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LIFE JOURNEYS OF KOREAN MUSIC THERAPISTS IN NEW ZEALAND*

Hyunah Cho**

ABSTRACT

This study explores the life journeys of Korean music therapists living in New Zealand by examining their early immigration experiences, settlement processes, professional pathways in music therapy, and engagement with music at these different stages of life. Thus, this research aims to enhance diversity within the music therapy profession by sharing the stories of a community of New Zealand music therapy professionals and introducing the profession to immigrant communities in New Zealand. Through semi-structured interviews with three Korean music therapists, the following key themes emerged: (1) Pull and push factors of moving to New Zealand; (2) Between two worlds; (3) Music as a companion; and (4) Being a Korean music therapist in New Zealand. These findings prompted discussion on four key topics:

(1) The price of a new life; (2) Wearing two hats: Navigating Korean and Kiwi identities; (3) Transnational professional pathways; and (4) Music as a key for “knocking on the door to integration.”

Keywords: Korean New Zealand music therapists; Korean New Zealander, Korean Kiwi, Korean immigrants, Music Therapy New Zealand.

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KOREAN IMMIGRANTS IN NEW ZEALAND

Despite being a relatively recent migrant group in New Zealand (Kim & Agee, 2019), Koreans ranked as the fourth-largest Asian ethnic community in the country in 2018, following Chinese, Indian, and Filipino communities (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.a.). The broader Asian population in New Zealand has grown markedly—from 194,800 in 1996 to over 970,000 in 2023—making it the second-largest ethnic group after Europeans and surpassing both Māori and Pacific peoples. As of 2022, New Zealand ranked as the seventh most popular destination for Korean immigrants among Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD, 2024). A number of push factors have contributed to Korean migration to New Zealand. These include the highly competitive, work-centric culture of South Korea, ongoing political tensions with North Korea, and an intense societal focus on academic achievement (Chang et al., 2017; Kim, 2021). Pull factors include the perception of New Zealand as offering a better quality of life, a more relaxed lifestyle, and a positive environment for raising children with less competitive educational environment (Department of Labor, 2006; Kim & Hocking, 2018). Reflecting the strong educational motivations of this significant wave of immigrants, Renwick's (1997) guide for Korean parents—supported by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research—aimed to assist families in navigating the local school system, exemplifying the government's recognition of Korean immigrant needs.

Korean immigrants in New Zealand demonstrate ongoing transnationality. The community remains predominantly overseas born, with only 18.1% born in New Zealand and the majority identifying with Asian origins (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.b.). With their transnationality, employment remains a key area of ongoing challenge for Korean immigrants in New Zealand. In 2023, only 50.3% of Korean immigrants were employed full-time, while 14.7% worked part-time (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.b.). Although employment rates have improved since 2018, language and cultural communication barriers continue to limit employment opportunities, often leading to underemployment and identity struggles (Kim et al., 2016; Kim & Hocking, 2018; Kim, 2021).

THE MUSIC THERAPY PROFESSION IN NEW ZEALAND

Music Therapy New Zealand defines music therapy as the planned use of music to support the healing and personal growth of individuals with identified emotional, intellectual, physical, or social needs (Music Therapy New Zealand, n.d.a). Music Therapy New Zealand, while a member of Allied Health Aotearoa NZ (Ministry of Health, n.d.), is a self-regulated professional association and is not governed by the Health Practitioners Competence

Assurance (HPCA) Act 2003,¹ which regulates certain—but not all—allied health professions. Despite growth in practitioner numbers—from 36 in 2009 to over 75 in 2016—the field remains limited in scale (Molyneux et al., 2016). General awareness of music therapy's full potential in New Zealand remains modest. A survey found that academics and health professionals in a university setting reported only low-to-moderate awareness of music therapy's impacts across emotional, social, spiritual, and physical dimensions of wellbeing (Cho et al., 2025). This finding signals an ongoing need to advocate for the value of music therapy, especially within public health and education sectors.

A national survey found that most Registered Music Therapists (RMThs) were based in Wellington (38%) and Auckland (26%), with a clear concentration on the North Island (Molyneux et al., 2016). This figure shows similar results compared with the most recent survey from Music Therapy New Zealand (Talmage et al., 2025), as most respondents were located in New Zealand's main cities: Wellington (34%) and Auckland (23%). However, comparisons between the 2016 and 2022 distributions should be made cautiously, since the data reflect survey respondents rather than all RMThs in the latest survey (Talmage et al., in press). The profession remains predominantly European in ethnic composition, with limited Asian representation—only two Asian therapists were reported in the 2016 survey, and no Korean practitioners were identified (Molyneux et al., 2016). This underrepresentation highlights the need for broader cultural inclusion in a field grounded in values of diversity, wellbeing, and connectedness (Fletcher, 2016).

New Zealand's multicultural society makes the integration of diverse cultural identities into music therapy practice both necessary and enriching. For therapists from migrant backgrounds—such as Korean New Zealanders—professional development might be closely tied to personal experiences of transnational journey and cultural adaptation. Professional identity in music therapy is not static but evolves through lived experiences and social interactions (Warren & Rickson, 2016). In this sense, the migration journeys of Korean music therapists and their acculturation processes significantly influence how they negotiate their place within the profession. Moreover, multicultural competency is a critical component of ethical and effective music therapy in culturally diverse settings. Music therapists must continually engage with multiple cultural worldviews and musical traditions to navigate complex client-therapist dynamics (Hadley & Norris, 2016). Cultural safety—defined by Williams (1999) and elaborated by Crooke et al. (2024)—requires that practitioners reflect critically on their own cultural identities and potential biases. Creating environments where

¹) The HPCA Act 2003 is New Zealand legislation that ensures certain regulated health practitioners, such as doctors and nurses, are competent and fit to practice. It creates regulatory bodies to set standards, register practitioners, and handle complaints, but does not cover all health professions, leaving some, like music therapy, self-regulated.

clients feel respected, understood, and free from discrimination is essential to practice integrity.

KOREAN MUSIC THERAPISTS IN NEW ZEALAND

To date, no research has focused specifically on Korean music therapists in New Zealand. Exploring their life experiences is vital, as people engage in occupations through the lens of their culture, with each occupation encompassing physical, social, psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions (Hasselkus, 2011). In this context, examining the experiences of Korean music therapists can shed light on the challenges and benefits Korean immigrants encounter while settling in New Zealand, offering fresh perspectives on their migration and adaptation journeys. Sharing the experiences of Korean immigrant music therapists, which have not yet been explored, aligns with the values of Music Therapy New Zealand, which emphasize inclusivity and diversity (Music Therapy New Zealand, n.d.b). The experiences of Korean music therapists in New Zealand thus, can also contribute meaningfully to international discussions on intercultural practice, minority professional experiences, and the globalization of music therapy. Because music therapy is deeply shaped by therapists' and clients' cultural background, Korean therapists contribute unique traditions, values, and perspectives on healing that can enrich the profession and enhance its responsiveness to diverse communities. Furthermore, their journeys reveal how immigrant professionals navigate issues such as identity, language, credential recognition, and cultural differences, while also demonstrating the strategies they use to overcome these barriers.

When considering their profession as music therapists, it is also valuable to explore their personal experiences with music throughout their lives. Music has been shown to provide emotional comfort, foster companionship, support relationship-building within local communities, and help maintain connections to one's cultural roots—findings particularly evident among Korean international students adapting to life in new countries (Cho, 2024). These insights underscore the importance of exploring how Korean music therapists in New Zealand engage with music throughout their settlement journey, which may influence their pathways into the profession.

