of Korean language and identity. This dual focus is particularly significant in a society grappling with the cultural implications of “English fever.”

3. Student Perceptions & Experience — How English Fluency is Seen as in Korea

In a global or general perspective, English is seen as a critical and or crucial point for future opportunities as English is widely known for being the international/ global language. As English is known as the global language, people see this as an asset that grants people with academic advancement, career competitiveness, social status, and success generally. According to Park (2009), English fluency functions as a form of social and cultural capital that can open doors to elite opportunities. With this mindset, particularly in Korea, a lot of families or parents would invest their money into private English lessons, after-school academies, and even overseas education. Song (2013) explains how some families go so far as sending their children abroad to give them an edge in English learning. This shows how deeply rooted the idea that English fluency is tied to future success in Korea—both academically and socially.

Academic-wise, international schools and or English-focused education has led to higher academic performance and better university access. South Korea consistently ranks among the top countries in global assessments like PISA, with students excelling in reading, mathematics, and science. However, students attending international schools or English-focused programs often benefit from curricula such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) or Advanced Placement (AP), which are globally recognized and geared toward fostering critical thinking and creativity beyond rote memorization dominant in Korean public schools. These programs enhance readiness for admission to prestigious universities both in Korea and abroad, particularly English-medium institutions.

International schools, which are often accessible primarily to wealthier families, emphasize English fluency

through immersion and interactive learning, which improves students' communicative competence and academic confidence. This contrasts with the Korean public system's heavy focus on grammar and test preparation. Research suggests that students in English-focused environments develop stronger language skills and adaptability, which positively affect academic engagement and outcomes at tertiary levels.

Student Perceptions & Experience — How do International Schools and English-Focused Education Affect Students' Academic Outcomes and Social Perceptions of Success? For some students, English-focused education can be transformative. Lee (2016) interviewed high school students in immersion programs, many of whom described gaining confidence and critical thinking skills. One student said, "It's not just about English. It helped me express my opinions and think more critically, which we don't often practice in regular Korean classes." So, it's not merely about acquiring a skill, but more about the process of learning it. Yet, this growth often comes with emotional costs. Students frequently feel anxious and academically overwhelmed in English-medium instruction (EMI) courses, especially when there is little support in Korean. In a study by Kim (2014), students described EMI lectures as "very stressful" and reported relying heavily on textbooks because they couldn't follow spoken English in class. Others avoided EMI courses entirely due to fear of underperformance.

These pressures extend beyond the classroom. Park (2009) explains that English in Korea functions as a form of cultural capital. It is seen as a prerequisite for elite university admission, high-status jobs, and social mobility, rather than just a skill to acquire and use daily. Consequently, families invest large amounts of money in private English lessons, overseas schooling, and even family separation (e.g., "goose families") to give their children a competitive edge (Song, 2013). The social perception of English fluency is powerful in Korea. Being good at English is often equated with intelligence, global sophistication, and higher class status (Lo & Kim, 2015). Students from international schools are frequently viewed as "elite" or globally competent, reinforcing the idea that success requires aligning with Western, English-speaking norms. At the same time, this creates a hierarchy among students. Those educated in Korean-medium schools or from less privileged backgrounds may feel excluded or seen as less successful. This leads to what Park and Wee (2012) describe as "linguistic stratification," where English becomes not just a language skill but a social filter.

These perceptions largely stem from the nature of English education in South Korea, which is heavily oriented toward preparing students for high-stakes exams, particularly the Korean Scholastic Ability Test (KSAT), rather than developing practical communication skills. For many students and their families, English is primarily valued as a tool to gain admission into prestigious universities, which are seen as crucial stepping stones to desirable career paths and social status. As a result, English instruction often prioritizes grammar, vocabulary, and test-taking strategies aimed at maximizing exam scores, rather than fostering conversational fluency or intercultural communication skills that are essential in a truly globalized context. Moreover, this narrow focus reinforces the idea that English is primarily an academic subject rather than a living language used for global communication and collaboration. Parents often support this approach because it aligns with the immediate goal of securing university admission and future job prospects, which are perceived as the main avenues to success in Korea's competitive society.

