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Negotiating Professional Emotions and Identities Across Unequal School Districts: A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of a Novice English Teacher in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines how a novice English teacher's emotions, professional identity, and pedagogy were negotiated across contrasting school districts in Seoul, Korea. Drawing on an ecological framework and narrative inquiry, the study traces the early career trajectory of a public middle-school teacher who began teaching in a multilingual and low-income district of Seoul and later transferred to a school in an affluent and predominantly monolingual district under the teacher rotation system. Three retrospective interviews formed the primary dataset, while selected blog entries and school materials were used to contextualize episodes discussed in the interviews. In her account of the first school, initial emotions of confusion and frustration were gradually transformed into care, fulfillment, and growing pedagogical confidence through sustained interactions with students and supportive school contexts. These emotional experiences played a key role in shaping the teacher's emerging identity as a caring motivator. The transition to the second school constituted a major ecological shift characterized by emotional shock and a reorientation of teaching practices toward content-focused instruction. The emotional and pedagogical shifts led her to negotiate her professional identity as a content specialist. This study suggests that language teacher emotions and identities are ecologically situated and dynamically reconfigured in response to unequal educational environments. It concludes that unequal school ecologies can condition how teachers perceive the value of different forms of professional expertise.

KEYWORDS

language teacher emotions, teacher identities, Ecological Systems Theory, narrative inquiry, novice English teacher, multilingual classroom

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1. Introduction

Korea presents a distinctive educational landscape in which teachers' professional practices and identities are shaped by locally situated contexts. In particular, regional disparities in educational resources and achievement create markedly different teaching ecologies across the country (Choi 2021, Kim 2022, Youn and Kang 2019). Teachers working in multicultural and working-class districts often encounter pedagogical realities that differ substantially from those in affluent and highly competitive areas (Kim 2018, Park 2019). These differences are not simply contextual variations but reflect structural inequalities that shape how teachers experience, interpret, and enact their work.

The variability of teachers' professional experiences is further intensified by the public-school teacher rotation system. Public school teachers in Korea are assigned to a different school approximately every five years under this system (Yoo 2018). Moving between contrasting institutional and sociocultural environments may, in turn, prompt changes in teachers' emotions, pedagogical practices, and professional identities (Benesch 2017, Song 2016). Teaching in Korea, therefore, involves an ongoing process of adaptation and negotiation across diverse educational ecologies rather than a stable set of classroom practices (Golombek and Doran 2014, Zembylas 2003). However, little research has examined how teachers experience and make sense of these transitions over time.

These contextual transitions carry particular significance for English teachers, whose work is closely connected to broader sociopolitical issues such as socioeconomic inequality, multilingualism, and the social status of English in Korea (Choi 2021, Kim 2018, Shin 2006). English teachers routinely negotiate tensions arising from policy expectations, diverse student needs, and the emotional labor embedded in everyday teaching (Benesch 2017, Song 2016). Under such conditions, English teacher identity becomes especially sensitive to the interaction of emotion, belief, and ideology (Barcelos 2015, Mercer 2021, Zembylas 2003). Understanding English teachers' emotional experiences thus requires attention to the structural and ideological forces that shape local teaching conditions.

Recent studies have emphasized that teacher emotions and identities are not fixed internal traits but relational and contextually produced phenomena that unfold across multiple layers of influence (De Costa et al. 2018, Lasky 2005, Nazari et al. 2023). Drawing on Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979), the present study views teacher development as a process unfolding across these interconnected systems over time. Although ecological accounts have established the importance of multiple contexts and their interactions, little attention has been given to how teachers come to value particular forms of teaching as professional expertise within such ecological systems. To fill this gap, the study traces one novice English teacher's emotional experiences, identity negotiation, and pedagogical adaptation as she moves from a multilingual and socioeconomically marginalized district of Seoul to a predominantly monolingual and affluent district. Through a narrative inquiry, the study examines how her emotions and identities are reconfigured as she navigates the demands and ideological pressures embedded in unequal educational environments. By foregrounding the interplay among emotion, identity, and ecology, this study argues that unequal educational environments do not merely affect what teachers experience but further condition how teachers perceive the value of different forms of teacher labor and professionalism.

With this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

(1) How are a novice English teacher's emotional experiences and professional identities negotiated as she moves across contrasting school districts in Seoul?

(2) How do ecological conditions shape what forms of teacher labor, pedagogy, and professionalism she comes to perceive as valuable in each school district?

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2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Teacher Emotions and Identities

With the growing recognition of emotion in second language acquisition (SLA) research (Pavlenko 2013), applied linguistics and TESOL scholarship on language teacher emotions has expanded considerably. Early work in this area focused on the demanding realities of language teaching, including teacher burnout (Acheson et al. 2016), emotional labor (Loh and Liew 2016), and teacher immunity (Hiver and Dörnyei 2017). More recent studies have extended this focus to positive dimensions of teachers' emotional lives, such as emotional rewards (Miller and Gkonou 2018) and well-being (Mercer 2023). This body of research marks a shift away from viewing language teacher emotions as fixed psychometric traits toward understanding them as relational and socially situated phenomena that are constructed and negotiated within specific educational contexts (Lasky 2005). Of particular relevance to the present study is the growing recognition that these emotional experiences are deeply intertwined with the ongoing formation and negotiation of professional identity (Song and Miller 2025, Zembylas 2003).

Poststructuralist perspectives have further underscored the close relationship between emotion and language teacher identity. Zembylas (2003) argues that because teacher identity formation is fundamentally affective, attention to emotional experience provides critical insight into how teachers understand and enact their professional selves. From this perspective, emotions are not peripheral to teaching but are deeply implicated in how teachers perceive their roles, negotiate institutional expectations, and position themselves within particular sociocultural environments. Examining how teachers experience and manage emotions thus offers a window into the ongoing construction and performance of professional identity (Mercer 2021, Song 2016).

