



SRI PhD seminar: Examining the Educator's Compass for Democratic Practice: A Social Pedagogical Inquiry into South Korea's 'Education Fever'

-How do teachers navigate value dilemmas under institutional pressures?

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PART 1:

The Korean Context & Defining Problem





The Rise of Testocracy: Global Context & The Korean Apex

1. Global Context

Research from the US, UK, and Sweden suggests a consistent law: *“When governments dictate curriculum and increase the weight of testing, the psychological suffering of students increases.”*

In the 21st century, Western nations emulated the high-pressure East Asian models (e.g., Common Core in the US, 2012 Swedish reforms) to boost PISA scores.

However, no significant academic gains, but a sharp rise in anxiety, depression, and school-related distress.

2. South Korea: The Apex of the Testocracy Model

Korean students, by various accounts, spend more time studying than students anywhere else in the world (Ahn & Baek, 2013); regularly score at or near the top of the chart on the International PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) tests during two decades (OECD, 2023)

The "Test from Hell" (Suneung): A grueling 8-hour exam that determines university admission, future employment, and social status.

Extreme Study Intensity: Average **79 hours** per week (approx. 11+ hours/day) for age 18 student.



The Cost of Testocracy

■ The Student Crisis: High Achievement, Lowest Happiness

While students consistently rank at the top for PISA academic scores, they rank lowest in the OECD for life satisfaction. Normalized 58–79 hour study weeks have made school pressure the primary driver of teenage depression. Consequently, suicide has surpassed accidents to become the leading cause of death for Korean youth.

■ The Teacher Crisis: Burnout and Loss of Agency

The system is equally toxic for educators, with over 80% reporting significant stress. Data from TALIS 2024 reveals that South Korean teachers face the highest levels of emotional exhaustion and the longest working hours in the OECD, yet possess the lowest professional autonomy. Rigid mandates have stripped teachers of the ability to make schooling flexible or psychologically safe.

The Cost of Testocracy



■ The Economic Trap: A Financial "Arms Race"

Families are trapped in a mandatory private tutoring (*Hagwon*) market that costs the nation £15.2 billion GBP annually. Despite a shrinking student population, per-child spending hits new records every year. In competitive zones like Seoul, costs often exceed £1,500 per month, forcing average households to dedicate 15–20% of their income (per child) just to keep up with the competition.

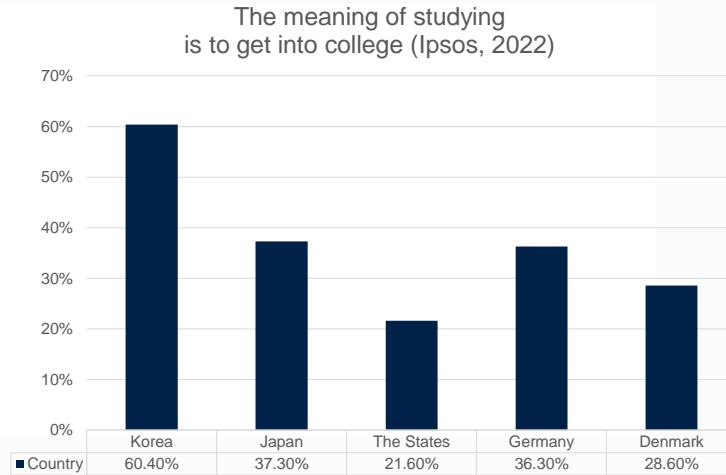
■ The Ultimate Consequence: Demographic Collapse

These pressures have converged to create a phenomenon termed "The End of Children." The combination of psychological distress and the exorbitant cost of the "exam race" has driven the fertility rate to a world-record low of 0.7. Young adults, traumatized by their own schooling and fearing the financial burden, are increasingly opting out of parenthood entirely.