Research Aim

This study explores the life journeys of Korean music therapists in New Zealand by sharing their lived experiences—including early immigration, settlement, and professional development in music therapy, as well as their engagement with music at these different

stages of life. In doing so, the research seeks to enrich music therapy practice in New Zealand by deepening and expanding its cultural perspectives. Furthermore, it will provide insights to inform educators, policymakers, and practitioners on how to better support immigrant professionals and develop services that reflect the realities of multicultural communities. Beyond the local context, this research contributes to international discussions on intercultural practice, minority professional experiences, and the global expansion of music therapy services. The findings aim to guide policymakers in both New Zealand and South Korea, while supporting the music therapy profession in developing more culturally responsive practices that honor the diverse multicultural fabric of New Zealand society.

Research Question

How do Korean music therapists in New Zealand describe their life journeys? The sub questions were:

- ❑ How do Korean music therapists in New Zealand describe their early immigration experiences?
- ❑ What are the key experiences that shaped their settlement and adaptation to life in New Zealand?
- ❑ How did their professional pathways in music therapy develop after migration and what are their professional experiences?
- ❑ How has music been engaged in the life journeys of Korean music therapists, and what role has it played in their personal and professional experiences?

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework (Figure 1) was developed based on the literature to provide a structured guide for investigating the research questions:

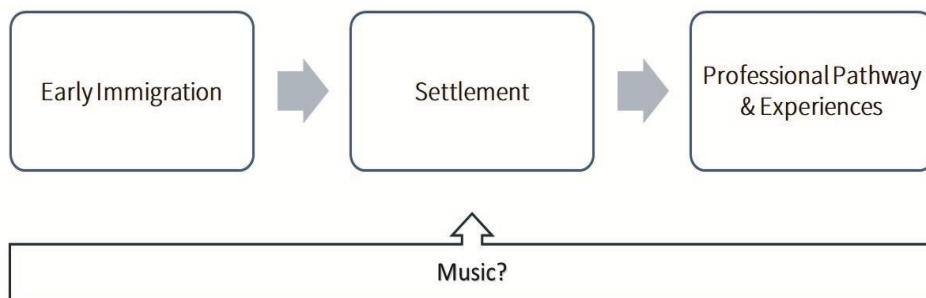


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Life Journey of Korean Music Therapists in New Zealand

METHOD

Research Design

Given the nature of the research question in this study, a qualitative research approach was adopted, specifically using semi-structured interviews informed by the four sub-questions. The key areas covered in the semi-structured interviews are participants' personal backgrounds, experiences of moving to New Zealand, settlement and adaptation processes, their journey toward becoming music therapists, and their professional experiences in the field. The interviews were conducted within a constructivist paradigm, which posits that reality is not objective but co-constructed through shared understanding between individuals (Lindo, 2023). As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe the qualitative interview functions as a "construction site of knowledge" (p. 2), where knowledge is actively created through dialogue. In this context, the interview process becomes an interactive space in which the researcher and participant collaboratively interpret experiences and uncover deeper meanings. Furthermore, individuals' experiences are shaped by their personal interpretations and the meanings they assign to those experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). To ensure accuracy and mutual understanding, I, as a researcher, consistently verified my interpretations with participants during and after the interviews and engaged in ongoing reflection on the data in light of my own experiences throughout the analysis process. This approach facilitates a nuanced exploration of subjective realities, offering a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives.

Participants

Three Korean music therapists (who were pseudonymized as Violet, Lily, and Daisy in this study) in New Zealand were recruited and interviewed for this study, reflecting the small number registered nationwide. The inclusion criterion was Korean ethnicity and current or past professional experience as a RMTh in New Zealand. Including the researcher, two formerly registered practitioners, and the three participants in this study, six Korean RMThs have been identified as having worked in New Zealand. Considering the small proportion of Asian music therapists represented in New Zealand, the presence of Korean music therapists identified in this study is particularly meaningful. All participants were 1.5-generation Korean New Zealanders—born in Korea, immigrating during school years, and educated in New Zealand (Roh & Chang, 2020). They arrived between the ages of 11 and 12, and at the time of the interviews, were aged between 32 and 43. Of the three participants, two had since left New Zealand, with only one still practicing locally.

Table 1

Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Arrival Year in NZ	Leaving Year from NZ	Age When Migrated to NZ	nationality	Education	Duration Working as a Music Therapist in NZ	Current Occupation
Violet	1994	2018	Early adolescence	NZ / AUS	BA Music, Psychology Diploma	5 years	Music therapist
Daisy	2002	NA	Early adolescence	NZ	BA Music/ Psychology	Around 9 years	Music therapist
Lily	2002	2024	Early adolescence	NZ	BA Psychology, Music diploma	Over 3 years	Teacher

Procedure and Data Analysis

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019). To accommodate geographic and scheduling constraints, individual online interviews were conducted in May 2025. Three interviews, each lasting 60 to 90 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim in Korean. Thematic analysis was then applied following Clarke and Braun's (2017) approach, and key themes were translated into English for reporting. After thematic analysis, the findings were shared with participants to confirm accuracy and as an

ethical gesture. Any quotations or information that participants did not wish to include were deleted.

Reflection on my Positionality

Three participants and I are of a similar age and share generational experiences. We all lived in Korea during the 1990s, and some of us, including myself, spent time there in the early 2000s. We witnessed many of the same social and political events, which shaped our perspectives in similar ways. The key difference is that I was raised in South Korea and trained as a music therapist there, while the three participants immigrated to New Zealand by following their parents and received their education and music therapy training in New Zealand. Despite these different paths, we share a common ground: we have all worked as RMThs in New Zealand. I moved to New Zealand in 2016 as an adult to pursue my PhD and lived and worked there as both a music therapist and academic until 2022. As mentioned, my own training took place in Korea. Although the curriculum and practicum were based there, they were largely grounded in Western European psychotherapy theories and approaches. As Vencatasamy (2023) describes in her autoethnographic account, music therapy education and literature are often shaped by dominant narratives rooted in Western European psychotherapy traditions—narratives that can marginalise or erase non-Western perspectives.

Things began to shift when I moved to New Zealand and became involved with the local music therapy community. There, I was encouraged to embrace my identity as a Korean practitioner and to integrate my own belief systems and traditional health frameworks, which are deeply embedded in Korean healthcare. This experience allowed me to reconnect with myself and explore a more authentic understanding of health, therapy, and music. I was especially moved when Māori colleagues expressed that my approach resonated with aspects of their own traditional belief systems. I feel ‘welcomed’.

These experiences position me as both an insider and outsider. While I have a limited understanding of their experiences as 1.5 generation migrants and their music therapy training in New Zealand, I also share the experience of working as a music therapist in this context—though, of course, individual experiences may differ.

FINDINGS

The participants’ life journeys can be understood through four key themes that emerged from the data analysis: (1) Pull and push factors of moving to New Zealand; (2) Between two

worlds; (3) Music as a companion; and (4) Being a Korean music therapist in New Zealand. This section provides a detailed exploration of each theme, illustrating the complex and multifaceted experiences of the participants (Table 2).

Table 2
Themes

No.	Themes	Sub-themes
1	Pull and Push factors of Moving to New Zealand	Pull Factors to Come to New Zealand Push Factor to Leave South Korea
2	Between Two Worlds	Challenges of 1.5-Generation Immigrants Social Divisions Experiencing New Zealand Education The Korean Church as a Cultural and Spiritual Bridge Wearing a Kiwi Mask
3	Music as a Companion	Music as a Means of Remembering and Creating Visibility Music as a Language and a Bridge for New Friendships
4	Being a Korean Music Therapist	Korean identity in Music Therapy Practice in New Zealand Faced Challenges as Korean Music therapists Professional Challenges in the New Zealand Context

Theme 1. Pull and Push Factors of Moving to New Zealand

Pull Factors to Come to New Zealand

Participants noted that education in New Zealand was a major reason their families chose to immigrate. Unlike Korea's highly competitive academic environment, their parents hoped their children could study joyfully and freely pursue their interests—while also having time to play, explore, and grow at their own pace. For example, Daisy recalled her stressful childhood in Korea, filled with private lessons and extracurriculars. Her parents, like many others who immigrated to New Zealand, believed New Zealand would offer a healthier, more spacious environment for their children to discover passions, enjoy family time, and grow without the pressure of constant academic competition.