A growing number of empirical studies have demonstrated that English teachers' professional development is closely shaped by their emotional experiences, which are mediated by sociocultural conditions in specific work environments. For example, Song (2016) examined Korean EFL teachers' struggles in adapting to new teaching contexts, showing how vulnerability emerged through interactions with curriculum demands, students' local cultural backgrounds, and teachers' own personal histories. Similarly, Sun and Yang (2021) examined two Chinese senior high school English teachers' emotions during a teaching improvement project, showing that emotional changes related to personal and contextual factors. Wolff and De Costa (2017) analyzed a Bangladeshi non-native English-speaking teacher's navigation of emotional challenges and illustrated how these experiences shaped both her teaching practices and emerging sense of professional identity. More recently, Li et al. (2024) demonstrated that a novice English-medium instruction (EMI) teacher's sense of professional identity was actively shaped through emotional discourse, as shifting emotional states reflected and guided her evolving understanding of her professional role. These studies suggest that language teachers' emotional challenges arise from multiple sources and that negotiating these challenges plays a central role in the ongoing formation of teacher identity.

Such emotional negotiation and professional growth are particularly salient in the experiences of novice teachers. Teng (2017) found that emotional fluctuations during teacher education programs were closely intertwined with identity shifts, highlighting the importance of managing emotions in early professional development. Similarly, Nazari et al. (2023) showed that novice EFL teachers' identity construction was entangled with emotional labor, with tensions arising from misalignments between their emerging identities and institutional expectations. Such findings point to the broader role of contextual factors, including institutional constraints, early-career status, and policy pressures, in shaping novice teachers' emotional experiences. Nazari et al. (2025) argue that participation in a professional learning community helped novice teachers address emotional tensions and reconstruct their professional identities, underscoring how the social and institutional contexts of early-career teaching mediate the

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relationship between emotion and identity development. These findings suggest that vulnerability and tension in novice language teachers' emotional experiences function not only as challenges but also as potential catalysts for professional growth.

Despite increasing recognition that language teacher emotions and identities are relational and context-dependent, relatively little attention has been paid to how structural educational inequalities—such as socioeconomic stratification and linguistic marginalization—shape teachers' emotional lives and identity work. Language teacher emotions are deeply entangled with institutional power relations, unequal resource distribution, and dominant language ideologies (Benesch 2017, De Costa and Norton 2017, Song and Park 2019). These dynamics take on particular salience in the Korean context, where structural inequalities rooted in multilingualism and socioeconomic stratification produce sharply differentiated teaching environments. The following section examines this context in detail.

2.2 Multilingualism, Educational Inequality, and English Teaching in South Korea

In recent years, public-school English teachers in Korea have encountered challenges that differ markedly from those faced by language teachers in other contexts or teachers of other subjects within the Korean education system (Lee 2016, Song 2016). These challenges stem from two interrelated social forces: the rapid expansion of multilingualism across Korean society and the widening divide in English proficiency that mirrors broader socioeconomic inequality (Choi 2021, Kim 2022, Youn and Kang 2019). In Korea, multilingualism and socioeconomic disparity do not operate independently; rather, they intersect to produce distinctive educational ecologies that English teachers must navigate in their everyday practice (Bronfenbrenner 1979, Choi 2021, Lee 2016). Crucially, multilingualism in the Korean context is not a politically neutral phenomenon but is deeply entangled with dominant language ideologies, socioeconomic hierarchies, and unequal distributions of educational opportunity, all of which bear directly on how English teachers experience, interpret, and negotiate their professional roles (Choi 2021, Lee 2016, Shin 2006).

Against the backdrop of globalization, Korea's linguistic landscape has changed substantially over the past three decades due to the influx of marriage migrants and foreign workers. The increase in immigrant and international marriages has given rise to new linguistic minority populations with multicultural and multilingual backgrounds, challenging Korea's long-standing ideology of linguistic homogeneity. According to the Korean Educational Statistics Service (KESS 2023), the number of multicultural students nationwide has grown rapidly, increasing from 46,954 in 2012 to over 181,000 in 2023. In addition, the Ministry of the Interior and Safety (2023) reported that the total population of foreign residents, naturalized citizens, and their Korean-born children reached 2,258,248. Currently, approximately four out of every 100 school students are from multicultural families. With Korea's record-low birthrate and the continued growth of migrant populations, language-minority students are expected to constitute an increasingly larger proportion of the public-school population (Choi 2021).

These demographic changes have not only expanded linguistic diversity but have also intensified existing educational inequalities. Many multilingual students face structural disadvantages that directly affect their academic performance, including limited access to linguistic support and private education. However, the rapid growth of multilingualism has not been accompanied by corresponding levels of institutional recognition or educational equity (Kim and Kim 2015, Olneck 2011, Park 2019). Instead, multilingualism has become increasingly entangled with structural forms of marginalization within Korean public education (Choi 2021, Kim 2018, Youn and Kang 2019). National data point to widening learning gaps for language-minority students: their middle-school dropout rate is nearly double that of their non-multicultural peers (Choi 2021). Through the analysis

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of data from the Busan Educational Longitudinal Study, Youn and Kang (2019) found that students from immigrant backgrounds initially underperformed across subject areas; notably, this achievement gap disappeared once socioeconomic variables were taken into account. This finding suggests that learning disparities are driven primarily by socioeconomic inequality rather than language ability alone. Other studies similarly report that many multicultural families experience chronic financial strain (Kim 2018), which restricts their access to private English education and further exacerbates disparities in English abilities, a phenomenon often referred to as the "English divide" (Lee and Jang 2023, Shin and Lee 2019). These studies illustrate how linguistic diversity, socioeconomic marginalization, and unequal access to English learning opportunities intersect to produce layered forms of educational inequality that English teachers encounter in their classrooms. Importantly, these inequalities are not evenly distributed but tend to be spatially concentrated in particular urban districts.