The Cost of Testocracy



The Cost of Testocracy



Daean (대안) Education: A Counter-Movement to Rehumanize Schooling

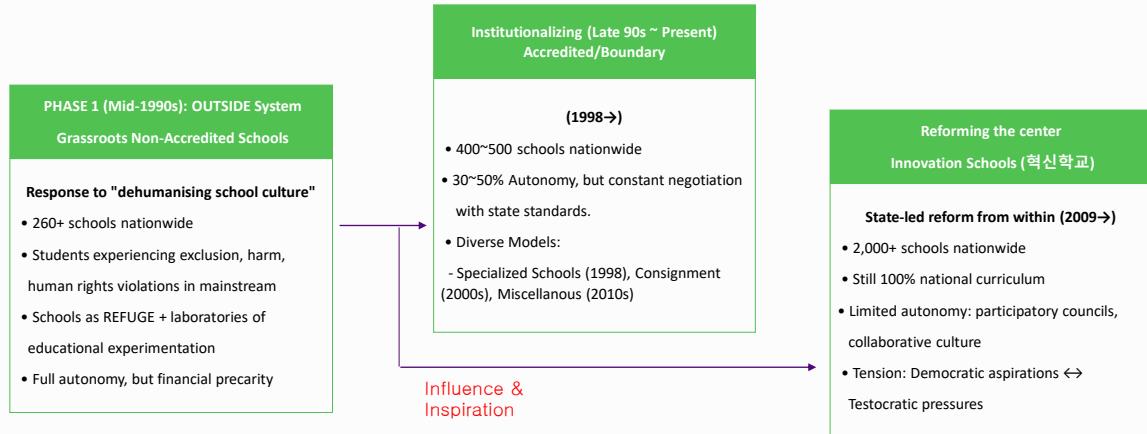
-From Grassroots Resistance to Diverse Ecosystem



- The Dae'an (Alternative) Education movement took concrete shape from the mid-1990s as a challenge to the alienating and dehumanising culture of mainstream schooling (Song, 2005; Ahn, 2021; Lee et al., 2023). Crucially, this movement unfolded in various forms, described as practices 'outside, within, and beside the formal education system' (Song, 2005).

Daean (대안) Education: A Counter-Movement to Rehumanize Schooling

-From Grassroots Resistance to Diverse Ecosystem



School	Approximate Number (Early 2024)	Key Features	Primary Focus / Challenges
Total Schools (All Types)	~ 21,000+		standardized Curriculum, CSAT focus
Alternative Schools (Total)	~ 700		
-Unaccredited Alt.	~ 260+	Operate outside formal accreditation; Free schools	Maximum autonomy; Lack of funding, legal instability
-Accredited Alt.	~ 440-450+	Accredited under Ed. Act	Partial autonomy; curriculum obligations differ by type
↳-Specialized	~ 44	Accredited; vocational/arts/international focus	Must implement ≥70% of national curriculum; talent development focus
↳-Miscellaneous Sch	~ 50+	Accredited; More explicit alternative philosophy	Must implement ≥30% of national curriculum; more curricular flexibility
↳-Consignment Inst.	~ 350	Institutions for students at risk of dropout	Aim: Support, Remediation, 'Back on Track' for mainstream
* Innovation Schools (Hyukshin)	~2,000+	Regular public schools designated for reform; emphasis on student participation, democratic ethos	Must follow 100% national curriculum; ethos vs. exam system tension

Consignment Institution Critique:

While providing vital support for struggling students, these institutions primarily aim to reintegrate students into mainstream systems ('Back on Track') rather than challenge systemic issues like hyper-competition or narrow success definitions (Ha et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2020).



The Fundamental Questions: What IS Humanization?

What does it mean to HUMANIZE education?

How they democratise education?

DO they educate about democracy? Assess knowledge about democracy? How to live democratic?

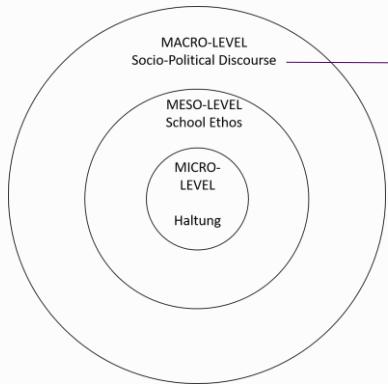
- **How do teachers ACTUALLY PRACTICE humanization daily—especially when institutional pressures push back?**
- Teachers face:
- Curriculum mandates
- Exam expectations
- Parent demands ("Will my child get into good university?")
- Financial survival pressures (especially unaccredited schools)
- → **What SUSTAINS teachers in this struggle?**
→ **What BREAKS them?**



PART 2:

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Framework: Thin vs Thick Democracy



Thin Democracy	Thick Democracy
Voting & elections	Deliberation & dialogue
Procedural participation (Tokenism)	Deep relational engagement
Focus: Institutions	Focus: Citizens' inner capacities
Example: Vote every 5 years	Example: Ongoing community deliberation