New Zealand's immigration policies also influenced the families' decisions. Violets and Daisy said that, at the time, the policies were welcoming and visas were relatively easy to obtain. However, Lily's family had a different experience. They arrived on visitor visas without job offers and applied for work visas during their stay. Unfortunately, immigration pathways closed soon after, leaving them without income and causing significant financial hardship. After two years of uncertainty, they returned to Korea—only to be granted work visas shortly

afterwards. Believing their investment in New Zealand was worth continuing, they chose to return. Thus, visa policy proved a significant pull factor. The growing Korean community, especially in Auckland (New Zealand's largest city), also attracted families. Violet recalled her father's two friends already living there, and their chosen neighborhood had a large Korean presence. This familiarity eased their transition and reinforced their decision.

Push Factors to Leave South Korea

Discontent with Korean society was a key push factor. Participants noted their parents struggled with Korean work culture—such as heavy drinking and poor work-life balance— and the lack of family time. At the time, Korean society faced several distressing events, including the Sampoong Department Store²⁾ and Seongsu Bridge collapses,³⁾ as well as child

2) The Sampoong Department Store collapse in Seoul on June 29, 1995, was a catastrophic structural failure that killed over 500 people and injured more than 930, caused by overloading and the use of substandard concrete rather than initial suspicions of a gas leak or terrorism (Britannica, n.d.).

3) The Seongsu Bridge disaster occurred on October 21, 1994, in Seoul, South Korea, when a 48-metre section of the bridge collapsed during the morning rush hour, resulting in 32 fatalities and 17 injuries. The collapse was attributed to a combination of faulty welding, rusted extension hinges, and inadequate maintenance, leading to structural failure (Yoon, 2023).

kidnappings. These incidents intensified concerns about safety and quality of life. Parents were also concerned about Korea's intense education system and the limited free time it allowed, given the highly competitive academic environment described above. They saw New Zealand as a kind of Utopia—offering a safer, healthier environment not available in Korea at the time.

Theme 2. Between Two Worlds

Challenges of 1.5-Generation Immigrants

The participants experienced the challenges of settlement firsthand. Navigating between Korean and New Zealand cultures introduced additional difficulties. Violet recalled, “As a teenager, I faced an identity crisis. I felt strongly Korean, yet I was living in New Zealand!” Similarly, Lily struggled to emotionally connect with local peers. Shared jokes, cultural references, and humor often eluded her, and her polite, reserved behavior was sometimes misunderstood. At the same time, behaviors considered acceptable in New Zealand schools often conflicted with expectations at home, creating cultural tension. Reflecting on this experience, she explained, “I had to learn how to wear different ‘hats’—my home self (Korean) and my social self (New Zealander/Kiwi⁴!).” Over time, switching between these identities became more natural.

Like many 1.5 generation immigrant children, Violet and Lily were thrust into adult roles earlier than peers in Korea, leading to premature adulthood. Violet, for example, spent her after-school hours helping in her parents' business. Lily recalled constant worries over money and visa issues that clouded her childhood. With the strongest English language skills in her family, she took on responsibilities such as visa applications, government paperwork, property matters, and banking—tasks she likely would not have faced had they remained in Korea. Reflecting on her experience, Lily shared:

I think someone like me—1.5 generation immigrants—might relate to what I'm saying. If we were in Korea, I probably wouldn't have known anything about 'adult' responsibilities. But because of the language barrier, my parents were afraid of making mistakes. Kids pick up English faster than adults, so they would often ask me to help read documents—whether it was for banking, government duties, or property stuff...(Lily, personal communication, May 2025)

4) An informal term used to refer to New Zealanders.

Language barriers were a major struggle for the participants as immigrant children. Upon arriving in New Zealand, they felt their social status plummet overnight. In Korea, they had been high achievers—class presidents, honor roll students, and prize winners. Suddenly, limited English meant lower grades and the loss of leadership roles. Although most eventually regained academic success and even won awards, the early period was marked by a sharp sense of decline—they went from being looked up to, to needing help themselves.

The pressure to learn English quickly created intense stress and anxiety. Lily recalled a time when her mother found her hitting her head against the wall in frustration. Despite the emotional toll, Lily felt she had to manage the challenge alone. Violet described constant anxiety: "I worried someone would ask me something I couldn't answer or wouldn't understand my questions." Her introverted nature made things harder: "Every time I spoke, I tried to craft the perfect sentence, which made conversation exhausting." As a result, she struggled to form local friendships and became quiet and withdrawn. Language barriers, therefore, contributed significantly to their social isolation. Some participants felt invisible in the classroom. Once seen as exemplary students in Korea, they now felt overlooked. Violet remembered a day when the teacher called on every student—except her. In that moment, she felt insignificant and unseen.

Feelings of stress, anxiety, and isolation often manifested physically. Violet remembered her lips becoming cracked and swollen from stress and being mentally exhausted every day. "I was terrified of not finding the right classroom," she recalled. These struggles often went unnoticed by teachers, highlighting how invisible the emotional burdens of immigrant children can be. "Being a teenager is already hard—this (living as a immigrant in new culture)

made it even harder.” She also observed the toll on peers; some Korean students, overwhelmed by isolation, began skipping school or engaging in risky behavior like smoking. At home, financial and emotional strain led to parental conflict, which deeply affected Violet and her younger sibling.

Social Divisions

From the moment they arrived in New Zealand, the participants experienced social divisions. In Auckland's academically prestigious areas—often selected by Korean families—large Korean student populations formed. Within these environments, children quickly became aware of where they belonged. There was often unspoken pressure to align with either the Korean immigrant group or the local New Zealander group, with little room to move between. Many, like Lily, spent most of their time within the Korean peer circle.

As children, we often chose the easier group—the one we could communicate with, and where others looked like us. There was no middle ground. If a Korean child chose to play with local peers, somehow, they were no longer emotionally included in the Korean group at school... (Lily, personal communication, May 2025)

She reflected that more opportunities to play with local children could have improved her English and helped her better understand New Zealand culture. However, such interactions were rare among Korean children in New Zealand. Daisy also recalled feeling the social divide, despite having both Korean and local friends. Her mother often hosted two separate birthday parties—one for each group—because blending them felt nearly impossible.

Violet noted that even among Korean immigrant children, social divisions sometimes emerged. Early arrivals in New Zealand often acted territorial toward newcomers, offering little support and reinforcing exclusion within their own community.

Although there were other Korean students, they showed 텃세 teot-se—a kind of territorial attitude. Some had arrived just three months earlier, yet they acted like seniors and kept their distance. Looking back, it's almost funny, but at the time I had no close friends and felt very lonely...(Violet, personal communication, May 2025).

Daisy and Lily noted that the social divide between Korean and New Zealander peers persisted into university. Lily observed that students naturally formed distinct groups: Korean international students, 1.5 generation Korean immigrants, local students, and mixed clusters of those who had shared high school experiences. “It’s hard to communicate without a shared context,” she explained. Daisy added that shared language, emotions, and nostalgia for Korea often kept Korean students together—creating a “little Korea” within New Zealand.

Experiencing New Zealand Education

Providing a better educational environment was the primary reason participants' parents chose to move to New Zealand. Their expectations were confirmed by the participants' positive experiences, especially regarding education. Daisy described her arrival as "really, really great," appreciating the slower pace and freedom from Korea's intense, hagwon⁵⁾-driven

5) Hagwon (학원) refers to a private educational institute or academy where students receive supplementary lessons outside of regular school hours.

system. She enjoyed more quality family time and felt it was "okay to be easygoing and slow."

While music lessons existed in both countries, participants noted it was often harder to study under renowned musicians in Korea. In New Zealand, they accessed more suitable private tutors and better opportunities. Daisy found tutors whose teaching style suited her better, while Violet attended a high school known for its music program and choir, which inspired her to pursue music more seriously. She explained that as a middle-class family in Korea, extensive music training wasn't affordable. Moving to New Zealand "opened doors I never imagined."