These structural conditions are further compounded by the limited preparedness of teachers to work with multilingual students (Kim 2020). Many teachers are insufficiently prepared to work with multilingual student populations as issues of linguistic and cultural diversity are rarely addressed in pre-service or in-service teacher education (Mo and Lim 2013, Roh 2015). As a result, students often fall behind due to inadequate linguistic and emotional support (Mo and Lim 2013). Chang (2015) notes that existing teacher training programs provide limited practical guidance for managing linguistic and cultural diversity in classrooms. Even in schools where Korean-as-a-Second-Language (KSL) programs are available, mainstream English teachers frequently struggle to bridge the gap between content instruction and language support (Choi 2021). Consequently, English teachers in multilingual and socioeconomically marginalized contexts are likely to face intensified emotional labor, increased pedagogical demands, and more complex identity negotiations than their counterparts in more ethnically homogeneous and affluent areas (Benesch 2017, Song 2016).

Despite such challenges in teaching English for multilingual learners, English teachers' negotiations of their identities and emotions have received limited attention in academic or institutional literature. One possible reason is that such identity work and related pedagogical practice remain discursively invisible and receive little institutional recognition, even when particular school contexts make them necessary. For instance, language teachers' relational work of sustaining motivation, trust, and classroom stability, which are required to teach marginalized students, is often read as a matter of personal disposition rather than professional expertise, and receives little institutional credit (Benesch 2017, Loh and Liew 2016). Thus, examining English teachers' emotions and identities across unequal educational contexts can make visible the pedagogical practices and roles that teachers construct as valuable and legitimate.

2.3 Ecological Perspectives on Teacher Emotion and Identity

Recent research on language teacher identity has increasingly adopted ecological perspectives to capture the relational, situated, and dynamic nature of teachers' professional lives (Edwards and Burns 2016, Nazari et al. 2023, Sun and Yang 2021, Wang et al. 2021). Moving beyond approaches that conceptualize identity as a stable internal attribute, ecological perspectives emphasize how teachers' emotions, beliefs, and identities are continuously negotiated through interactions with multiple contextual forces across time and space (Lasky 2005, Zembylas 2003). This orientation reflects broader shifts in applied linguistics and teacher education research that foreground context, power, and temporality in understanding professional development (De Costa et al. 2018, Han et al. 2023, Mercer 2021, Tsang 2021). Building on this body of work, the present study adopts an ecological approach to examine how a novice English teacher's emotions, pedagogical practices, and professional identity

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are shaped and reshaped across unequal educational environments. Specifically, this study draws on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979) as its core theoretical framework.

Ecological Systems Theory, originally developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), provides a structured and multi-layered framework for analyzing the reciprocal relationships between individuals and their surrounding contexts. Although initially conceptualized to explain child development, the theory has since been widely applied across educational research. In language education, ecological perspectives have been influential in theorizing classrooms and schools as dynamic environments in which social, discursive, material, and ideological factors intersect (van Lier 1997). Bronfenbrenner conceptualized context as a set of interrelated systems, including the microsystem of immediate interactions (e.g., classroom practices and teacher–student relationships), the mesosystem of connections among these settings (e.g., collegial collaboration and school-level support), the exosystem of institutional and policy structures that indirectly shape teachers' work (e.g., teacher rotation systems and administrative governance), and the macrosystem of broader sociocultural ideologies surrounding language, education, and professionalism. The chronosystem adds a temporal dimension, enabling analysis of how teachers' identities and emotions evolve across time through personal, institutional, and societal transitions. This temporal emphasis makes Ecological Systems Theory particularly compatible with narrative inquiry, which centers on experience and change over time. While Bronfenbrenner's nested model has been widely used, some scholars have proposed complementary formulations, such as Neal and Neal's (2013) networked ecological systems, which conceptualize context as overlapping configurations of social relationships rather than fixed spatial layers. However, as Chong et al. (2023) note, the explicit differentiation of ecological layers allows researchers to systematically trace how interactions across contextual levels shape teachers' emotions, identity work, and professional reasoning.

One policy worth noting is the teacher rotation system, under which public school teachers are assigned to a different school approximately every five years (Yoo 2018). Because schools within Seoul differ in student demographics, linguistic composition, and resource profiles, such transfers can generate major ecological shifts that prompt English teachers to renegotiate their pedagogical practices, beliefs, and professional identities (Song 2016). As will be discussed in the following section, the focal participant in this study was especially susceptible to such ecological shifts because she was a novice English teacher who moved from one of the most multilingual and socioeconomically marginalized districts to one of the most affluent and academically competitive districts in Seoul. This transition provides a particularly illuminating case for examining how language teacher emotions and identities are reconfigured through ecological shifts.

3. Methodology

Drawing on a narrative inquiry approach, this study examines how a novice English teacher's emotions and professional identity evolved across two contrasting educational contexts. Narrative inquiry is particularly suited to investigations of this kind because it provides access to teachers' accounts of professional experiences across time and multiple contexts, capturing how identity develops through sustained engagement with specific sociocultural conditions in their narratives (Barkhuizen et al. 2025). As such, it has been widely employed in language teacher identity research to explore how teachers interpret and make sense of their professional lives over time (Tsui 2007, Wolff and De Costa 2017). This methodological orientation is especially relevant to research on language teacher emotions, where emotions are understood not as private psychological states but as relational, political, and socially situated phenomena (Benesch 2017, Zembylas 2003).