"Strong democracy requires not just institutions, but citizens' **capacity to deliberate with empathy, question power structures, and act collectively for justice.**"
— Benjamin Barber (1984)

Korea's Democratic Paradox

- 1. The Thin Achievement vs. The Thick Deficit
- **Institutional Success (Thin):** Internationally recognized as a **Consolidated Democracy** (EIU, since 2020) with free elections and peaceful power transitions. 22/167 in the world (EIU, 2023)
- **Deliberative Weakness (Thick):**
 - **Low Deliberative Component Index (V-Dem):** Politics characterized by severe polarization and negative partisanship rather than policy debate.
 - **Historical Narrative:** Colonialism(1910-1945), Korean war(1950-1953), ideological & existential threat (NK), military regimes (1960s–1980s), and rapid authoritarian development have limited the cultivation of patience for diversity and dialogue in society and education (Nilsson-Wright, 2022).

Democratic society but hierarchical structure.

The Role of Meso-level: schools

The Educational Imperative: From "Belonging" to "Deliberation"

Bridging the Paradox:

- We've seen Korea has thin democracy institutionally and hierarchical culture historically
- **Question:** Where can thick democratic capacities actually be cultivated?

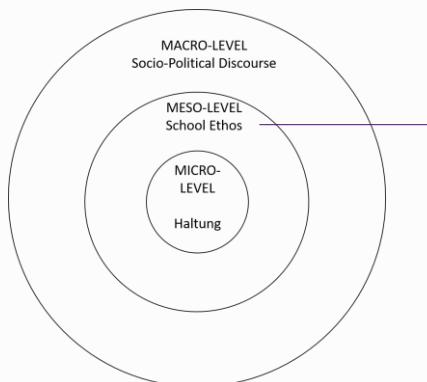
The Role of Schools (Meso-Level):

- Democracy must be re-cultivated as a "**culture of relationships**" in everyday life (Dewey, 1916; Biesta, 2007).
- Schools are the critical arenas where students practice converting *national solidarity* into *thick democratic capacity* (empathy, questioning power).

Why This Matters:

- Thick democracy cannot exist only at the macro institutional level
- It requires **lived practice** in everyday social relationships
- Students must experience democracy "here and now" (Arendt), not just learn about it for the future

Theoretical Framework: Democratic Education & Social Pedagogy



Democratic Edu

- Intellectual
- Participatory
- Justice-oriented

(Westheimer & Kahne, 2004;
Um, 2018)



SP Perspective

- Community & Life-world Focus
- Diverse forms

(Natorp, 1899; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Cameron & Moss, 2011; Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011).

Dimension of Democratic Edu

Dimension	Focus	Thin Democracy Passive & Abstract	Thick Democracy Active & Structural
1. Intellectual	Criticality Thinking about Power	Memorizing Definitions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "What is the dictionary definition of democracy?" • Learning about democracy as a static subject. 	Questioning Structures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Who holds power in our school and why?" • Analyzing hidden curriculums and structural inequality.
2. Participatory	Agency Voice & Governance	Tokenism & Events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student council organizes festivals/sports. • Voting on trivial matters (e.g., lunch menu). • Voice without influence. 	Co-Creation & Decision <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students co-design curriculum & school rules. • Real power in budget/personnel decisions. • Voice that shapes reality.
3. Justice-Oriented	Action Equity & Change	Charity & Abstraction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Discrimination is bad" (Moral lesson). • Fundraising/Charity (Personal responsibility). • Observation of injustice. 	Structural Action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizing to change unjust school policies • Addressing root causes of inequality. • "Acting" to disrupt the status quo.

Theoretical Framework: Democratic Education & Social Pedagogy

Which level you think the Korean main stream education system is at for each domain?