They valued New Zealand's tertiary education system, which enabled entry into interdisciplinary master's programs like music therapy, requiring both music and psychology backgrounds. Some participants held degrees in both fields; others completed diplomas or music grade exams to meet entry requirements. For example, Violet combined her piano and guitar skills with psychology courses through a graduate diploma. Lily, with a psychology degree, completed a music diploma to qualify. Financially, university was manageable without parental support, thanks to New Zealand's interest-free student loans and allowances. Community support was also crucial. For instance, Daisy struggled to find her own musical instrument but could continue her studies by borrowing one through generous community members.

However, participants noted limited resources in New Zealand's education system—scarce instruments and an occasional need to rely on personal networks. During music therapy training, some had to travel abroad for specialized instruction unavailable locally, such as the Nordoff-Robbins method at New York University. They admired how the Korean Music Therapy Association actively brought international experts to Korea for diverse therapeutic approaches, including Guided Imagery and Music, Vocal Psychotherapy, and more.

The Korean Church as a Cultural and Spiritual Bridge

All participants identified as Christians, either Catholic or Protestant, and their faith helped guide them through settlement. Despite emotional challenges, their faith helped them avoid

high-risk behaviors like smoking or juvenile delinquency, which some 1.5 generation Korean peers faced. Korean churches in New Zealand played a crucial role—not only for shared faith but also for easing cultural shock and allowing them to speak Korean. These churches provided a space to connect with other Koreans outside school. Violet said, “I made many friends there and could talk freely. At church, I was a completely different person from the quiet girl at school. I don't know how I would have managed without it.”

The Korean Christian community was also vital in maintaining Korean culture in New Zealand. During the school years, Korean churches provided a space to meet peers, speak Korean, and access Korean books. Later, as music therapists, they received practical support through volunteering and part-time work via church networks, helping them connect with more clients.

Wearing a Kiwi Mask

Participants often felt the need to wear “Kiwi masks” to fit into New Zealand life, even though they valued their Korean identity. They highlighted family upbringing—especially encouragement to speak Korean and practice Korean culture at home—as crucial for preserving their identity. Speaking exclusively Korean at home helped them retain language skills, though some families chose English to aid quicker language acquisition. For Lily, this strong cultural foundation supported her development of a Kiwi identity through schooling. Despite initial challenges, she successfully integrated both Korean and Kiwi identities meaningfully. Overall, family efforts to uphold Korean culture enabled participants to live in New Zealand with a strong Korean identity.

If my family hadn't helped me build a strong Korean identity, I would have struggled to belong to either culture. Although the beginning was challenging and there were some conflicts between my identities, having a solid Korean foundation at home has been invaluable for living in a non-Korean society...(Lily, personal communication, May 2025)

Moreover, living in Auckland facilitated maintaining Korean identity due to its large, active Korean community. Certain schools, known for strong academics and with many Korean students, helped participants stay connected to their culture and feel a sense of community. Violet recalled attending an intermediate girls' school with over ten Korean classmates and a high school with more than 100 Korean students. Violet shared:

I went to a girls' school in a neighborhood often called the 'Gangnam²⁾ of Auckland.' Many Korean parents chose to live there so their children could attend good schools.

²⁾ Gangnam is a specific district in Seoul and a symbol of South Korea's highly competitive schooling and elite academic culture.

Thanks to that, I was able to keep speaking Korean and stay connected to my culture...(Violet, personal communication, May 2025)

With many Korean students and school support, some participants did not feel like minorities. Daisy noted her school hosted an annual Korean Night attended by both New Zealanders and Koreans. It was common for students to bring Korean food to lunch, and local students often asked to try it. Daisy said living among many Koreans created a strong sense of family: "It would have been different for other Korean children who went to a place without any other Korean students."

Raised in New Zealand, participants still felt strong Korean cultural values deeply influencing their attitudes and behaviors. For example, some struggled to speak up in group discussions, reflecting traditional Korean norms that discourage sharing personal opinions—rooted in a collectivist, Confucian culture. These cultural influences affected them at school and throughout their professional lives. While New Zealand's culture promoted a healthier work-life balance with slower weekends and holidays, their Korean upbringing emphasized diligence and hard work, leading some to work harder than their New Zealand colleagues due to internalized expectations of perseverance.

Deeply rooted Korean cultural values sometimes caused miscommunications with European New Zealanders, due to differing intercultural communication styles between Korea and New Zealand. This made everyday interactions challenging, as well-intentioned behaviors were not always understood or accepted in New Zealand society.

I would often get strange looks...There were so many instances like that. For example, in Korean culture, we often say 'Did you eat rice?' as a way of saying hello or showing care. But in New Zealand, people take that literally—as if I'm asking for a specific reason. In Korean culture, we often say things for the sake of the other person, out of consideration, but in a more individualistic society like New Zealand, people tend to speak from their own perspective for clarity. In those moments, I felt like I was being considerate—acting out of respect—but it wasn't always recognized that way. What I intended as kindness sometimes got lost in translation... (Lily, personal communication, May 2025)

In New Zealand, participants were often perceived as passive because of their polite demeanor, a reflection of Korean values emphasizing humility and traditional feminine behavior. While these traits were highly valued within their Korean families, they often conflicted with New Zealand's more individualistic and assertive culture. As a result, participants felt pressure to be outspoken in public, yet struggled to reconcile this with the modesty expected at home. This tension led many to feel compelled to soften their Korean

identity in order to conform to New Zealand's Eurocentric norms, a process they described as “wearing a Kiwi mask.”

Theme 3. Music as a Companion

Music as a Means of Remembering and Creating Visibility

Participants used music to remember their hometown and friends in Korea in their early immigration. For example:

When we left Korea for New Zealand, we transferred through Singapore, and my father bought a Walkman³⁾ for my sibling and me...We brought along cassette tapes filled with Korean 가요 gayo and drama soundtracks—songs like ‘Drama 느낌 Neukkim,’ ‘마지막 승부 Majimak Seung-boo,’ and music by O15B and Tae-Ji Seo. I also enjoyed Disney songs and pop songs like Mariah Carry's songs, who were popular in the early '90s I listened to them every day, walking to school. I In Korea, walking to and from school was a joy. Holding hands with friends from the same apartment, I was happy...But in New Zealand, the houses were spread far apart. I remember one windy, rainy winter morning when I had to walk to school alone. I was scared and miserable... (Violet, personal communication, May 2025)

Whenever Violet felt isolated, she listened to songs on her Walkman that reminded her of friends and shared moments like eating 떡볶이 tteokbokki in Korea. Music reassured her that those friendships still existed. During solitary walks between home and school—times she would have spent with friends in Korea—music was her constant companion. Daisy still enjoys 1990s K-pop, especially groups like H.O.T., which transport her back to childhood memories in Korea. “Whenever I miss Korea, I listen to that music. It makes me feel like I'm still there,” she shared.

All three participants learned piano in Korea. Excelling in music helped Violet gain recognition at school despite language challenges. Daisy's piano skills earned her positive attention, allowing her to be seen as an elite student rather than marginalized. According to three participants, music allowed them to embrace their Korean identity, with one saying, “I don't need to wear the Kiwi mask!” The global rise of K-pop began positively impacting participants' experiences in New Zealand. As K-pop gained popularity, many felt safer and prouder expressing their Korean identity. Daisy shared, “When New Zealanders showed interest in K-pop, I felt heart warmed. I felt respected. It was like they were acknowledging who I really am.” She reflected further,

³⁾ A Walkman is a portable music player that was first introduced by Sony in 1979. It originally played cassette tapes, allowing people to listen to music through headphones while on the go—a major innovation at the time.

