



From Otherness to Belonging: How co-ethnic relationships helped young Korean New Zealanders form a positive ethnic identity

This article addresses a question of growing relevance for researchers, educators, parents, and students across Aotearoa: why do Korean New Zealanders increasingly form friendships with co-ethnic peers during their high school and university years?

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 Korean New Zealanders from the newer generation, the study traces a clear trajectory of identity development. Children who begin their education in small, predominantly Pākehā primary schools often face social marginalisation, pressures to assimilate, and suppression of visible cultural expressions. As they transition into larger, more diverse secondary and tertiary institutions—paralleled by the rising visibility of Korean popular culture—many find psychological comfort and affirmation within co-ethnic peer networks.

These co-ethnic relationships offer more than just companionship: they provide shared understanding, a sense of belonging rooted in common migrant family experiences, and a space where heritage language, cuisine, and values can be expressed without apology or explanation.

The authors identify both structural and interpersonal dynamics behind this phenomenon: Korean families often settle in majority-Pākehā neighbourhoods, parents frequently prioritise English-language immersion, and school cultures remain centred on white norms. Rather than seeing co-ethnic friendship groups as exclusionary, the article reframes them as an adaptive response to the identity dissonance created by mainstream environments.

This study offers concrete, evidence-based insights for educators and policymakers. It calls for the visible inclusion of heritage cultures in school life, the normalisation of diverse languages and food practices, and the creation of safe spaces where minoritised youth can explore and affirm their cultural identities. This article helps readers understand the everyday logic behind a common but underexamined social dynamic in Aotearoa's classrooms—and suggests practical strategies for building inclusive educational environments.

Full article available: Park, L. S. C., Park, J. J., & Song, C. (2024). From otherness to belongingness: the role of co-ethnic relationships in Korean New Zealanders' ethnic identity formation. *Identities*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2024.2427522>

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