Domain	Level 1: Superficial/Formal	Level 2: Institutional/Engaged	Level 3: Deep/Transformative
Q2.1) Intellectual/ Reflective	P1,P2,P3,P4, P5 <input type="checkbox"/> Rote Memorisation: Focuses on teaching testable knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/> Skill Cultivation: Fosters critical thinking and media literacy	<input type="checkbox"/> Cultivating Critical Consciousness: Nurtures a reflective disposition to question dominant narratives and understand the structural roots of social problems (Freire, 1970).
Q2.2) Participation/ Relationship	P1,P2,P3,P4, P5 <input type="checkbox"/> Formal Participation: (Tokenism) Operates student councils with limited authority, focusing on procedural practice.	<input type="checkbox"/> Collaborative School Culture: Fosters a democratic school culture where student opinions are actively sought and reflected in school governance (Jeon et al., 2024).	<input type="checkbox"/> Co-creation of Community: Students and teachers act as co-participants in creating a 'consciously democratic community' through shared responsibility and dialogue (Fielding, 2011).
Q2.3) Social Justice	P1,P2,P3,P4, P5 <input type="checkbox"/> Abstract Learning: Teaches social justice issues like human rights as abstract concepts.	<input type="checkbox"/> Issue-based Engagement: Encourages participation in specific social campaigns or volunteer activities.	<input type="checkbox"/> Emancipatory Praxis: Aims to empower students to challenge systemic inequalities and engage in transformative social action for a more just society (Um et al., 2021).

Social Pedagogy



1. Schooling vs. Education (Upbringing)

- Critique: Current systems focus on "Needy Child" (deficits/test scores) and narrow instruction
- **Social Pedagogical View:** "Education in its widest sense" (Upbringing/Bildung)—viewing students as "Rich Child" (competent, active, rights-holding)

2. Lebensweltorientierung (Life-world Orientation)

- Education connects to student's **lived reality** and community, not abstract knowledge
- **Practice:** Students organize real campaigns to change unjust rules

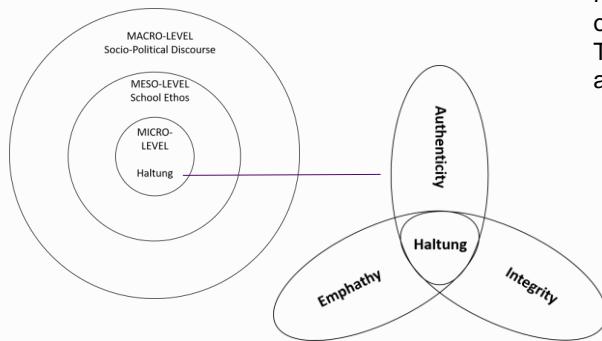
3. Das Gemeinsame Dritte (The Common Third)

- Authentic relationships formed through **shared activities**, not hierarchical instruction
- **Practice:** Teacher-student cooking, farming, building together—activity mediates relationship

4. The Social Pedagogue (Haltung)

- Educator is not technician but **moral companion** requiring 'Haltung' (ethical orientation)
- **Practice:** "Walking alongside" student (co-learner) rather than leading from front

Theoretical Framework: The Micro-Level: Haltung as the Professional Core

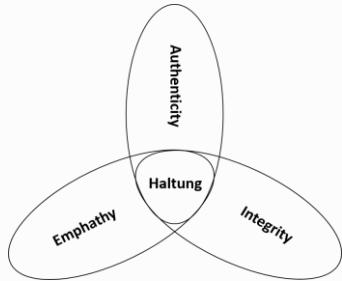


Not a skill, but the educator's inner fundamental orientation.

The continuous ethical negotiation between the Person and the Profession.

Theoretical Framework: The Micro-Level: Haltung as the Professional Core

The Triad of Disposition: Navigating the Tensions



Authenticity (Identity & Self-Congruence):

Rooted in Identity: The alignment between who I am (Self) and how I act (Practice). The courage to bring one's unique personal identity into the professional role, resisting the pressure to become a nameless functionary. Yet without empathy, it risks devolving into moral rigidity or dogmatism.

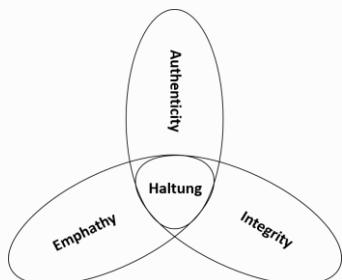
Empathy (Relational Understanding):

Sensing the student's inner reality and emotional context. The bridge that connects the teacher's identity to the student's experience. Unbounded empathy can blur professional boundaries and lead to emotional exhaustion.

Integrity (Institutional & Professional Integration):

Integrity aligns the personal and professional self ('me the professional') through ethical consistency. Yet when formed solely by external authority or policy, integrity risks collapsing into mere compliance.