Social Implications: English Education and the Deepening of Social Inequality in South Korea - Most people know that the growing popularity of International schools and English-medium instruction (EMI) education in South Korea has changed both the academic and cultural landscapes. But recently, many argue that it is beginning to intensify the country's already existing socio economic divides. While some see these institutions as doors to global opportunity. Others see it as barriers - which are only accessible primarily to wealthier families. As a result, being fluent in English and receiving international education are becoming powerful markers of social class, widening the gap between rich and poor, and reshaping what educational privilege looks like.

Elite Access and the Reproduction of Social Hierarchies - One of the most visible effects of South Korea's obsession with English — often called "English fever" — is the growing divide in its education system. More and more, access to globalized learning programs like the International Baccalaureate (IB) or Advanced Placement

(AP) is something only the wealthiest families can afford. Tuition at international schools can run into the tens of thousands of dollars each year, not to mention the extra costs for private tutoring, extracurriculars, or overseas summer camps. As Park (2009) points out, speaking fluent English isn't just about communication — it acts like cultural capital, opening doors to prestige, mobility, and elite circles. In this kind of environment, English becomes more than a language — it turns into a symbol of class. This is what sociologists call “educational stratification”: kids from wealthy families are far more likely to attend international schools, go abroad for studies, and get into top universities at home or overseas. Meanwhile, those from lower-income backgrounds who stay in the public school system often miss out on these same opportunities — especially when it comes to building strong English skills or getting global exposure. Over time, this deepens the gap and makes it even harder for students from less privileged backgrounds to move up in society.

Two-Tiered Education System: Elite vs. General Track - Another social implication of South Korea's English-focused education system is the clear divide between two very different educational tracks. On one side, there's the elite, globally oriented path built around English immersion and international programs. Students in this track — usually those in private international schools — follow globally recognized curriculums like the IB or AP, which focus on critical thinking, broad learning, and getting into top universities abroad. These students are often on a track to international careers and long-term success, which strengthens their social and economic advantages down the line. On the other side, there are most students that remain in the general track — mainly in public schools — where the focus is still on memorization, test preparation, and sticking closely to the national curriculum, especially when it comes to preparing for the Korean college entrance exam (KSAT). The differences in these educational tracks doesn't just lead to different academic outcomes — it also shapes how students see themselves and their futures. Those in the elite track might grow up more aligned with Western values and feel more at home in global spaces, while those in the public system can end up feeling left out of that picture entirely. Some may start to see themselves as less capable or less worthy, simply because they weren't given the same opportunities. Over time, this two-track system makes inequality even more deeply rooted — turning education into something that not only divides people by class, but also by the kind of future they can realistically hope for.

English as a Social Filter - In South Korea today, English isn't just a subject — it's becoming a social filter, a tool of sorting people. People are classified based on their language proficiency and the institutions they attend. Students attending international schools are often seen as more polished, more global, more “prepared” for success. Meanwhile, students from regular public schools may be unfairly viewed as less suited for the international job market. This kind of thinking will eventually lead to a social hierarchy in education, where going to an English-medium or international school isn't just about academics — it's also about being seen as part of a higher social class. Lo and Kim (2015) describe this phenomenon as “**linguistic stratification**” — the process by which language ability, particularly in English, becomes a basis for social differentiation. In this system, English functions as a “symbolic gatekeeper,” separating the global elite from the local mainstream. Students educated in English-speaking environments often enjoy better job prospects, are more competitive in global labor markets, and are favored in admissions to prestigious universities. This entrenches a meritocracy that is not only academic but also linguistic and economic.