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3.1 Participant and Context

To examine the emotional and identity-related dimensions of the case, this study employed purposive sampling, specifically within-case sampling (Dörnyei 2007). This approach enabled focused attention on particular aspects of the case—namely, the English teacher's emotions and experiences across multilingual and monolingual classroom contexts. Although three potential participants were initially recruited, their differing classroom compositions and years of teaching experience limited comparability. As a result, this study undertook an in-depth analysis of a single focal case, Mirae, based on two selection criteria: her experience teaching in a Chinese-dominant multilingual English classroom and her early-career status as a novice teacher. Mirae, Hanrim, and Solnae are pseudonyms.

Mirae began her career as an English teacher at a public middle school in Hanrim, Seoul, where students from Chinese backgrounds constituted approximately 40% of the student population. She taught in this context for three years (2018–2020) before transferring to a public middle school in Solnae, Seoul. In her first school, many multilingual students had Chinese backgrounds, including students from families formed through international marriages and students with Korean Chinese (*Chosunjok*) parents who had migrated from China. In contrast, the student population in her second school in Solnae was largely ethnically homogeneous and predominantly Korean. According to Mirae, students in Hanrim often experienced greater difficulty following English lessons due to language differences and lower academic motivation, whereas students in Solnae generally displayed high levels of motivation and academic engagement in English learning. As she perceived that the linguistic and socioeconomic disparities between these two districts were substantial, understanding them was essential to situating Mirae's professional experiences within the broader structural conditions of Seoul's educational landscape.

Hanrim is located in Yeongdeungpo-gu, a southwestern district of Seoul known for having one of the highest proportions of multicultural students in the city. According to the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education (2023), several schools in Yeongdeungpo reported multicultural student ratios substantially above the national average of 3.5% (KESS 2023). By contrast, Solnae remains a predominantly monolingual and socioeconomically privileged district, with multicultural students accounting for less than 2% of the student population (Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education 2023). Data from the Seoul Metropolitan Government (2023) further indicate that average household income in Yeongdeungpo district is substantially lower than in Solnae district. This socioeconomic gap shapes access to private education, opportunities for English learning, and overall school resources, thereby producing sharply different educational ecologies for English teachers. For Mirae, these differences formed a critical contextual backdrop that shaped her early emotional experiences, teaching challenges, and ongoing identity negotiation as a novice teacher.

3.2 Data Collection

Three rounds of retrospective interviews were conducted and audio-recorded to elicit Mirae's narratives. The first interview, conducted face-to-face, focused on background information about her teaching experiences and the difficulties and emotions she encountered in her English classes. The second interview was conducted online two weeks later and explored the sources of her teaching challenges and emotional changes during her three years in a Chinese-dominant multilingual school, as well as her efforts to address these challenges. The third interview, which was conducted two weeks after the second, focused on comparing her perceived teacher roles in Hanrim and Solnae. All interview recordings were transcribed for analysis. During the interviews, Mirae referred to a blog in which

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she had journaled classroom experiences and shared teaching materials, and to school materials such as annual academic plans and English curriculum outlines. She showed some of these to the interviewer while recounting particular episodes. With her permission, the research team also collected blog entries and drew on them in the analysis. The three interviews were conducted within a single month in 2023.

3.3 Data Analysis

Narrative inquiry treats a teacher's account of her past not as a record of what took place but as an interpretation carried out from a present position (Barkhuizen et al. 2025). When teachers look back on earlier phases of their careers, they select, order, and connect episodes in ways that make sense of who they have become, so that the coherence of a professional trajectory is itself produced through narrative (Barkhuizen 2016, Tsui 2007). The object of analysis is not only what a teacher recounts but also the position from which she recounts it, and what her retrospective accounts accomplish for her in her present setting (Wolff and De Costa 2017). Because such accounts are told from a particular moment in a career, they make visible how earlier settings are re-evaluated in light of later ones. In a similar vein, narrative inquiry does not require sustained observation of the events it examines, but it takes the narrated account itself, produced from a particular point in time, as the object of study (Barkhuizen et al. 2025). On this basis, three epistemological points of reference guided analysis and interpretation in this study. First, because all three interviews were conducted while she was teaching in Solnae, her account of Hanrim was necessarily narrated from that later position. Second, the temporal scale of the analysis was the career span Mirae narrated, beginning in 2018, rather than the period over which the data were collected. Third, Mirae's descriptions and evaluations of students, other teachers, and schools were understood as reflections of her situated perceptions rather than as independently verified sociocultural "facts."

Data analysis followed the procedures of narrative inquiry as outlined in Barkhuizen et al. (2025). The interview transcripts were first read holistically to identify key episodes describing emotionally salient events across Mirae's early career. These episodes were then coded inductively, with attention to how emotions were narrated in relation to contextual triggers, shifts in teaching practices, and changes in identity positioning. After initial coding, we constructed a chronological storyline tracing Mirae's emotional and professional development from the beginning of her career in Hanrim to her transfer to Solnae. Moving iteratively between individual narrative episodes and the broader chronological storyline, we identified emotional tensions and traced how they were produced through interactions across ecological layers. This included examining microsystemic classroom interactions and teacher-student dynamics; mesosystemic collegial relationships and institutional support structures; exosystemic policy arrangements, such as the teacher rotation system; and macrosystemic ideologies surrounding English, multilingualism, and academic achievement in Korea. This ecological mapping was conducted in dialogue with the narrative analysis rather than as a separate step, allowing us to attend simultaneously to the ways in which Mirae narrated her experiences and the structural conditions that shaped them.

