

“Examining Diversity in the Republic of Korea Through the Educational Lens”

The experiences of North Korean defectors: Do specialized schools aimed at North Korean defectors rather hinder their transition into South Korean society than help them?

Jung-hwan Jang

ABSTRACT: North Korean defectors are given one educational choice, not a variety of choices. This is especially true for North Korean teenagers living in South Korea who attend alternative schools quite different from those attended by South Korean teenagers. Do North Korean teens truly for North Korean teenagers living in South Korea who attend alternative schools quite different from those attended by South Korean teenagers? Do North Korean teens truly benefit from the current special segregated schooling system, or do these separate schools hinder their socialization rather than integrate them into South Korean life?

Analyzing this issue through economic, social and educational lenses will help provide a clearer picture of the barriers and potential advantages that may impact the life of a typical North Korean student defector. By conducting in-depth surveys and focus group discussion sessions with students who have attended these specialized schools, the study will examine student experiences to evaluate whether this divided school system set by the South Korean government is supporting the success of North Korean teens.

Keywords: North Korea, Adolescent Refugees, Education, South Korean Schools, Diversity, saeteomin teenagers

Introduction

A minority in disguise: North Korean defectors. Although we look alike, they are faced with different circumstances which starkly contrast from their South Korean peers. This study examines North Korean defectors in South Korea, with a special focus on their education. Currently, there is approximately 27,000 defectors, including the 2,500 teenage defectors residing in South Korea.¹ Ironically, they exist as a minority within South Korean

¹ 탈북청소년 교육현황(Education Status of North Korean Refugees in South Korea) (n.d.). Retrieved December 12, 2016, from <http://www.hub4u.or.kr/hub/edu/status01.do>

society, when after all, they are Korean as well.² Considering the limited amount of research done on the education of teenage defectors, this study will analyze the status quo of North Korean defectors, with a special focus on the education of defectors and specialized schools designed for defectors who are young adults. This paper will aim to answer questions such as: do North Korean teens truly benefit from attending special, segregated schooling mandated by the government, or does it hinder their integration into South Korean life? To what extent do the social networks built during students' adolescent years influence life outcomes?

The first phase of the project will involve surveying students from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. This will be achieved through seminars, in which teenagers attending English-language, vocational, magnet, and NGO-run schools will discuss their experiences at each type of school. Follow-up interviews will be conducted one-on-one to encourage the sharing of personal testimonies and honest feedback.

The second phase will involve similar workshops organized with the goal of studying North Korean adults now living in South Korea. In these focus groups, participants will provide insight on how the type of school they graduated from or attended has influenced their current career, lifestyle, and social standing.

As Korea has historically been an ethnically homogeneous country with little diversity, there has been limited research into the problems faced by defectors, especially difficulties young defectors may encounter. This paper will endeavor to offer unique insight into this understudied process of socialization and integration into South Korean society.

The Overall Situation of North Korean Defectors

From the mid-1990s, this sudden phenomenon of the rise of defections by members of the general North Korean population was caused by economic instability in North Korea and severe floods that occurred in 1995 and 1996. North Koreans suffered famine and many people died from hunger. In order to survive, many North Koreans entered China temporarily to work and then returned to North Korea. However, during this period, some North Koreans

² South Korea, Ministry of Education. (n.d.). *North Korean Economy Watch*. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from <http://www.nkeconwatch.com/nk-uploads/Manual-for-the-Resettlement-Support-for-North-Korean-Refugees.pdf>

migrated from China to South Korea. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, in 1998, there were a total of 947 defectors who entered the South and the percentage of female refugees was 12%. In 2001, the number of North Korean defectors coming to South Korea was over 1,000. Since 2002 the percentage of women has increased to become larger than men. In September of 2016, the number of North Korean refugees living in South Korea was almost 30,000 people.

With the rapid increase of the number of North Korean defectors entering South Korea, various changes have occurred. First, NGOs may try to help North Korean refugees try to escape North Korea and enter South Korea, since this assistance will prove a safer defection paths for women, children, and the elderly. In addition, this assistance by NGOs is increasing the number of defections by a group of family members. As a result of these changes the constitution of North Korean residents in South Korea has become more diverse. This has helped more South Korean people view North Korean refugees entering South Korea as ordinary people, not social, political and ideological defectors who might need assistance in integrating into a new life.