Consequences for Social Cohesion - The widening gap between students who can access international education and those who cannot may lead to long-term social fragmentation. When global demand for people who speak English rises, and when English fluency becomes prerequisites for desirable jobs, high incomes, and social prestige, students from less privileged backgrounds are systematically excluded from full participation in modern Korean society. This not only undermines the principle of equal opportunity but also threatens national cohesion by creating a two-tiered society: one fluent in global capital, and the other increasingly marginalized. As Song (2013) puts it, Korea's obsession with English has turned from an educational trend into a kind of “social epidemic.” It fuels dreams of global success, but also creates a sense of alienation for those who can't keep up. While today's world calls for people who are multilingual and flexible, the reality in Korea is that the road to becoming that kind of person is uneven — and often only open to those who can afford it.

Cultural Balance - South Korea is experiencing a rapid rise in international education, bringing both global opportunities and deepening the challenges of maintaining national identity. As English-Medium Instruction (EMI) becomes more dominant, especially in early childhood settings, educators are increasingly faced with the challenge of balancing Korean cultural values and global education frameworks. These changes are especially visible in international and private schools, where students are frequently encouraged to adopt global ideals while staying rooted in their cultural values. Kim and Choi (2024) argue that the spread of English-medium kindergartens, driven by social competition and policy neglect, contributes to a widespread “English fever”, an obsession with English fluency. Kim & Brutt-Griffler (2025) argues that the phenomenon of "English fever" has created a learning environment where English is treated as the primary marker of success and seen as the most essential tool for success. These studies highlight how early childhood English education, instead of being carefully managed by the state, is shaped by market demands and parental anxieties. Many educators in these settings face strong pressure to prioritize English immersion, often at the cost of culturally appropriate, play-based, or Korean-language learning. While the government blames these schools for undermining integrity, Kim and Choi (2024) show that many educators are actually trying to resist full immersion and preserve Korean values through bilingual materials and flexible language use.

Similarly, Kim and Brutt-Griffler (2025) examine how family language policies reflect this same tension at home. In households with strict English-only rules, the usage of Korean language becomes limited, not only reducing fluency in the mother tongue but also distancing children from their culture, history, and emotional expression. The authors describe this approach as a “high-pressure family language policy,” which may succeed in producing English fluency but risks cultural disconnection. However, they also point out the families and educators who are beginning to embrace a more balanced approach. These families believe that children should be able to develop multiple languages, including Korean, to remain globally competitive while staying culturally rooted. Despite structural pressures, some educators are taking action to maintain a cultural balance. Schools have started embedding Korean Studies modules within English-language curricula. For example, teachers might use bilingual storybooks, incorporate Korean historical content, or celebrate national holidays. While they are not a perfect solution, these practices help restore a sense of identity and belonging, allowing students to make personal connections between global themes and Korean realities. Furthermore, educators and schools have started to rebalance priorities, with holistic development as their number one priority.

Kim and Choi (2024) also describe how some kindergartens allow code switching, making space for child-led play in Korean. Although limited, these approaches help young learners affirm their Korean identity, express their feelings while still acquiring English skills. Similarly, Kim and Brutt-Griffler (2025) show that educators who support bilingualism, not just English fluency, are better positioned to meet the emotional and cultural needs of their students. In conclusion, educators in South Korea are navigating through a complex space where global expectations and national identity collide. Maintaining cultural balance requires more than just changing textbooks; it demands a deeper shift in educational philosophy, one that values both local roots and global reach. As the country continues to internationalize, this balancing act will remain one of the most critical and defining challenges for its educators

4. Discussion

This essay highlights the intricate dynamics among international education, linguistic stratification, and cultural identity within the context of South Korea. It delineates a conflict between the pursuit of global competitiveness, predominantly through the acquisition of the English language, and the imperative to uphold Korean cultural values and social cohesion. The prioritization of international schools as conduits to success has the potential to engender a social hierarchy, given that these institutions are frequently regarded as offering superior preparation for the global arena. This perception, as articulated in the document, may result in students enrolled in conventional public schools being unjustly perceived as less equipped for the international labor market, thereby contributing to an educational social stratification that transcends mere academic performance.