Understanding Dilemma: From Preliminary Study



1. Mainstream Public: The Dominance of "Imposed Roles"

Structural Configuration: A hyper-focus on Context and Profession (technical procedures) suppresses other dispositions.

The Imbalance: Integrity (as Compliance) >> Authenticity & Empathy

Preliminary Findings:

-Contextual Overload: "The context is so overwhelmingly strong that only the imposed roles become dominant," preventing relational aspects from expression (Speaker 2).

-Disconnection: Educators risk becoming individuals left with "only actions and procedures," failing to connect themselves to moral values (P2).

Understanding Dilemma: From Preliminary Study

2. Public Alternative: The Tension of "Centripetal Force"

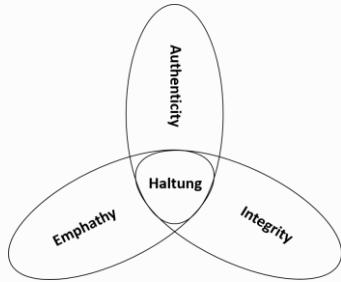
Structural Configuration: A conflict between the **Authenticity** of alternative ideals and the **Integrity** required by the institutional system.

The Tension: **Authenticity (Ideal) <-> Integrity (Systemic Pull)**

Preliminary Findings:

Systemic Isomorphism: "As long as it's within the institutional system, there's a **centripetal force** that tries to fit everything into the system's framework" (Speaker 1).

Affective Dissonance: Teachers experience "**Awkward Unease**" - a state where they compromise their authenticity to align with systemic demands (Speaker 1).



Understanding Dilemma: From Preliminary Study

3. Unaccredited Alternative: The Deficit of "Professional Integrity"

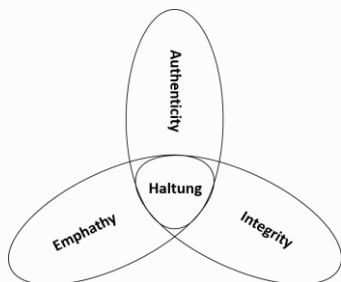
Structural Configuration: High reliance on **Authenticity** and **Empathy**, but a structural weakness in **Integrity** (defined here as professional systematization).

The Deficit: **High Relationality vs. Low Professional Structure**

Preliminary Findings:

Reliance on Sincerity: Teachers fulfill duties with "sole sincerity" but lack systematic training (OJT), leaving professionalism to the "individual's domain" (P1).

Replication of Methods: Due to a lack of professional integrity, some settings paradoxically replicate "alternative-style cramming" despite high intentions (P2).





Research Questions

How is democratic education understood and practised in three different types of Korean alternative schools within their specific contexts?

How does the interplay of institutional context, pedagogical stance, and teachers' Haltung shape the cultivation of democratic dispositions across these settings?

What are key considerations for shaping a 'thicker', Haltung-informed democratic education in Korea, drawing on Social Pedagogy?



PART 3:

Methodology

Research Design - Overview

- **Approach: Comparative Multiple Case Study**
- This study employs a **comparative multiple case study** design with ethnographic methods to examine how teachers navigate value dilemmas across three institutional contexts.

Three Strategic Stances:

- **Reform from Within** (Innovation School)
- **Negotiated Autonomy** (Accredited Alternative School)
- **Radical Opposition** (Unaccredited Alternative School)

Design Rationale:

- **Comparative**: Reveals how different strategic stances shape Haltung configurations
- **Ethnographic Methods**: Captures lived realities of teachers' daily ethical negotiations
- **Case Study**: Allows in-depth exploration of context-specific dilemmas

Research Design - Three Cases

Case 1: Innovation School (혁신학교) - Reform from Within

Institutional Position: Within public system, bound to 100% national curriculum

- **Strategic Stance**: Reform from within under maximum systemic constraint

Why Innovation Schools Matter:

- Born from teacher-parent collaboration in field, often starting in crisis schools
- Demonstrates collective professional agency under institutional constraint

2. Accumulated Professional Knowledge (15+ Years)

- Experiential wisdom embedded in practitioners: what works, what fails, why, how to act

3. Professional Identity Transformation

- From "document processors" → "curriculum developers", From "passive deliverers" → "active reconstructors"
- Teachers, students, parents as **co-creators** of school

Research Design - Three Cases

Case 2: Shin-na-neun School - Negotiated Autonomy

■ Institutional Position:

- Miscellaneous school (각종학교) - "inside yet outside" dual condition
- 6-year residential, non-graded, small-group system
- Diploma recognition + subtle testocratic pressures

■ Strategic Stance: Negotiating between institutional structures and educational ideals

■ Key Research Focus:

- How do teachers balance autonomy and conformity?
- What does "negotiated autonomy" look like in daily practice?