Social, Cultural, and Psychological Effects Defectors Face

As mentioned above, the ratio of North Korean defectors has risen sharply in recent years as has the proportion of North Korean female defectors. Over 50 percent of youth defectors have difficulty adapting for diverse reasons. The biggest reasons are the social climate and cultural differences in South Korean society, and many schools established for the social integration of North Korean refugee youth are not effective.

First, the North Korean defector youths were unable to adapt to school in South Korea and most often quit halfway through the school. According to an excerpt from the Hankyoreh newspaper press release, “Won Hye-young (Democrat, Bucheon Oh Jung District) of the National Assembly Foreign Affairs and Trade Unification Committee in October, 2013, of the 56 youths 42.9% said they stopped studying because of immigration reasons, followed by long-term absences (23.2%), career change (21.4%), school maladjustment (8.9%) and missing (3.5%). Won pointed out that the immigration phenomenon of the defectors is fundamentally a sign that Korean society is not helping them

properly. The number of North Korean refugees in elementary and junior high schools, which was 966 in 2008, nearly doubled to 1992 by the end of 2012.³

In addition, only around half of North Korean refugees are “school-aged.” According to the 2015 edition of the Daily Newspaper in South Korea, “About half of the North Korean refugees who attended high school were older than the age of school or grade who were below their age. The Ministry of Unification and the South and North Korea Foundation surveyed 744 North Korean adolescents in South Korea under the age of 18 who entered the country by December 2013, and found that 48.1% of the students attended schools lower than school age. The proportion of those who exceeded the age limit was 29.1% in middle school, which was relatively higher than that of elementary school (3.9%). The most difficult problem at school for them was 'to follow school lessons' (48%). Culture, language adaptation (14.9%) and friendship (8%) were also identified as difficulties in school life.”⁴

Source: South and North Korea Foundation

In April of 2016, 13 employees of a restaurant the North Korean government operates in China entered South Korea together⁵ and high-ranking military personnel are also entering the country. In the 1990s, low-income North Koreans often escaped from North Korea, but in recent years, defectors such as diplomats, overseas employees, and senior officers are fleeing in increasing numbers. More importantly, the number of North Korean teenagers is also increasing, and there are problems to be considered regarding their integration into South Korean society. Despite the increase in the number of North Korean refugees, the school system for them has not improved significantly in integrating young defectors into a new society. According to the "North Korean Youth Survey of 2014," reported by the media, 58.4 percent of North Korean teenagers said they do not want to reveal that they are from North Korea.⁶

³ Hong Yong-deok, “North Korean Refugee students quitting schooling is 'Korean maladjustment' rather than 'School maladjustment'”, *The Hankyoreh*, October 9, 2013 (홍용덕기자, “탈북청소년 학업중단 이유는 ‘학교 부적응’보다 ‘한국 부적응’”, 한겨레신문, 2013년 10월 9일), accessed November 29, 2016, <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/area/606436.html>

⁴ Jang Young-eun, "Half of North Korean high school students are" over school age", *The Edaily*, February 9, 2015 (장영은기자, “탈북 고등학생 절반이 학령초과자”, 이데일리, 2015년 2월 9일), accessed November 29, 2016, http://www.edaily.co.kr/news/realtime/realtime_NewsRead.asp?newsid=03148806609268880

⁵ Yonhap, “North Korean restaurant workers resettle in South Korea after April mass defection”, *The Korea Herald*, August 17, 2016, accessed November 29, 2016, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20160817000140>

⁶ Lee Min-young, “Survey on actual situation of North Korean defectors”, *The Seoul Newspaper*, February 1, 2016 (이민영기자, “탈북 청소년 실태 조사”, 서울신문, 2016년 2월 1일), accessed November 29, 2016, <http://www.seoul.co.kr/news/newsView.php?id=20160202005004>

Due to various factors, including the famine in North Korea in the 1990s, North Korean adolescents have experienced more nutritional deficiencies and growth-related issues than their South Korean counterparts. The average height and weight of a North Korean defector is less than that of the average South Korean, and it is difficult to see that this physical difference leads to social problems as well. Especially in South Korea, where favorable physical standard is to be tall in height, these emotions can be linked to social maladjustment. Also, according to 2004 Unification Ministry data, it takes about three years for North Korean refugees to get to South Korea after leaving North Korea, and in most cases, they travel through China, Central and Southeast Asia.⁷ The tense situation and experience during this period can have a profound effect on the psychological and emotional state of North Korean children and adolescents.