The notion of "linguistic stratification," as articulated by Lo and Kim, is pivotal for comprehending the intricate social dynamics involved. As per the document, proficiency in English has evolved into a "symbolic gatekeeper," establishing a hierarchy wherein individuals fluent in English are afforded enhanced access to opportunities and elevated social standing. This stratification may engender disparities in opportunities for students hailing from less privileged backgrounds, thereby potentially relegating them to exclusion from sought-after employment and advanced educational avenues. The expanding chasm between those who can avail themselves of international education and those who remain unable poses a threat to national cohesion, thereby risking the emergence of a bifurcated society. When fluency in English becomes a requisite for lucrative positions, substantial incomes, and social esteem, students from less affluent backgrounds may be systematically marginalized from full engagement within contemporary Korean society.

This essay examines the difficulties of preserving Korean cultural identity in a world that is becoming more globalized. The increase of English-medium instruction, especially in early childhood environments, leads to worries about the possible decline of Korean language proficiency and cultural awareness. According to Kim and Choi, the proliferation of English-medium kindergartens, fueled by social rivalry and governmental oversight, leads to a pervasive "English fever," an obsession with achieving English fluency. This "English fever" has established a learning atmosphere in which English is regarded as the main indicator of achievement. This essay also states that numerous educators in these environments experience significant pressure to focus on English immersion, frequently at the expense of culturally relevant, play-oriented, or Korean-language education. This strong emphasis on learning English may create a setting where English is viewed as the main indicator of achievement, possibly undermining the Korean language and culture. The document states that families enforcing strict English-only rules may inadvertently alienate children from their culture, history, and emotional expression, a situation referred to as a "high-pressure family language policy."

5. Conclusion

South Korea's integration of international schools and its strong emphasis on English education have profoundly influenced student experiences, academic outcomes, and social perceptions. The adoption of global curricula like the International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP) has shifted the nation's educational paradigm from traditional, exam-focused, and memorization-based instruction toward a model that values bilingualism, critical thinking, and global citizenship.

Student Experiences - International schools and English-medium programs offer students more diverse, inquiry-based learning environments. These settings foster the usage of English and encourage skills such as adaptability, creativity, and independent thought qualities often held back by Korea's high-pressure, test-driven national curriculum. However, students who are accustomed to rote memorization may struggle to adapt to these new demands, especially in bilingual or English-medium classrooms. The transition requires not only academic adjustment but also significant support for student well-being and identity development.

Academic Outcomes - The IB and AP programs provide pathways to prestigious universities and global careers, making them highly attractive to families seeking international opportunities for their children. Students in these programs typically gain stronger communicative competence in English and are better prepared for the demands of a globalized world, although the benefits are not universally accessible. High tuition fees and limited spaces mean that these opportunities are largely reserved for affluent families, this deepens the educational inequality and reinforces social stratification.

Social Perceptions - English proficiency and international education have become powerful forms of cultural capital, symbolizing elite status and serving as gateways to social mobility. This has intensified competition and contributed to a dual education system, where access to global programs marks a clear divide between privileged and less privileged students. At the same time, the expansion of English-medium education and global curricula has sparked concerns about the decrease of Korean cultural identity and social cohesion, as English and

international values sometimes overshadow local traditions and language.

Implementation Challenges and Local Adaptations - Integrating IB and AP curricula into Korean schools presents significant challenges. Teachers require extensive training to shift from didactic, exam-focused methods to the facilitative, student-centered approaches favored by these programs. Students and families must also navigate the tension between global competitiveness and the preservation of Korean heritage. Recent government initiatives, such as the introduction of dual-language IB programs in public schools, represent important efforts to democratize access to global education and reduce reliance on costly private international schools. These policy experiments are crucial for balancing educational equity with the need to maintain national and cultural significance. In conclusion, South Korea's focus on international schools and English education has opened new avenues for student growth and global engagement, but it has also intensified debates about equity, identity, and the meaning of educational success. South Korea faces the ongoing challenge of expanding access to high-quality, bilingual education while safeguarding its cultural heritage and ensuring that all students, not just the privileged few, can benefit from the opportunities of a globalized world. The full potential of these reforms will require sustained commitment from policymakers, educators, and communities to address both the promise and the pitfalls of this educational transformation.

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