Research Design - Three Cases

Case 3: Jecheon Gandhi School - Radical Opposition

■ Institutional Position:

- Pioneer of Korean alternative education movement
- 6-year residential, non-graded, **entirely outside state system**
- **Lebensweltorientierung:** Mandatory internship, graduates run social enterprises

■ Strategic Stance: Radical autonomy with **financial insecurity and social marginalisation**

■ Key Research Focus:

- How do teachers sustain Haltung under radical autonomy?
- What challenges arise from financial precarity?

Data Collection - Multi-Method Approach

Focusing on Controversial Issues

Why This Matters:

- Teachers' approach to controversial issues reveals whether they cultivate **thin or thick democracy** (Kosberg, 2024a; Kosberg & Roffhaug, 2025)

Two Patterns Observed:

Schools cultivating thick democracy:

- View controversial issues as **epistemic** (rationally argued) or **political** (ideological disagreement), engage students even when it causes tension.

Schools reproducing thin democracy:

- View controversial issues as **divisive and emotionally triggering**, avoid discussions: "*I try to steer away from the controversial if it could trigger discomfort*"
- Focus of Data Collection:**
- How do teachers in Korean alternative schools navigate controversial issues (democracy, justice, power) under testocratic pressures?
- Do they create **safe structures for engagement** (cooperative learning, deliberation) or avoid topics to prevent "discomfort"?
- This reveals the **Intellectual dimension** (critical thinking vs. memorization) and **Participatory dimension** (authentic voice vs. tokenism) in practice.

Data Collection - Multi-Method Approach

1. Semi-Structured Interviews

- Participants** (20-25 total across 3 schools): Founders/Principals (1-2), Teachers (5-7), Students aged 15-18 (2-3) — with parental consent + individual assent
- Interview Protocol:** Key themes include understandings of democratic education, experiences of systemic pressure, and narratives of tension. Interviews explore how participants understand and work with the intellectual, participatory, and justice-oriented dimensions of democratic education in everyday practice.

2. Participant Observation

- Stance:** Observer-as-participant—attending meetings and activities without decision-making roles, keeping fieldnotes.
- Observation Sites:** Staff meetings, parent-teacher consultations, student councils, daily activities—providing opportunities to observe in real time how systemic pressures and school ethos intersect, and how decisions are made, justified, or contested. **Special attention will be given to moments when controversial topics arise** (e.g., political events, justice-oriented discussions) and how teachers facilitate or deflect these conversations.

Data Collection - Multi-Method Approach

3. Document Analysis

- **Documents:** Founding statements, curriculum plans, internal policy documents, materials aimed at external audiences.
- **Analytical Focus:** Identifying tensions between a school's declared philosophy and the practical compromises it makes in relation to systemic pressures. **Documents will also be examined for how schools articulate their stance on controversial issues**—whether they explicitly encourage critical engagement or emphasize "neutral" or "safe" learning environments.

Triangulation: These three modes of inquiry provide **thick and contextualised understanding** (Geertz, 1973) of how Haltung is enacted and tested under structural constraints, with particular attention to **how teachers' openness to controversial issues shapes students' democratic dispositions**.

Data Analysis - Three-Phase Process

Phase 1: Within-Case Analysis | RQ1: *How is democratic education understood and practised in different alternative school contexts?*

- Data from interviews, observations, and documents analysed thematically through three dimensions—intellectual, participatory, and justice-oriented. Teacher and student perspectives initially separated before synthesis to ensure both voices equally represented. **Haltung** remains latent undercurrent, reflected in participants' ethical orientations.

Phase 2: Within-Case Synthesis + Haltung Dynamics | RQ2: *How does the interplay of context, pedagogy, and Haltung shape democratic dispositions?*

- **Central Analytical Assumption:** The key issue is not whether teachers individually possess balanced Haltung, but whether the **school culture enables reflexive negotiation** of the three dispositions. **Phase 3: Cross-Case Comparative Analysis | RQ3:** *What are key considerations for shaping 'thicker,' Haltung-informed democratic education?*

Data Analysis - Three-Phase Process

Phase 3: Cross-Case Comparative Analysis | RQ3: What are key considerations for shaping 'thicker,' Haltung-informed democratic education?