Furthermore, the abrupt change from a communist system to a capitalist system including the concept of democracy renders it difficult to adapt to the new unfamiliar environment. However, there isn't a wide range understanding and tolerance in South Korean society. In fact, North Korean defectors face “over-expectation” or the general assumption that because North Koreans are Koreans, they will face minimal barriers in transitioning into society.⁸ Rather, they are viewed unfavorably when unable to adapt to South Korean society. The problem they face is a complex problem that cannot be overcome only by historical, social, and individual efforts such as division of the South and North Korea, differences in ideology, differences in language use, and cultural differences.

The Status Quo on Education for Defector Youth

Many defectors feel that they are discriminated against because of the fact that they came from North Korea. According to a survey of 79 adolescents of North Korean defectors who entered Korea from 2000 to 2003, 74.6% of the respondents said they were from North Korea. However, 81.8% of them are known as teachers' introduction as soon as they enter school. Only 18.2% of the respondents said they spoke voluntarily. 66.7% of the girls did not tell it. The burden of hiding one's identity may actually cause psychological stress when

⁷ "Actual Situation and Tasks of North Korean Adolescents in South Korean Society" ("새터민 청소년의 남한 사회 적응실태와 과제"), accessed November 29, 2016

http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:UDIEw0y7sJ8J:www.nuac.go.kr/jsp/fileupload/file_down.jsp%3FbaseDir%3Dupload/board%26addDir%3D%20%26filename%3D%25C1%25D6%25C1%25A6%25B9%25DF%25C7%25A5%25B9%25AE-%25BB%25F5%25C5%25CD%25B9%25CE%25C3%25BB%25BC%25D2%25B3%25E2%25C0%25C7%2520%25B3%25B2%25C7%25D1%25BB%25E7%25C8%25B8%2520%25C0%25FB%25C0%25C0%25BD%25C7%25C5%25C2%25BF%25CD%2520%25B0%25FA%25C1%25A6.hwp%26servername%3D3670dde269f0e8219ab4.hwp+&cd=1&hl=ko&ct=clink&gl=kr

⁸ Jeon, W. T. (2000). Issues and problems of adaptation of North Korean defectors to South Korean society: An in-depth interview study with 32 defectors. *Yonsei Medical Journal*, 41(3), 362. doi:10.3349/ymj. 2000.41.3.362

making friends, and this can be caused by anxiety that his or her true identity will be revealed. As a result, it can be very difficult for North Korean refugee teens to form relationships with peers in South Korea, which can eventually lead to school dropouts.⁹

According to a study of the level of education of 75 North Korean refugee students from the fifth grade of elementary school to the third grade of junior high school in Seoul in 2004, the decline of middle school students was worse than that of elementary school students. In particular, more than 80% of middle school students failed math. Poor schooling is the main reason for the disruption of youth. Since they have the difficulty studying and making friends in school, most of the North Korean refugee teenagers are abandoned or dropped out of school. According to the data from the Ministry of Education, the enrollment rate for middle school is 57.9%, while the enrollment rate for high school is only 10.9%. In comparison, the high school enrollment rate in South Korea is 98%, and university enrollment rate is close to 80%. Given that South Korean society highly values academics and scholarly work, the prevailing low educational status of North Korean defectors soon becomes a big obstacle to their future social life.¹⁰

Status of school children and adolescents school enrollment (March 2004)

[새터민 아동 청소년 취학현황 (2004 3 월)]

Group	Elementary School (Ages 6-12)	Middle School (Ages 13-15)	High School (16-20 세)	Others (Lifelong Education Facility)	Total
Students to Enroll	217	114	294		625
Students	364	66	32	2	464