Several procedures were used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis. Two researchers coded the transcripts independently before the full research team reviewed the coding and the narrative reconstruction. Disagreements were resolved by returning to the transcript and collaboratively discussing such cases. Member checking was conducted by sharing findings with Mirae, who recognized the narrative as consistent with her own understanding of her experience. She did not request any corrections or clarifications.

In what follows, the findings are presented with a focus on Mirae's transfer from Hanrim to Solnae. The account presented here is a reconstruction of her narratives, informed both by the ways in which she sought to construct a coherent trajectory through her narratives and by our thematic analysis of those narratives from an ecological

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perspective. This analytical and representational approach was informed by Barkhuizen's (2008, 2016) view that narrative inquiry is compatible with thematic analysis and that narrative episodes can be understood as being scaled across multiple contexts.

3.4 Researcher Reflexivity

Our research team consisted of five members who were studying or working in a graduate program in English language education at a South Korean university. Although we differed in ethnicity, gender, educational background, and research interests, we shared an interest in inclusive English teaching for multilingual students in South Korea. Two members were international graduate students from Chinese backgrounds. Their experiences of studying and living as linguistic minorities in the predominantly monolingual society made the team attentive to how multilingual speakers and multilingualism are positioned in public discourse and policy. Acknowledging the differences between the participant's position and our own, we listened closely to Mirae's accounts and treated points at which they diverged from our expectations as analytically significant.

We also recognized that our familiarity with Hanrim and Solnae would inevitably inform the analysis because the two districts carry contrasting meanings in South Korean public discourse. As described above, social surveys and statistical data document differences in their socioeconomic and linguistic profiles. At the same time, we remained attentive to the possibility that emphasizing this contrast could reproduce deficit representations of multilingual and low-income students. The contrast presented in the findings primarily reflects the way Mirae organized her own narrative, although our selection and organization of episodes may also shape its presentation. Nevertheless, neither her narrative nor our interpretation can be separated from broader public discourses on educational inequality and regional disparities in South Korea.

4. Findings

The findings are organized around the major shift in the chronosystem over time. As the analysis progressed, three temporal phases emerged: (1) from the pre-service period to Mirae's first year in Hanrim, (2) the subsequent years in Hanrim, and (3) the period following her transfer to Solnae. Each section below describes key emotional incidents Mirae experienced and examines how these incidents interacted with her beliefs, identities, and pedagogical practices as an English teacher.

4.1 Learning to Teach in Hanrim

Mirae described the beginning of her teaching career in terms of a deep affective commitment to her students, which was a mindset she traced to previous volunteer work with children in underprivileged settings. When she received her first assignment in Hanrim, a district known for its high proportion of multicultural students, she felt some apprehension, fueled in part by a popular film that had portrayed the district through the lens of crime and violence and reinforced existing social stigma. Nevertheless, with reassurance from colleagues and drawing on what she described as a generally positive outlook, Mirae began her work as a novice English teacher with a mix of slight concern and a genuine curiosity about the school.

What she encountered instead, in her telling, was a reality that challenged the beliefs she had formed during her pre-service years. She recalled being confronted with what she then read as low levels of motivation and

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engagement, which she described as leaving her embarrassed and uncertain about her teaching philosophy. Many students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds appeared to her to have low self-esteem and limited academic confidence. Having previously believed that a teacher's primary responsibility was the transmission of knowledge, Mirae frequently found herself in tension with students who showed little motivation to participate.

> "When I first stepped into the classroom, there were definitely a lot of moments where reality hit me hard and my fantasies shattered. Honestly, I lived a bit of a goody-two-shoes life during my school days, so I hadn't experienced many of the situations these students face in their school life. It was like realizing that what I had initially thought wasn't all that realistic, and that understanding made me feel a lot more at ease. Instead of trying to fit the students into my preconceived notions, I started trying to accept them for who they are." (Interview 2, 2 November 2023)

This discomfort Mirae described ran deeper than frustration with unmotivated students. She described her classroom encounters as bringing her face to face with realities of socioeconomic marginalization for which her pre-service training had left her unprepared. Rather than withdrawing, she responded by reorienting her practice around the students in front of her. In one early instance, Mirae assigned a personalized task to a student who had rarely engaged in class, asking him to memorize a basic vocabulary list during the lesson. The student responded, and gradually became more willing to participate.

A blog entry from the beginning of her second semester at Hanrim documented a similar effort to foster student motivation. Mirae designed a true/false game around stories from her own summer vacation, explaining that she wanted students to find, in her words, "a reason of their own" to engage with English, as many of them found the subject intimidating. She observed that incorporating her own photos and experiences appeared to capture students' attention more effectively and that they remained engaged when writing and anonymously sharing similar statements about themselves. Reflecting on the activity afterward, Mirae wished that she had given students an even more active role, for instance by inviting them to come forward individually and select which one to read. Through such efforts, Mirae's initial confusion began to give way to a more sustaining source of commitment.

> "I felt more like an entertainer than a teacher at that time. 'Let's make this fun! Here, have some candy.' I gave a lot of external rewards. […] The candy wasn't just candy; it was the teacher's love, at least that's how the kids seemed to perceive it. Attention, affection. I think those were pretty significant. […] The moment I feel like I'm doing well in teaching is when students start opening their minds. It feels like my efforts and affection for them are being well received by them. That's when I feel it." (Interview 1, 16 October 2023)

Although attention, affection, and small relational gestures had no place in Mirae's pre-service image of good teaching, these resources proved more generative than the approaches she had initially tried. This shift was still taking shape through daily classroom encounters at the microsystem level with limited institutional guidance. At the same time, her sustained engagement with multicultural students was reshaping her assumptions about the students themselves.