Thanks to K-pop, people started approaching me with genuine interest in Korean culture. That made me feel like I didn't have to hide anymore. I could just be myself... I realized—I don't need to wear a mask. I can be me, and still be accepted... (Daisy, personal communication, May 2025)

As such, music served as a companion in participants' immigrant settlement experience, and, along with religious experiences and educational opportunities, guided them toward the path of becoming music therapists.

Music as a Language and a Bridge for New Friendships

Music also helped Daisy connect in New Zealand despite language barriers. Her piano playing attracted neighborhood children who danced to her performances, and local women showed interest in her music. "Music isn't just sound—it's a language," she said. Through music, Daisy built friendships and bridged cultural gaps.

For Violet, music was essential as a means of expressing emotions, serving as an alternative to verbal language. As an introvert with limited English, she struggled to verbalize feelings. Playing piano and singing in the school choir allowed her to express emotions, find stability, and ease loneliness. In high school, music became a safe space for her self-expression and comfort.

As online communities grew in the early 2000s, K-pop helped Daisy form bonds with Koreans in Korea. She described a shared sense of solidarity, or *동지애* *dongji-ae*, meaning comradeship. Listening to K-pop with other Korean children in New Zealand brought comfort and a feeling of belonging. "It reminded me that I'm Korean," she smiled. K-pop also connected her with the local New Zealand community as its popularity grew. "People here approached me because of K-pop... we could communicate through it."

Theme 4. Being a Korean Music Therapist in New Zealand

Korean identity in Music Therapy Practice

Participants agreed that New Zealand's music therapy community is generally open and respectful of cultural diversity, acknowledging their Korean identity within professional practice. Embracing their Korean identity was seen as essential to culturally responsive therapy. Daisy highlighted the importance of the Treaty of Waitangi and the Māori concept of *Whanaungatanga*—emphasizing relationships, connection, and belonging—which resonated deeply with her. This prompted reflection on how her Korean background could enrich her professional identity rather than conflict with it. *Whanaungatanga* stresses building

meaningful, collaborative relationships beyond family ties, essential for authentic therapist-client connections.

Understanding their Korean identity was integral to participants' training and ongoing self-reflection. Lily noted that music therapy training helped her better understand her complex identity as a Korean immigrant and Asian woman, enhancing her ability to provide sensitive care. Participants also learned to adopt more active, leadership roles in therapy, contrasting with the passive tendencies encouraged in Korean culture.

Their Korean identity also influenced their use of Korean songs, like *동요* Dong-Yo (children's songs), in sessions with Korean clients. These songs evoked childhood memories and created comfort and emotional connection for both clients and therapists. Using Korean music fostered a culturally resonant environment, supporting engagement and therapist authenticity, especially when client and therapist shared Korean roots.

Faced Challenges as Korean Music Therapists

Participants recognized that being a Korean music therapist in New Zealand often means managing two languages. Although Violet is fluent in both English and Korean, she found speaking English during music therapy mentally exhausting. She shared, "It was really tiring coming back from work. Two languages were in my head while providing music therapy, and I think this made me very tired." This linguistic strain also made team meetings at work difficult for her.

One day, my supervisor said, 'You haven't said a word! You haven't said anything!' But I couldn't explain myself. I've been here for more than 20 years, and saying I still have difficulty speaking in English just sounds like an excuse.

(Violet, personal communication, May 2025)

Participants often secured part-time work within the Korean community, requiring them to use Korean despite their music therapy training being entirely in English. This posed challenges in selecting appropriate tone and language, as subtle differences affect clients' emotional expression and trust. They had to navigate how Korean and English shape interpersonal dynamics in therapy.

A persistent internal feeling of "not good enough" was common, rooted in cultural self-doubt rather than external judgment. Violet shared, "Although I have five years of experience, I still felt I wasn't enough compared to others in New Zealand." This was sometimes reinforced by colleagues who, influenced by cultural differences in communication and modesty, may have underestimated their skills despite their competence. Korean cultural values of humility made it difficult for therapists to promote their work or demonstrate client progress, limiting others' understanding of their contributions. Violet felt unacknowledged by peers, noting that only supervisors truly recognized her abilities.

Participants also experienced feelings of marginalization in New Zealand society as Korean music therapists. Though overt discrimination was rare, they often sensed their presence carried little weight and were rarely consulted first in group settings. Daisy recalled some clients preferred white European therapists over Asian ones. Despite this, she found motivation in the Korean spirit of 오기 (ogi) (resilient defiance) to work harder. Undeterred, Daisy persevered, striving to change perceptions through dedication and professionalism.

Professional Challenges in the New Zealand Context

Participants acknowledged that working as a music therapist in New Zealand is challenging due to limited recognition and scarce job opportunities—not because of their Korean background, but because music therapy remains a relatively new and under-recognized profession. They noted that local acceptance of music therapy is strong, largely rooted in the Māori cultural understanding of music's spiritual and holistic role. Despite this community openness, music therapy lacks formal government recognition and funding, unlike other allied health professions such as physiotherapy. As a result, music therapists must rely on unstable grants and donations.

After completing their master's degrees, many New Zealand music therapists start as self-employed practitioners before securing contract or full-time roles, often through internship connections, depending on timing and availability. For example, Lily secured a full-time role at her placement center, Daisy began self-employed before being hired full-time, while Violet initially received only a part-time contract after her placement and gradually increased hours over five years. To build private practices, therapists often depended on personal networks, including Music Therapy New Zealand, schools, and the local Korean community.

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the low wages for employed music therapists. Violet recalled that in the late 2000s, the hourly rate was about NZD 31 before tax—roughly NZD 20 after tax—which was very low compared to other allied health professions, such as speech and occupational therapy. She noted that she had earned NZD 50 (gross) per hour giving piano lessons without a formal degree.

Despite low pay, music therapy demands advanced skills and significant time commitments, encompassing assessment, therapy delivery, evaluations, and outreach across diverse settings such as schools and hospices. Meeting clients' families and maintaining costly therapy instruments—especially for self-employed therapists—added financial strain. Lily noted that many music therapists take multiple jobs, such as teaching or performing, to supplement income.

Violet eventually left New Zealand, restarting her career in Australia due to better income potential and government funding through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).⁸⁾ She found music therapy rates in Australia comparable to speech therapy and occupational therapy, with more stable employment in dedicated centers and hospitals. Lily decided to

return to Korea primarily due to her family's health needs. With both her mother and grandmother requiring medical care, she found Korea's healthcare system more accessible and efficient than New Zealand's. She experienced and heard of many unsatisfactory healthcare services in New Zealand, noting, "Healthcare workers in New Zealand are underpaid, and there simply are not enough of them to provide proper care." The shortage of medical professionals and resources made timely, proper care difficult to access, prompting Lily and her family to return to Korea for better healthcare.

While her family's medical needs were the primary reason for returning to Korea, Lily's decision was also driven by a desire to give back. She expressed gratitude for New Zealand's peaceful life, educational opportunities—including student loans—and cultural values like harmony with nature, spirituality, diversity, and community. "I also wanted to contribute to Korea with what I've learned from New Zealand," she said. Lily noted that many values and practices from New Zealand do not directly translate to Korean society, especially in education, where she now works as a private English teacher.

For example, many Korean children seem withdrawn. Unlike kids in New Zealand, they don't really act like children. They study so hard and often show little interest in 'people' surrounding them. I feel very sad when I see that, and it makes me want to share what I learned in New Zealand with children here in Korea...Korean children are incredibly smart, but they're always busy with school and after-school classes. I want to offer them something different—something that creates space for creativity, connection, and emotional expression, which I learned during my time in New Zealand... (Lily, personal communication, May 2025)

Lily noted that Korean society's openness to change gave her the space to contribute in her own way: "What I've come to realize is that I don't need to be the same as everyone

8) See the link: <https://www.ndis.gov.au/>
else to fit in. I can be myself—a Korean from New Zealand." Reflecting on the cultural contrast between the two countries, she observed,

Unlike Korea, which is fast-paced and dynamic, New Zealand feels more static. People there are sometimes reluctant to change—they prefer to stay as they are. There's a sense of being more conservative or rigid in thinking. Korea, on the other hand, is always seeking new ideas, and that openness allows me to maintain my uniqueness while still being accepted. That's something I appreciate about Korea—its willingness to embrace new ideas, which is something I can share with people there... (Lily, personal communication, May 2025)

Lily noted that it would have been difficult for her to change herself to fit in while relocating to Korea. However, people in Korea encouraged her to be herself, reassuring her that the authenticity of being a Korean New Zealander is a unique and valuable contribution she can bring to Korean society.