⁹ Jung Jin-kyoung, Jung Byung-ho, Yang Kye-min, "The Adjustment of North Korean Refugee Youths in South Korean Schools"(KRF-073-BM2004)(National Research Foundation of Korea) (정진경,정병호, 양계민, "탈북 청소년의 남한학교 적응" (KRF-073-BM2004), (한국학술진흥재단, 2002), P 8

¹⁰ Kim Mi-sook," "A Study on the Actual Condition of School Adaptation Process of North Korean Defector Students (RR2004-02)", 2004 (김미숙, "북한이탈학생의 학교적응과정 실태분석 연구(RR2004-02)", 2004), P114, <https://www.kedi.re.kr/khome/main/research/selectPubForm.do?plNum0=4386>

Enrollment Rate(%)	167	57.9	10.9		74.2
--------------------	-----	------	------	--	------

Source: Ministry of Education "School Establishment Plan for North Korean Defectors" (July 2004)

[출전: 교육부 “북한 이탈주민을 위한 학교설립추진계획” (2004.7)]

The interdisciplinary system of North Korea is 2 years of kindergarten, 4 years of elementary school, and 6 years of middle school. That is 11 years of compulsory education up to middle school, including one year of kindergarten. When South Korean students graduate from junior high school, with the two years gap that occurred in elementary school, North Korean students become 16 years old when they graduate middle school. Thus, these interdisciplinary differences cause fundamental problems in enrolling North Korean refugee students in South Korean schools. In accordance with the current policy of education for North Korean students being assigned to South Korean schools over a period of time, many settled students are placed in grades two or three years younger than their age. If they were not able to go to school in North Korea and took a few years to escape from North Korea, it will be included in the school year as much as the time they spent from escaping North Korea to entering South Korea. According to the data from Ministry of Education (2004.7), only 4.8% of school-aged adolescents attend public schools with students the same age as they are. Approximately 75% differ by more than 2 years, the extreme case being 6 years.

School-Age Difference Gap between North Korean Defectors Attend at General Schools

[일반학교에 재학중인 북한이탈 청소년의 학령-학년 간 차이]

Age Gap	0 yr	1 yr	2 yr	3 yr	4 yr	5 yr	6 yr
Rate(%)	4.8	21.4	33.3	28.6	7.1	2.4	2.4

The biggest educational burden defectors face is English. Never in the North Korea have they heard English and with language diversification ever so widening in South Korea, increasingly more young defectors complain about the challenges of learning this new language. However, it is an obstacle they inevitably must face to get a job other than manual labor or menial tasks. In the 2005 study by the DCNKHR, 52 of the surveyed 126 defector

youth indicated that English was the toughest subject.¹¹ In another survey of 60 college students, defector students scored an average 445 on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), 100 points lower than the South Korean Average in 2005.¹² Thus, the culminations of these factors lead to many defector youths to drop out of the educational system, leaving future prospects for social mobility in South Korea bleak.¹³ The solution is to establish a specialized school dedicated for North Korean refugees — the South Korean government says.

Specialized Schools for Defectors

The government has selected and established a number of alternative schools as a new policy project. Alternative schools offer three customized education programs for teenagers and young people who have missed their academic time in the process of escaping from North Korea. The alternative school offers a curriculum that enables individualized education to be tailored to each individual's characteristics. The most well-known of these is the "Hangyore High School," a specialized high school for North Korean adolescents founded by the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development of Korea in 2006. The Hangyore School is a transitional school for students who wish to enroll in secondary school. Given that South Korean schools lack the system to support and educate North Korean defectors at the same time, schools such as Hangyore School can contribute to the education of the North Korean defectors. Hangyore School teaches the national common curriculum, but individualized classes are conducted according to the level of each student. The purpose of "customized education" is to provide young defectors with minimum difficulty for students to adapt to life and to have the advantage of being confident in life in South Korea.