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> "The multicultural, multilingual situation here feels just like any other school condition. It's a time when students, whether they're Korean or Chinese, have a lot of thoughts and doubts about themselves. Adolescents, you know. I just felt like [multiculturalism] is one of many other factors. Even when I was teaching, I didn't feel much difference compared to other students. It was similar, but some students just had slightly lower motivation and weren't yet proficient in English." (Interview 1, 16 October 2023)

Mirae's reflection narrated a subtle shift in perspective. In her account, she moved away from viewing her students mainly through the lens of linguistic and cultural differences; instead, she came to see adolescents—uncertain, self-doubting, and in need of support—whose challenges were evident regardless of their background. Multilingualism was just one aspect among many, and this realization fostered a different kind of teaching relationship.

By the end of her first year, Mirae had not resolved the tensions of her new context, but she had found in care and affective attentiveness a foundation from which to teach. It was through this process of emotional reworking, set in motion by daily microsystemic encounters with marginalized students, that she began to claim an identity as a caring motivator, a teacher for whom emotional connection ran through every aspect of her practice. This identity, still nascent, would deepen significantly in the years that followed.

4.2 From Survival to Commitment

As Mirae moved into her second and third years in Hanrim, she gradually adapted to the school environment and felt more secure in her role as an English teacher. She also recounted changes in the broader school atmosphere. In her account, multicultural students who had previously kept to the margins were becoming more visible as their linguistic repertoires were increasingly acknowledged rather than treated as deficits. At the mesosystem level, this shift was partly enabled by the arrival of a Chinese bilingual assistant teacher, whose presence transformed the teachers' room into something Mirae called a sarangbang—a gathering place.

> "There were students who had recently immigrated from China. They had just transferred schools across countries and all the surroundings including their language suddenly changed. They had nowhere to attach themselves. Then, the Chinese bilingual teacher really took care of these kids a lot emotionally. The kids came to see her and hang out there while chatting in Chinese. The teachers' room became a *sarangbang*." (Interview 3, 14 November 2023)

In Mirae's account, the bilingual teacher became a cultural broker for her as much as for the students. Through her, Mirae gained access to understandings of the school's multicultural condition that classroom observation alone could not provide: why certain students arrived late, how family patterns differed, and what kinds of support the children were actually seeking.

This mesosystemic scaffolding expanded Mirae's pedagogical reach and deepened her sense of investment in the school's multilingual community. Inspired by this change, Mirae and her fellow teachers formed a voluntary group to learn basic Chinese, meeting once or twice a week after school with the bilingual assistant and a Chinese language teacher. The proficiency they gained was elementary, and it rarely translated into direct communication with students in Chinese. Yet for Mirae, the shared effort carried its own significance. Colleagues sitting together after hours and learning a language that mattered to their students signaled an orientation that a multilingual school should pursue. These collegial practices made relational support a concrete resource. It was this sense of collective

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investment, as much as any individual pedagogical decision, that deepened her confidence and enthusiasm as a teacher of multilingual learners.

Building on her growing confidence and institutional support, Mirae introduced what she would later describe as her most memorable teaching practice: the "Dear Me Card" activity, where students wrote self-affirming messages to themselves in English. The goal was to empower students with low self-esteem and foster an inclusive classroom environment where everyone felt valued and appreciated.

> "There was a multicultural student who wrote a Christmas card to themselves that said something negative like, 'That's just how you are.' That's when I realized that students found it hard to say something kind to themselves. […] That's why I first did this activity. The hardest part for the students was not writing in English; they spent the most time finding something positive about themselves. […] The reason the Dear Me Card activity stands out to me is that, unlike other activities which were designed solely for oral communication or just for fun, it had a positive impact on the students' emotions and self-image. It really reflected the direction I want to pursue as a teacher." (Interview 3, 14 November 2023)

Mirae described the student's card as a moment that led her to reconsider the place of students' self-perceptions in English lessons. In her account, the activity made emotional support part of her pedagogical purpose rather than an incidental expression of care.

> "Looking back on my three years in Hanrim, I approached teaching more from the aspect of motivation, rather than teaching a large amount of knowledge. This seemed to change my identity as a teacher. At first, I thought knowledge was crucial, but in reality, it might not be that important. Because I saw positive changes in students even when I didn't teach them a lot of content, I started to think that focusing on knowledge alone might not be the right approach. My perception of what it means to be a teacher has broadened. There was a kind of growth. A change in me." (Interview 2, 2 November 2023)

In this retrospective account, she described a pedagogical shift away from knowledge transmission as the measure of good teaching, toward a relational approach to teaching. What had begun as an affective disposition in her first year had, through the mesosystemic support of colleagues and the responsiveness of students, consolidated into a professional identity she could articulate and claim. She thus presented her earlier self as a caring motivator, a teacher whose authority rested on emotional attentiveness and the creation of spaces where marginalized students could find confidence.

4.3 Identity under Pressure in Solnae

Looking back from Solnae, Mirae described her three years in Hanrim as having given her a settled sense of who she was as a teacher. The rotation system then relocated her to Solnae, a district defined by intense academic competition, overwhelmingly monolingual classrooms, and students whose approaches to English learning differed markedly from those she had previously taught. The first thing she noticed was the desks.

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> "In Hanrim, it was very common to see students without pencils or books on their desks. But in Solnae, every student has their books, pencil cases, colorful pens, and files ready and fully prepared, waiting for the class to start. I was shocked. Once I began teaching, they diligently took notes with great enthusiasm." (Interview 1, 16 October 2023)

Her account of this shock extended beyond the tidy pencil cases. Besides classroom lessons, Mirae faced a learning culture shaped by fierce competition and private tutoring. What Mirae was encountering was a different student population shaped by broader systemic pressures where English was a form of academic capital, and attending hagwon, or private after-school lessons, was common practice. The combination of heavy academic workloads, heightened stress, large class sizes, and what Mirae perceived as a more "calculative" approach to learning contrasted sharply with her earlier experiences in Hanrim.