- Synthesises findings across three cases to compare how differing strategic stances produce distinct Haltung configurations. Analysis identifies **structural, pedagogical, and relational conditions** that enable or constrain reflexive balancing of Haltung, generating empirically grounded, transferable considerations (Yin, 2018) for how institutional conditions, pedagogical approaches, and relational cultures must align for balanced, reflexive Haltung to flourish.

Limitation

1. Analytical Transferability (Not Statistical Generalisability)

- Findings from three purposefully selected cases aim for **analytical transferability** (Yin, 2018)—offering rich insights that may resonate with similar phenomena in other contexts—rather than claiming statistical generalisability across all Korean alternative schools.

2. Researcher Subjectivity

- As interpretivist study, findings inevitably shaped by researcher's subjectivity. This limitation is **embraced as part of interpretive paradigm** and mitigated through rigorous reflexivity: maintaining two-column reflexive journal and regular peer debriefing with supervisors throughout fieldwork and analysis.

3. Breadth vs. Depth Trade-off

- Multiple case study design allows comparative analysis across diverse contexts but at cost of prolonged immersion associated with single-site ethnography. **Mitigation:** Clearly outlining case selection criteria and transparently reporting schools' features enables readers to make informed judgments about findings' relevance and applicability.

Anticipated Contributions

Empirical Contribution

- First comparative study of **Haltung dilemmas across three strategic stances** (Reform from Within / Negotiated Autonomy / Radical Opposition) in Korean alternative education, providing rich ethnographic data on "moments of professional dilemma."

Theoretical Contribution

- Extends **Haltung framework to non-Western context**, developing "**reflexive autonomy**" concept that examines how school cultures enable or constrain teachers' capacity to negotiate Authenticity-Empathy-Integrity tensions. Bridges democratic education (intellectual focus) with social pedagogy (relational focus).

Practical Contribution

- Informs **teacher education for alternative schools**, offers **policy insights on institutional conditions** that support reflexive Haltung (e.g., importance of collective reflective spaces like PLCs), and provides **actionable strategies** for schools navigating testocracy.

Contextual Contribution

- Challenges Western assumptions by exploring whether Korean **communal ethos and collective culture** can support democratic education differently, contributing to Korean alternative education scholarship with social pedagogical lens.

Potential Follow-up Studies

From Qualitative Depth to Mixed-Methods Breadth

While this PhD employs in-depth qualitative case study design, the rich data collected will provide strong foundation for subsequent **mixed-methods research** extending findings to larger populations.

- **Student-Focused Quantitative Extension:** Survey instrument (500+ students across school types) measuring democratic dispositions, testing whether schools with higher teacher "reflexive autonomy" correlate with stronger student political efficacy and sense of agency.
- **Teacher-Focused Mixed-Methods Study:** Online survey (200+ teachers) measuring Haltung configurations and institutional pressures, combined with follow-up interviews to explore how reflexive autonomy emerges and evolves. Large-scale data strengthens evidence base for policy recommendations regarding teacher education and structural supports.

Data Collection - Multi-Method Approach

Focusing on Controversial Issues

Why Controversial Issues Matter:

- Recent research shows teachers' openness to controversial issues is crucial for students' political efficacy (Kosberg, 2024a; Kosberg & Roffhaug, 2025)
- But teachers navigate different understandings of what makes an issue "controversial"

Two Approaches in Schools:

- Successful schools:** Teachers view controversial issues as **epistemic** (rationally argued from multiple sides) or **political** (ideological disagreement). They emphasize discussing these topics even when it causes tension, helping students make sense regardless of context.
- Unsuccessful schools:** Teachers view controversial issues as **divisive and emotionally triggering**. They avoid discussions about "religion, ethnicity, and economy," stating: *"I try to steer a discussion away from the controversial if it's something that could trigger discomfort in my class."*
- Implications for This Study:** Data collection focuses on **how teachers in Korean alternative schools navigate controversial issues** related to democracy, justice, and power under testocratic pressures. Do they create **safe structures for engagement** (cooperative learning, group work) or avoid topics to prevent "discomfort"?