However, in some aspects, the establishment of the Hangyore School is insufficient to support saeteomin youth. There are two obvious reasons. Firstly, the Hangyore School has a limited admission quota currently standing at approximately 180. Additionally, it is geographically difficult to attend Hangyore School, which is a boarding school in Anseong

¹¹ DCNKHR 2005

¹² Kim, J., & Jang, D. (2007). ALIENS AMONG BROTHERS? THE STATUS AND PERCEPTION OF NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES IN SOUTH KOREA. *Asian Perspective*, 31(2), 5-22. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42704587>

¹³ LAURENCE, J. (2011, 12 August) Insight – North Korean Defections Rise, But Is the South Ready? Reuters. From <http://news.indialocals.com/read/2011/08/22/Z2RkZTD1AwR3KmH3ZGD1AN==/full-story-insight--north-korean-defections-rise-but-is-the-south-ready?> (accessed on 3 September 2011).

—approximately 80 kilometers from Seoul.

For the purpose of this research, a number of North Korean defectors of young age were interviewed. Among them, a young man attending a college in Seoul, who had graduated from college in Pyongyang, North Korea, enrolled in college to study Computer Science. To do so, he first enrolled in Yeomyung School, an alternative school specialized for North Korean defectors. However, since the school system is focused on living in Korea rather than the lessons he wants, to him, it seemed that such specialized system did not help much, so he withdrew from the school and worked on his General Educational Development (GED) to earn his Certificate of High School Equivalency. Currently, he is majoring in programming at a university in Seoul.

Another North Korean settler who is also a college student in Seoul escaped from North Korea in his mid-teens, was caught by a Chinese Police, sent back to North Korea, lived in detention camp, and escaped again in five years. It took about three years to come to Korea through China and Central Asia. During the process of escaping, he was in no environment where he could study. Thus, when he arrived in Korea, it was difficult to attend regular school. Instead, he studied for two years at a GED Academy to earn his high school certify graduation from high school and immediately entered one of Korea's well-known colleges to study Political Science.

After interviewing North Korean defectors who are students themselves, the GTE is more efficient than school in preparation for college admission. In the first case, the student was admitted to an alternative school, but enrolled in college after taking the GED test. The latter enrolled in college without going to school in South Korea. Both went to college through the GED program and found it more helpful.

Another problem is that the quality of the education provided to the defectors is at a level that only educates them to adapt to Korean lifestyle — with little concern about their thoughts, perspective, and personality. The policy of educating them to assimilate into South Korean society by Korean government is more difficult for them to adapt to the Korean society. In addition, alternative schools are often founded by religious organizations, and in such cases students, often against their will, attend church mass and other religious activities.

The educational system within specialized schools and geared towards North Korean defectors does not include a curriculum that will allow them to live in various parts of society in harmony with the South Korean society. In contrast to the growing number of settlers in

South Korea, the lack of effective educational policies set by the government is becoming a major social problem. For defectors, it is necessary to save their individuality rather than setting a rigid guideline on quickly adapting into South Korean society. Individuals have their own way of integrating into a new environment, but to force those to choose one path rather than giving them options gets rid of their of individuality as a whole.

So do specialized schools leave future prospects for defectors bright? Through going to these specialized schools, defector youth often are able to get rid of the obstacles they face, such as “Catching up with class, cultural adaptation and language, and friends.”¹⁴ In this case, the government is suggesting defectors to go at their own pace even though they may be years behind their same age-group, get rid of the problem of cultural integration by secluding themselves into one group, and only meet friends back from ‘home.’ Homophily, the tendency to associate with similar others, pervades South Korea. Simply put, homophily “advantage members of advantaged groups and disadvantage members of disadvantaged groups.”¹⁵ This ultimately leads solidarity between the advantaged members, “such that interpersonal relations revolve around persons with similar background with regard to education, geographical origin, or kinship.”¹⁶ But the reality is, “North Korean defectors are de facto excluded from this form of solidarity and from influential groups of South Korean society” because they are apart of the disadvantaged.¹⁷ The whole purpose of successful adaptation through a specialized school where only defectors can attend, then, is highly controversial. Through isolating themselves into one group, specialized schools are alienating defectors into one cluster, a “permanent, semi-hereditary underclass,”¹⁸ rather than diversifying personal relationships through interaction with different people other than defectors themselves.