> "There weren't many students going to hagwon after school in Hanrim. Here in Solnae, there's no student who doesn't go to hagwon. From the evening till late at night. You know, it requires a lot of attention from parents. There seems to be quite a big difference in parental involvement and care. […] Perhaps due to the high academic pressure, students seem a bit astute here. Sometimes they exhibit a more calculated attitude." (Interview 2, 2 November 2023)

> "They might ask, 'Will this be on the test?' and study selectively." (Interview 3, 14 November 2023)

As Mirae described them, the students at the school in Solnae were already motivated; they arrived prepared for the high-stakes assessments in ways Mirae had never had to account for. The identity she formed in Hanrim—centered on emotional attentiveness and the gradual process of building student confidence—became less central to how she understood and described her work in Solnae. She questioned what kind of teacher she could be in this new environment, which seemed to have no place for the teacher she had become. Facing students who were already highly motivated and achievement-oriented, she felt an increasing need to strengthen her professionalism as a content specialist rather than primarily positioning herself as a motivator or advocate for inclusive classroom participation.

> "Here, many students are already motivated and highly focused on their grades. So the emphasis in my classes has shifted more towards knowledge transmission and precise explanations rather than motivation. I spend more time thinking about how to effectively convey and organize the curriculum content, as well as considering students' learning strategies and styles. Also, given the higher level of teaching and exam questions, I find myself thinking that I need to be more thorough and better versed in curriculum content." (Interview 3, 14 November 2023)

This was not simply a personal recalibration. The exosystemic conditions of Solnae, including large class sizes exceeding 35 students, a pervasive hagwon culture, and strong parental expectations regarding exam performance, made activity-based instruction difficult to sustain. At the mesosystem level, colleagues relied predominantly on lecture-based teaching, and the collaborative atmosphere Mirae had known in Hanrim was largely absent. In Mirae's account, these conditions placed greater value on a specific kind of teacher: one who delivered content with precision and prepared students for assessments. Mirae found herself, gradually, becoming that teacher.

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For Mirae, becoming a content specialist involved explaining curricular content with greater precision, organizing lessons more closely around assessed knowledge, and paying greater attention to how students approached learning. These were not simply technical adjustments; they reflected a change in what she understood effective teaching to require in Solnae. The relational and affective work that had been central to her account of Hanrim did not disappear, but it became less prominent in how she described her professional work.

Despite these changes, Mirae emphasized that her earlier experiences in Hanrim continued to exert a lasting influence on how she navigated this transition. When asked how she might have felt if she had begun her career in Solnae and then transferred to Hanrim, she suggested that the adjustment would have been far more difficult.

> "Oh, I think I would have been extremely surprised. Much more than when I first got assigned. Having already formed a certain level of teacher identity and expecting students to behave in a certain way, moving to a place like Hanrim would have been very hard to handle. Yes, the first job is crucial." (Interview 2, 2 November 2023)

Mirae described Hanrim as formative for her professional development because it had required her to make care part of her teaching. Her hypothetical reversed transfer gave Hanrim continuing value in the story she told from Solnae. She suggested that this experience made Solnae more approachable and that, without her experience in Hanrim, adaptation would have been much more difficult. While Mirae's teacher identity continued to evolve in Solnae, she articulated a sustained aspiration to be "a teacher who fosters a positive change in students." Although she questioned whether she could exert the same level of influence on students in Solnae as she had in Hanrim, she emphasized her continuing desire to have a positive impact.

> "In Hanrim, I often thought about being a teacher who created a classroom where everyone participated. As time goes by, especially recently, I've come to think that I might not be able to have such a huge impact on students through my classes. Despite this, I still want to be a teacher who has a positive influence on my students, even if just a little." (Interview 3, 14 November 2023)

In Mirae's account, the goal of having a positive influence on students remained important, although she described pursuing it differently in Solnae. Her emphasis shifted from securing full classroom participation to making a smaller positive difference within a school ecology that demanded a different form of teaching. "Especially recently" locates this evaluation in her present position, while "even if just a little" qualifies the influence she claims. These phrases suggest how a continuing aspiration was narrated together with uncertainty about its current enactment.

5. Discussion

Building on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, this section first traces how Mirae's emotions, pedagogical practices, and professional identity were reshaped across the ecological layers of Hanrim and Solnae. It then considers what her ecological shift reveals about teacher identity and labor. Specifically, Mirae's account suggests that contrasting school conditions shaped how she valued different forms of professional expertise: relational work with multilingual and marginalized students in one setting, and curricular precision in the other.

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From this perspective, a coherent professional identity is actively constructed through reflection and narrative across contrasting ecologies.

Mirae's narrative traced a trajectory in which her emotions, pedagogical practices, and professional identity were continuously reshaped as conditions across ecological layers changed between Hanrim and Solnae. In Hanrim, interrelated conditions allowed emotional investment and identity formation to move in the same direction: microsystemic encounters with marginalized students and mesosystemic support from colleagues and a Chinese bilingual assistant teacher, including the voluntary Chinese-learning group through which relational support became part of her professional experience. The macrosystemic deficit discourses that had initially framed Hanrim as a difficult and undesirable workplace were, through sustained engagement, gradually reinterpreted. What had begun as apprehension became care, and what had begun as confusion became a settled professional commitment.