DISCUSSION

The findings address the research question, How do Korean music therapists in New Zealand describe their life journeys?, by answering the following sub-questions as mentioned above. To gain a deeper understanding of their experiences, the following key topics are discussed in relation to the existing literature: (1) The price of a new life; (2) Wearing two hats: Navigating Korean and Kiwi identities; (3) Transnational professional pathways; and (4) Music as a key for “knocking on the door to integration.”

The Price of a New Life

The findings highlight the costs of beginning anew that participants encountered as members of the 1.5 generation of immigrants. Roh and Chang (2020) noted that the socio-cultural experiences of 1.5 generation immigrants can differ significantly from those of both their parents (first generation) and their offspring (second generation), as they occupy a unique position. In the current study, these experiences included the challenges in the beginning of the settlement such as premature adulthood—often stemming from their stronger language skills compared to their parents in the host society, language barriers, social isolation, feelings of invisibility, identity confusion between two cultures, and emotional and mental difficulties resulting from these struggles. Language barriers were initially experienced during the early stages of settlement. Over time, however, challenges shifted toward difficulties arising from cultural misunderstandings and miscommunication. Social isolation was particularly prominent in the beginning, while feelings of invisibility continued to emerge from time to time throughout their journey. While these experiences may vary depending on individual family contexts and personal characteristics, several themes align with those reported in previous studies on 1.5-generation Korean New Zealanders (Kim & Agee, 2019; Roh & Chang, 2020).

Identity confusion among 1.5-generation Korean New Zealanders in this study aligns with Kim and Agee's (2019) findings, which described participants navigating “two countries in one,” reflecting cultural tensions and identity struggles during adaptation. Their study

involved eighteen 1.5-generation Korean New Zealanders, aged 29 to 47, who migrated before 2002 (ages 5–17) and had lived in New Zealand for 14.7 to 35 years—demographics closely matching this study's participants. Consistent with Roh and Chang (2020), participants here identified cultural and emotional differentiation, along with perceived and actual discrimination, as key challenges contributing to identity confusion and feelings of not fully belonging.

The unique experiences of the 1.5-generation participants in this study involved navigating complex social divisions, beginning in childhood and continuing into adulthood. These divisions were observed among Korean immigrants themselves, between Korean immigrants and local New Zealanders, and also between Korean immigrants and Korean international students (see Theme 2). Two participants noted that they felt a sense of “closeness” and “togetherness” within their Korean peer groups—something they could not experience with their local peers. This connection may reflect the Korean cultural concept *우리* *woori*, or *woness* which is a collective concept describing a psychological state in which individuals de-differentiate themselves to the collective, showing togetherness (Yang, 2006).

One participant reflected that these dynamics may partly stem from the nature of the community in which they lived, which had a high concentration of Korean residents in a specific region. Roh and Chang (2020) observed that, although many Korean parents migrated abroad hoping to provide their children with a less competitive educational environment, they often believed that active involvement in their children's education would ease their adaptation and promote academic success. Consequently, many Korean families chose to settle in particular geographic areas, resulting in school communities with significant Korean student populations.

The large Korean population in New Zealand does not fully explain the social divisions experienced by 1.5-generation Korean immigrants. These divisions could be arise from factors like differences in language proficiency, cultural values, customs, personality, and individual circumstances. For example, Lily noted that many Korean students stayed within their own peer groups for comfort and shared culture. However, exceptions like Daisy acted as a ‘bridge’, actively engaging with both Korean peers and local New Zealanders.

It is also possible that the 1.5 generation mirrored the social integration process their first-generation parents encountered during the settlement process. Kim (2021) observed that Korean immigrants in New Zealand often persistently ‘knock on the door to integration’, facing significant barriers such as limited language proficiency, restricted access to resources, and insufficient social networks. In response, many of them rely on ethnic community networks—especially through employment and social connections—as a way to gradually build familiarity with the local context and expand their ‘safe zones’ within the host society. Kim (2021) described the Korean community as a “steppingstone for integration” (p. 37), helping individuals slowly extend their engagement into New Zealand society. Similarly, 1.5-

generation immigrants may view their Korean peer groups as initial support systems—a steppingstone—during their early settlement years. While they may no longer need to rely on these networks in their professional lives—such as in their work as music therapists—they may still depend on them for social belonging during earlier stages of immigration, which are in their student years.

Therefore, there is a clear need for support from relevant stakeholders to foster more inclusive communities. Daisy's account of her school organizing events for the Korean student community, and how these activities encouraged interaction between Korean and local peers, underscores the important role schools and local institutions can play in fostering social cohesion. Her experience illustrates the value of structured, culturally inclusive initiatives in bridging cultural divides and supporting the integration of diverse communities.

Wearing Two Hats: Navigating Korean and Kiwi Identities

Describing the participants' life journeys involves understanding their continuous navigation between Korean and Kiwi identities—regularly “switching hats” depending on context. As some expressed, they moved between their “Korean hat” and “Kiwi hat,” reflecting ongoing identity negotiation across two cultures. This dynamic process, as described by Burke (2006) and Hall (2006), is shaped by fluid movement through cultural, temporal, and social spaces, occurring both consciously and unconsciously.

From their arrival in New Zealand, participants began forming an ‘in-between’ identity shaped by dual experiences at home and in society. They often felt “caught in the middle” of two cultures (Kim & Agee, 2019, p. 40). Roh and Chang (2020) similarly note that 1.5-generation Korean–New Zealanders develop hybrid identities influenced most strongly by family and school. At home, participants upheld Korean values and customs, while at school, they absorbed New Zealand norms, leading to a complex negotiation of identity and belonging. Strong ties to Auckland's Korean community reinforced their sense of “Korean-ness,” shaping their behavior and worldview. However, their “Korean-ness” led them to think and behave in ways rooted in Korean culture, which occasionally caused miscommunication in the broader New Zealand society. Conversely, Kiwi cultural influences occasionally led to misunderstandings within families when participants' actions clashed with Korean expectations.

Given these circumstances, participants often spoke about the need to learn when to “wear the right hat”—navigating and switching between Korean and Kiwi cultural modes depending on the context. This duality frequently led to moments of cultural tension, as they balanced the expectations of both cultures in their daily lives. For example, participants described

accidentally “wearing their Kiwi hat” at home, leading to friction with parents, or “wearing their Korean hat” in public settings, resulting in confusion or social discomfort. These experiences highlight the nuanced and ongoing process of identity negotiation that defines the life journeys of the 1.5 generation.

While growing up, participants became more comfortable switching between their “hats,” gradually embracing an in-between cultural identity as described by Kim and Agee (2019). However, the process of identity negotiation—often accompanied by challenges—remains ongoing. One participant, for example, continued to experience new challenges in her music therapy practice in New Zealand. Although her clients—both Asian and Pākehā (white New Zealanders)—were generally kind and respectful, there were moments that reminded her of her outsider status. Clients would sometimes ask, “Do you know this?” referring to a New Zealand-specific term, cultural reference, or custom. While these questions were often well-intentioned, they could still leave her feeling like a stranger—particularly when she genuinely did not know the reference.