The Relationship between Economic Burdens and Social Connections

¹⁴ 2012 report on North Korean youth refugees prepared by the Korea Hana Foundation

¹⁵ Quillian, L., & Reardon, R. (2006, June). Can Social Capital Explain Persistent Racial Poverty Gaps? *National Poverty Center Working Paper Series*, 6(12). Retrieved December 13, 2016, from http://www.npc.umich.edu/publications/workingpaper06/paper12/working_paper06-12.pdf

¹⁶ Bidet, E. (2009, January). Social capital and work integration of migrants: The case of North Korean defectors in South Korea. *Asian Perspective*, 33(2), 151-179. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240638583_Social_capital_and_work_integration_of_migrants_The_case_of_North_Korean_defectors_in_South_Korea

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ Lankov, A. (2006). Bitter Taste of Paradise: North Korean Refugees in South Korea. *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 6(01), 105-137. doi:10.1017/s159824080000059

According to a survey conducted by Information Center for North Korean Rights, the four frequent problems faced by North Korean defectors include: financial problems, isolation and loneliness, health related problems and social discrimination.¹⁹ However, it is important to realize that isolation and loneliness and social discrimination cumulate to financial problems. As stated by William Wilson, author of *The Truly Disadvantaged*, “social isolation is intended to describe mechanisms that enhance dislocation.”²⁰ Such social isolation leads to the inability and difficulty to reach the “South Korean middle class [which] contributes to their persistent poverty.”²¹ Or in other words, “The limited level of trust among themselves and between them and the South Koreans makes integration more problematic.”²² Similarly, Sanders, Nee, and Sernau states “Job seekers who have kin, friends, or acquaintances whose social connections are expansive are likely to receive more useful information and assistance than job seekers whose social network is poorly developed.”²³

In accordance with the classical dual labour-market theory developed by Piore, there are two separate markets: a primary market and secondary market. A primary market “provides relatively well-paid stable employment, with good working conditions and promotion prospects and evenhanded management.”²⁴ A secondary market, on the other hand, is not attractive by any standards. The theory states “job mobility between the two labour-markets is very restricted in normal circumstances”²⁵, and unless workers in the secondary market go to college or obtain higher qualifications, they are stuck forever.

According to the February 9, 2015 article by the E-Daily South Korea,” In 2014, the average monthly income of North Korean settlers was two-thirds of that of the general population. The average of North Korean refugees’ monthly income is 1,471,000 won, up 4.1% from 2013, but the average monthly income of an ordinary South Korean last year was 2,331,000 won. In addition, the average number of working hours per week for the settlers was 47 hours, 2.9 hours longer than the average of 44.1 hours for ordinary citizens.

¹⁹ Information Center for North Korean Rights, 2005.

²⁰ Linder, M. (1989, January 1). William J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City ...* Retrieved December 12, 2016, from http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1027&context=law_pubs

²¹ Bidet, E. (2009, January). Social capital and work integration of migrants: The case of North Korean defectors in South Korea. *Asian Perspective*, 33(2), 151-179. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240638583_Social_capital_and_work_integration_of_migrants_The_case_of_North_Korean_defectors_in_South_Korea

²² *ibid*

²³ Sanders, J., Nee, V., & Sernau, S. (2002). Asian Immigrants' Reliance on Social Ties in a Multiethnic Labor Market. *Social Forces*, 81(1), 281-314. doi:10.1353/sof.2002.0058

²⁴ Piore, M. J. (1968). On-The-Job Training and Adjustment to Technological Change. *The Journal of Human Resources*, 3(4), 435-449. doi:10.2307/144796

²⁵ "labour-market segmentation." *A Dictionary of Sociology*. Retrieved December 12, 2016 from Encyclopedia.com: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/labour-market-segmentation>

Moreover, the occupation types of the refugees were found to be difficult for many refugees to accumulate as professions from the present profession due to simple labor, 32.6%, service workers 23.1%, functional and related workers 12.2% and office workers 8.3 %. Employment status has been shown to be inferior to the level of the general public, both qualitatively and quantitatively, which means that there are various obstacles to assimilation of refugees in South Korean society.