By contrast, Mirae's move to Solnae involved a simultaneous reconfiguration of multiple ecological layers. Microsystemic classroom interactions were characterized by high levels of student preparedness and exam-oriented engagement, while mesosystemic relations among teachers were more individualistic and aligned with lecture-based instruction. At the exosystemic level, strong parental involvement and widespread participation in private tutoring reinforced a narrow focus on measurable academic outcomes. These dynamics were underpinned by a macrosystem in which English functioned as a form of cultural and economic capital, closely tied to neoliberal competition and high-stakes assessment (Lee 2016, Shin 2006). The shift made the emotional and pedagogical orientations Mirae had developed in Hanrim more difficult to maintain and less visible as professional expertise. Emotional shock thus emerged not simply as a reaction to difference, but as an indicator of misalignment between an established professional identity and a newly encountered ecological configuration. All in all, Mirae's emotional experiences during her three years in a multilingual classroom highlight that teacher emotions are relational, situated, and socially mediated rather than fixed individual traits (Barcelos 2015, Lasky 2005, Mercer 2021, Zembylas 2003).

In addition, the findings show that teacher identity is negotiated ecologically through the alignment of emotion and pedagogy that is made possible or constrained by particular institutional environments. The movement from the Dear Me Card to greater curricular precision illustrates changing pedagogical priorities alongside continuing responsiveness to learners. This shift should not be understood as a simple replacement of one identity with another. Rather, it reflects an ongoing process of identity negotiation in which contextual constraints narrowed the range of identity options that she perceived as viable and valued (Lasky 2005, Song 2016). In other words, Mirae's case illustrates how structural pressures can lead teachers to recalibrate their practices and identities in response to dominant norms. In this process, emotions can prompt identity negotiation and pedagogical adjustment. This finding suggests that emotion is not peripheral to teacher practice but constitutes a core component of identity formation and professional reasoning (Barcelos 2015, Borg 2006, 2019, Mercer 2021).

Taken together, the findings suggest that educational inequality shapes not only what teachers experience but also how teachers perceive the value of different forms of professional expertise. In Mirae's account of Hanrim, care, affection, and sustained motivational efforts were important for supporting students whom she perceived as having low self-esteem and limited academic confidence within the broader structural disadvantages faced by multilingual and multicultural students in the Korean education system (Choi 2021, Kim 2018, Kim and Kim 2015, Lee 2016, Youn and Kang 2019). Yet this emotional labor tends to remain invisible or undervalued as professional expertise (Benesch 2017, Mercer 2023, Miller and Gkonou 2018). By contrast, Mirae's account of Solnae foregrounded subject knowledge and exam preparation as professional demands. Mirae's trajectory suggests that teacher emotions and identities are inseparable from broader structures of inequality, and that navigating these

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structures involves continuous negotiation of what it means to be a "good" English teacher in different contexts (Nazari et al. 2023, Song 2016, Teng 2017).

The chronosystem helps clarify this argument (Bronfenbrenner 1979, Neal and Neal 2013). In Mirae's case, the chronosystem provides a temporal thread: her transfer carried a set of skills and beliefs developed in one ecological context into a new one, where she reassessed their value. The relational competence she brought to Solnae had been formed under Hanrim's particular configuration of macro- and mesosystemic conditions. When carried into Solnae, the same competence met a macrosystem oriented around competition and private tutoring, where she described greater demands for subject expertise and exam preparation. Through this chronosystemic lens, Hanrim and Solnae can be understood not as two separate snapshots but as connected points within a single trajectory.

Linking two school ecologies through the chronosystem also shows what remained consistent across the transfer. Mirae continued to describe good teaching in terms of fostering positive change, even as she acknowledged the limits of her influence in Solnae. This continuity does not mean that her earlier identity remained unchanged; rather, the school ecology altered how it could be enacted. Her comment that moving from Solnae to Hanrim would have been more difficult suggests that, in her own account, her first placement shaped how she approached later teaching contexts. In this sense, the early-career ecology served as a reference point for interpreting the later transfer (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Her accounts of relational work in Hanrim and content-focused teaching in Solnae suggest a continuing aspiration to foster positive change, even though it was expressed through different pedagogical practices. This retrospective framing gave continuing value to the relational work she developed in Hanrim, even though it was less visible in Solnae. Her account therefore shows not only a change in practice but also how she made sense of two different expectations of good teaching.

6. Conclusion

Drawing on Ecological Systems Theory and narrative inquiry, this study examined how Mirae retrospectively described changes in her emotions, teaching practices, and professional identity across two school contexts in Seoul. Her account shows that this ecological shift changed not only her teaching conditions, but also the ways in which she perceived the value of her professional expertise. This study suggests how educational inequality may shape teachers' identity negotiations and their understanding of professional expertise.

This study offers two implications for teacher education and professional support. First, Mirae's case illustrates how emotional experience formed part of her professional development, particularly as she learned to work in a multilingual and socioeconomically disadvantaged school (De Costa and Norton 2017, Song 2016, Song and Miller 2025). Teacher education programs could provide opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers to reflect on emotional experiences and articulate how these experiences shape their professional roles. Second, Mirae's account suggests that transfers between contrasting school contexts can place new emotional and identity demands on teachers. Mentoring, collaborative teacher communities, and context-sensitive professional development may help teachers recognize and adapt the expertise developed in different schools. Her experience also suggests that teacher education and evaluation should give greater attention to the relational and affective work developed in multilingual and socioeconomically marginalized contexts (Benesch 2017, Choi 2021, Kim and Kim 2015).

This study is limited by its reliance on one participant's retrospective interviews. The findings describe how Mirae constructed her professional trajectory from her current position rather than provide a directly observed record of change or a basis for statistical generalization. The supplementary materials contextualized particular

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episodes but did not independently establish school-wide standards of professional recognition. Future research could compare multiple teachers across school transfers or follow teachers longitudinally through several rotations. Ethnographic observation could also provide evidence of how teacher identity and emotion are enacted in everyday school practice.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Language: English
Applicable Levels: Secondary, Tertiary

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