When participants returned to Korea—whether for short visits or extended stays—they often found themselves feeling like outsiders once again, this time as former immigrants from New Zealand. They had to relearn how to navigate cultural expectations, constantly switching between their “Korean hat” and “Kiwi hat” depending on the context. Despite their Korean heritage, their New Zealand residency status officially marked them as foreigners. One participant recalled being treated as an outsider when visiting banks or dealing with government offices in Korea, simply because of her foreign residency. These moments reinforced the complexity of their bicultural identity and the ongoing sense of not fully belonging in either country. While navigating their identities, Korean churches played a vital role by offering spiritual guidance and social networks for the Korean immigrants, consistent with previous research (Morris et al., 2007; Park & Anglem, 2012). Notably, these churches have also informed social work practices within the Korean New Zealander community (Park & Anglem, 2012).

According to participants, their journey to becoming music therapists in New Zealand was also a process of becoming “authentic Korean New Zealanders,” with identity development closely tied to professional growth. Reflective practice, a core aspect of effective music therapy that requires continuously evaluating and improving professional work, may also foster personal development (Warren & Rickson, 2016). Multicultural competency, which is essential to the music therapy profession (Hadley & Norris, 2016), could be developed through professional training. It might enhance their personal growth by fostering a deeper understanding of the relationship between oneself and one’s cultural traditions, particularly for those occupying an in-between cultural position. Moreover, as noted in the findings, the Māori concept of *whanaungatanga*—emphasizing relationship-building and connectedness—may have played a crucial role in helping them navigate their dual cultural identities by

switching between their “Korean hat” and “Kiwi hat,” depending on the social and professional context.

The adaptability participants already possessed—and further developed through their music therapy training and practice—may contribute to the development their strong sense of identity as Korean New Zealanders. Adaptability is a key component of a music therapist's professional identity, as highlighted (Warren & Rickson, 2016). This adaptability goes beyond musical flexibility, therapeutic techniques, or instrument use; it also includes the capacity to navigate complex professional and cultural landscapes (Warren & Rickson, 2016).

Being introduced to the concept of cultural safety—originally developed within Māori healthcare in Aotearoa New Zealand—through their music therapy practice holds particular significance for Korean music therapists as they navigate bicultural identities during their professional development. As Crooke et al. (2024) explain, cultural safety involves creating environments where individuals’ cultural, spiritual, and personal identities are acknowledged, respected, and never invalidated. This approach requires practitioners to engage in ongoing critical self-reflection, examining their own cultural assumptions and potential biases (Williams, 1999). For the Korean music therapists in this study, adopting cultural safety principles may help alleviate internal pressures—particularly the emotional burden of “not feeling good enough,” as described by several participants. It may also reduce the cognitive and emotional strain of switching between two languages, despite their fluency in both Korean and English (Kim & Agee, 2019), as well as the emotional challenge of navigating different cultural frameworks in therapeutic settings.

Transnational Professional Pathways

Participants shaped their professional pathways by navigating complex social, cultural, and economic factors in both South Korea and New Zealand throughout their life journey. Violet's family arrived in 1994, part of an early 1990s wave of Korean immigrants (Yoon & Yim, 1997), while Daisy and Lily's families immigrated in 2002, during a peak in Korean migration (Stats NZ, n.d.b). Their migration coincided with significant growth in Korean immigration to New Zealand, reflecting common push and pull factors seen in other studies (Chang et al., 2017; Kim, 2021; Kim & Hocking, 2018). These included push factors such as South Korea's competitive, work-centered culture, threat of conflict with North Korea, and academic pressures, alongside pull factors like New Zealand's promise of a better quality of life and positive social reputation (Department of Labour, 2006; Kim & Hocking, 2018).

Although the participants’ experiences in Korean education date back to the early 1990s and 2000s, the findings offer valuable insights for South Korean policymakers, particularly

concerning educational accessibility. Education in New Zealand—one of the main pull factors for migrating—largely satisfied the three participants with its accessibility and providing opportunities without the burden of excessive tuition fees or extra tuition fee to be a music therapist. In terms of tertiary education fees, full-time domestic students with New Zealand citizenship or residency are eligible for financial support through a student loan and/or a student allowance (Ministry of Social Development, n.d.a.; n.d.b.). A student loan can help cover tuition fees, course-related costs (up to 1,000NZD), and weekly living costs (up to 323.43NZD), and is repaid based on the student's income and location (Ministry of Social Development, n.d.c.; n.d.d.). In addition, a student allowance is a non-repayable weekly payment to support living expenses. Students under 24 without children are assessed for eligibility based on their parents' income and may also qualify for an accommodation benefit (Ministry of Social Development, n.d.b.). Although access to certain resources—such as specific musical instruments—was limited, strong community support played a key role in helping students pursue their academic goals. These opportunities extend even to the participants, who were the children in newly immigrated family who may lack strong social networks or financial resources. This is an important aspect that Korean education policy should address, ensuring accessibility and reducing barriers to education for all.

Additionally, the push factors prompting two participants to remigrate from New Zealand to other countries provide important insights for related policymakers and stakeholders. The two participants chose to leave New Zealand due to challenges as music therapists, including limited job opportunities, low income, and systemic constraints within the healthcare system. They pointed to policymakers' poor understanding of music therapy, leading to insufficient support and restricted employment. Supporting this, a study of 99 academics and healthcare providers in one New Zealand city found only low-to-moderate awareness of music therapy's benefits for emotional, physical, social, creative, spiritual, and environmental wellbeing (Cho et al., 2025). This limited understanding likely contributes to the profession's low visibility among policymakers nationwide.

The participants' experiences with self-employment reflect broader labor market trends identified by Kang and Page (2000), who reported that 36% of the 8,871 Koreans in Auckland were self-employed at that time. Similarly, the 2016 national survey of RMThs in New Zealand found that 67% were self-employed (Molyneux et al., 2016), indicating that independent work is common within the profession. This underscores the critical role of professional networks and community connections in securing employment. Additionally, New Zealand's relatively small population—estimated at around 5.3 million in 2024 (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.a)—likely contributes to the limited job opportunities available in music therapy.

Regarding participants' experiences with low income, Music Therapy New Zealand's 2016 national survey reported that individual music therapists charged hourly rates between NZD 60 and 85, or session rates ranging from NZD 45 to 100 (Molyneux et al., 2016). Compared to

a 2008 survey, which found average hourly rates of NZD 40 to 100, this increase is modest and arguably insufficient when accounting for eight years of inflation (Molyneux et al., 2016). Coupled with limited job opportunities and a high rate of self-employment, these rates often fail to provide a sustainable income. Consequently, all participants reported taking on additional jobs or multiple roles. This aligns with Warren and Rickson's (2016) observation that many music therapists in New Zealand hold dual qualifications in fields such as education or healthcare, reflecting both a need for broader employment options and a commitment to ongoing professional development.

The experiences shared by participants reflect global trends in the music therapy profession. Employment challenges such as underemployment and limited recognition of the profession are common worldwide. Kern and Tague's (2017) survey of 2,495 music therapists across six regions—including Australia/New Zealand, Europe, Latin America, North America, Southeast Asia, and the Western Pacific—highlighted ongoing struggles to gain recognition and government regulation for music therapy as an evidence-based, well-funded healthcare profession. As a result, many music therapists globally work part-time and feel underpaid, not just in New Zealand.

To address these challenges, the Music Therapy New Zealand and related organizations actively promote the value and benefits of music therapy. Initiatives like the annual New Zealand Music Therapy Week raise public awareness and recognition nationwide (Music Therapy New Zealand, 2024) while also serving as key fundraisers for the profession. Additionally, the New Zealand Journal of Music Therapy plays a crucial role by providing evidence-based research and practice-based articles that could inform policy development and advocates for increased government support.