Thus, the answer is clear: go to college or get higher qualifications through the accumulation of knowledge — through education. However, education has its own problems. The 2005 study of the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (DCNKHR) states the three major reasons why defector youth drop-out of school: “poor academic grades, conflict with friends, and age older than classmates.”²⁶ In research conducted by Woo Taek Jeon of the *Yonsei Medical Journal*, a core founding piece of research cited by many North Korean refugee papers, cites that loneliness, economical or political differences, prejudice and over-expectation are the four major factors hindering the defector’s adaptation into South Korean society. By over-expectation, the general assumption is that because North Koreans are Koreans, they will face minimal barriers, which is quite the contrary.²⁷

While most of such schools, such as Yeomong School was established by a religious institution or by NGOs such as Jangdaehyun School, Hangyore Middle and High School, as mentioned before, was made by government institutions. Established in 2006, Hangyore Middle and High School gets much more economic support compared to other specialized schools. The expected budget for Hangyore Middle and High School is approximately 1,900,000,000 won, while the next nine specialized schools, not run by the government, is 900,000,000 won.²⁸ In fact, according the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, Hangyore Middle and High School account for 69% of financial support directed to special schools for defector youth.²⁹ The next school with most financial support —Yeomyoung School — is significantly below Hangyore Middle and High School. Critics such as Joseph Park, a visionary and CEO of YOVEL and North Korean refugee himself, contend why 179

²⁶ DCNKHR 2005

²⁷ Jeon, W. T. (2000). Issues and problems of adaptation of North Korean defectors to South Korean society: An in-depth interview study with 32 defectors. *Yonsei Medical Journal*, 41(3), 362. doi:10.3349/ymj.2000.41.3.362

²⁸ 통일부

²⁹ 국회 2014 년 외교통일위원회_예비심사검토보고서

students in one particular school needs more than twice the budget than the next eight schools (which houses 265 students).³⁰

Conclusion:

Tailoring a young defector's needs through specialized schools certainly helps them in briefly adjusting to South Korean life — such as dealing with psychological stress and mentally adapting to the new reality they are going to face; however, the solution to the economic and social hardships young defectors face is not through throwing another hurdle at them. Specialized schools, whether run by a NGO or by a governmental institution, rather can have the negative consequence of institutionalizing young defectors into thinking separation as normal. The tag that they are “North Korean” should not be encouraged when trying to integrate them as a South Korean. However, specialized schools have the opposite effect as they continue to tag young defectors as still “North Korean” in identity.

Also, it is ultimately necessary for adolescents to receive integrated education with South Korean youth. Separate education for adolescents should be minimized as much as possible, and opportunities and training should be provided so that they can cooperate together as much as possible with South Koreans in South Korean society. After all, it has been clearly observed that North Koreans who have grown up with difficulties in education and social adaptation have suffered from income and job search issues more than the common South Korean who goes out to society .

As Eric Bidet says, the poverty North Korean defectors face is multidimensional. Poverty transcends beyond the financial problems and into their social and psychological state. North Korean defectors, due to their “defective or broken social link”³¹ have no one to rely on. Their low social status in the labor market makes it even harder to find people they can rely on in the future. However, attending specialized schools, which are approximately 1/10 the size of a regular Korean size severely limits their ability to diversify social connections that are crucial in the long term. To minimize potential discrimination North Korean defectors may face in the labor market and to ultimately break through the

³⁰ Park, J. (2014, January 27). 불공평한 북한이탈 청소년 대안학교에 대한 정부지원 [Web log post]. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from <http://coreadreamers.blogspot.kr/2014/01/blog-post.html>

³¹ Bidet, E. (2009, January). Social capital and work integration of migrants: The case of North Korean defectors in South Korea. *Asian Perspective*, 33(2), 151-179. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240638583_Social_capital_and_work_integration_of_migrants_The_case_of_North_Korean_defectors_in_South_Korea

“secondary market,” it is crucial that defectors build social connections that are not limited to defectors alike.

Even if the same system of specialized schools is to stay, they should be more geared towards giving their students education to compete against peers of the same group.

Currently, the purpose of classes is to ease their transition into South Korean society, which is favorable. However, higher level education has to become a natural part of their curriculum as the reality is their educational level in major subjects such as Korean, math and English, is very poor compared to South Korean peers going onto college. At the same time, it is necessary to give them more than one option. They should have the option to challenge themselves to pursue higher learning or in other cases pursue vocational education if the standard of education is too high. There should be no set framework to success, but paths must be available.