The insights from these three personal stories provide a glimpse into the push factors driving departures from New Zealand, as well as broader patterns of transnational mobility and immigration trends among Korean New Zealanders. Lily noted that many in her generation have moved abroad in search of better employment prospects. The age profile of the Korean migrant population in New Zealand appears to reflect the narratives presented in this study—many arrived as part of the 1.5 generation, pursued education, and left upon reaching adulthood. In 1996, the median age of Korean migrants was 25.2 years (Kang & Page, 2000), rising to 33.2 years by 2018 and 36.1 by 2023 (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.b). The median age of the Korean population in New Zealand increasing over time implies that fewer new young migrants are arriving, or that many younger migrants are leaving, or both. This aging trend may suggest that younger migrants, having come for education, working holidays, or short-term employment—forms of mobility typical among younger people—did not remain long-term. Many may have returned to South Korea or moved elsewhere. Supporting this interpretation, 2018 data show that among those who remained, 35.6% were not in the labor force, and in 2023, 32.9% were not in the labor force (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.b.). A

large percentage not participating in the labor force could suggest that they are students or dependents, people between jobs or on temporary visas, or individuals preparing to leave New Zealand.

Music as a Key for ‘Knocking on the Door to Integration’

Music played a pivotal role in the participants’ immigration journeys by aiding their integration into New Zealand society. At every stage—from leaving South Korea to settling in New Zealand and working as music therapists—music served as a constant companion for the participants. From early in their immigration journey, the participants brought with them musical skills and memories from Korea. During settlement, music became a key tool for engaging with and integrating into their new society. Furthermore, music guided them toward the profession of music therapy. It served as a companion, offering a safe space to express emotions, and became a language through which they communicated and formed friendships with locals. Simultaneously, music helped them maintain their Korean identity and, by sharing their love of K-pop with others, strengthened bonds through this shared cultural connection.

These experiences closely mirror findings from Cho’s (2024) study on Korean international students in the UK, where music similarly supported well-being. From the early stages of settlement—when loneliness and isolation were most acute—music was a constant companion, often evoking happy memories of Korea and shared moments with friends. Like in the researchers’ own study (see Cho 2024), music functioned as a 동반자 *tongbanja* (companion), providing a safe space for emotional expression and processing.

Music also facilitated new relationships with local peers. All three participants were skilled pianists upon arrival, using music as an active communication tool rather than passive entertainment. Additionally, as Cho (2024) noted, K-pop’s global popularity helped participants connect, as locals often initiated conversations about it. Their musical talents combined with K-pop’s popularity increased their social visibility, shifting them from being unnoticed to gaining recognition. Participants also reported that music freed them from the need to “wear a Kiwi mask” (see Theme 3)—they felt accepted and recognized as authentic Koreans in New Zealand. Thus, music transformed social divisions between Korean peer groups and local communities into social cohesion.

This study strongly supports the concept of ‘music as re-membling’ (Cho, 2024) in the context of the migration experience. Drawing on Klein (2005) and Fortier (1999), who described how collective memory is transmitted through songs from first-generation immigrants to subsequent generations, this concept helped explain how international students recall and reconnect with their ethnic and cultural identities (Cho, 2024). Similarly, in this study, music enabled participants to ‘remember’ their roots. Sharing musical tastes—especially K-pop—helped them reconnect with people in Korea and deepened their sense of comradeship and fellowship, particularly through online communities. Participants described

this as a form of ‘re-membling’ their Korean identity through a sense of *dongji-ae* (see Theme 3). As with Cho’s (2024) findings, K-pop played a significant role in this identity re-membling process.

Therefore, borrowing Kim’s (2021) expression of how first-generation Korean immigrants in New Zealand persistently “knock on the door to integration,” this study suggests that music can serve as a key to unlocking that door—facilitating integration into a new culture while preserving their home identity. Despite facing structural and cultural barriers, Korean immigrants demonstrated a strong desire to establish a sense of belonging in their new society (Kim, 2021). Building on this, the current study highlights how music plays a crucial role in this process, helping participants effectively knock on and open the door to integration.

Accordingly, the findings suggest that revisions are needed to the conceptual framework, incorporating the new key concepts indicated in italics (see Figure 2). As discussed above, during their early immigration, they had to pay the price of starting a new life. They were learning to “wear two hats” to settle in; however, this experience continued throughout their professional journeys. They navigated transnational life by balancing both their Korean and Kiwi identities. At each stage of their life journeys, music served as a ‘key,’ unlocking pathways through the experiences of early immigration, settlement, and professional development.

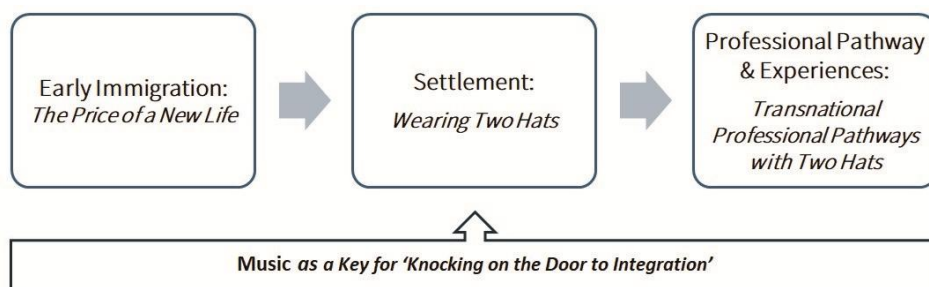


Figure 2: Amended Conceptual Framework: Life Journey of Korean Music Therapists in New Zealand

CONCLUSION

This study explores how Korean music therapists in New Zealand describe their life journeys. Having migrated as children with their parents, the participants’ settlement stories reflect the personal challenges of growing up as 1.5-generation immigrants, described as the “price of a new life.” Navigating dual cultural identities often led to moments of intercultural miscommunication and the need to “wear a Kiwi mask.” Thus, participants settled in New Zealand by metaphorically wearing two hats. The study highlights the ongoing identity negotiation faced by Korean music therapists and their transnational professional pathways.

In this process, music serves as a central medium through which they continually “knock on the door to integration” at each stage of their life journey.

By reflecting on my own experiences to engage in active dialogue with the participants’ narratives (Linda, 2023), I found that we faced different “prices” for starting a new life. Unlike the participants, who are 1.5-generation immigrants, my experience involved starting completely from scratch—more akin to what their parents, as first-generation immigrants, experienced. I did not include their parents’ experiences in this study, as they fall beyond the research scope. Unlike the participants, however, I did not experience identity confusion while living in New Zealand, having arrived as an adult for my PhD study. Wearing one hat sufficed, and being a stranger in New Zealand was expected. Nevertheless, as I explained previously, I became more “Korean” while living in New Zealand. As with the participants, music served as a key to integrating into the new society. Bringing my own music, the gayageum, a traditional Korean instrument, made me visible in New Zealand society, welcomed me into the music therapy community, and helped me ‘re-member’ my Korean identity (Cho, 2024).

The findings yield several recommendations for policymakers and related stakeholders. This involves consideration of educational accessibility in Korea, improving employment retention for immigrants in New Zealand, and enhancing government initiatives to create secure and sustainable job opportunities. Language support programs for immigrant communities should go beyond basic proficiency to encompass cultural and contextual understanding, while inclusive school programs should be promoted to foster social cohesion. Moreover, the profession of music therapy itself requires greater recognition and long-term support to ensure its sustainability. Importantly, the study highlights the transformative role of music throughout the participants’ immigrant journeys—illustrating its potential to inform culturally responsive music policies that could better support immigrant communities in New Zealand.

A key limitation of this study lies in its small sample size of three participants, reflecting the limited number of Korean music therapists currently practicing in New Zealand. Future research could explore the experiences of Korean music therapists in other countries or examine the perspectives of music therapists from diverse cultural backgrounds within New Zealand. According to the participants, through social media they could connect with people in Korea and stay up-to-date with Korean culture. However, this aspect was not discussed in detail in the current study due to word count limitations, suggesting the future research should further explore this influence. Additionally, further investigation is needed into the social divisions observed within the 1.5-generation immigrant community identified in this study.

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