

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Exercising Agency for a Better Future: Adolescents in Korea's Kinship Care

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## ABSTRACT

The literature on adolescents' perspectives on growing up in kinship care is limited. The study aims to explore the lived experiences of adolescents in grandparent kinship care by examining how they respond to adversity, build support and exercise agency. The study recruited 22 grandparent–adolescent pairs in a large Korean city. Separate interviews were conducted with each adolescent, aged 12–17, and their caregiver at the adolescent's home. The study uses interpretive thematic analysis to validate and triangulate themes and subthemes from the perspectives of adolescents and their caregivers. All adolescents experienced abandonment and had little to no contact with their parents, leading to feelings of disconnection, longing and stigma. For some, a grandparent's dedication and the presence of other relatives acting as substitutes helped lessen the negative effects of abandonment. Even amid adversity, they showed varying levels of agency, demonstrating awareness of their situations, intentionality in their actions and taking steps towards a better future. The findings emphasize the agency of vulnerable youth. Korea's underdeveloped foster care system and lack of coordinated services for grandparent kinship families leave them and their caregivers to navigate alone. Improved services for all grandparent kinship families, including guidance and meaningful support for adolescents at critical stages, could help strengthen their efforts to create a better future.

## 1 | Introduction

Increasing emphasis is placed on the voices of vulnerable children and youth through their participation in child welfare proceedings, service planning and intervention programmes (Berridge 2017; Bolin 2016; Stafford et al. 2021). The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child explicitly recognized children's vulnerability and their capacity to make decisions (Lansdown 2020). Research shows that even in the face of adversity, children and youth exercise agency to improve their circumstances and negotiate for greater bargaining power (Berridge 2017; Bolin 2016; Kim and Gewirtz 2020). Children and youth are not merely products of their environments but are also 'contributors' to the actions and decisions that shape their

lives (Bandura 1990, 2018). However, limited success in incorporating children's voices has led to child welfare practices neglecting their agency (Toros and Falch-Eriksen 2025).

Korea's out-of-home care (OOHC) services have evolved from a heavy dependence on large institutions to smaller, family-based care settings. Kinship care, particularly the care provided by grandparents, has become a prominent model of foster care (Chung et al. 2022; Kang et al. 2014). Children and adolescents in Korea's kinship care face challenges, such as stigma, ageing caregivers, poverty and limited opportunities, which are common across many societies (An et al. 2020; Farmer et al. 2013; Jung et al. 2021; Xu et al. 2021). Unlike those in other developed countries, however, children and youth in Korean kinship care

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experience worse developmental outcomes than those placed in institutional care (Kang et al. 2017) and express less satisfaction with their care than those in group homes (Lee et al. 2017).

This unexpected outcome results from the lack of government oversight, inadequate case management and limited support services for kinship families in Korea (Chung et al. 2022; Kang et al. 2014, 2017). Under these circumstances, adolescents in kinship care face significant challenges when navigating educational systems and planning for their futures. Even in adversity, they remain active agents in their own lives (Bandura 2006; Nunes et al. 2023). This study explores the lived experiences of adolescents in grandparent kinship care in Korea, particularly in search of agency, drawing from narratives from adolescents and their grandparent caregivers.

## 2 | Literature and Backgrounds

### 2.1 | Agency Among Vulnerable Children and Youth

Scholars define agency as ‘the feeling of control over actions and their consequences’ (Moore 2016, p.1) and as having a say in decisions that influence one’s life (Berridge 2017; Morrison et al. 2019). Rooted in social cognition theory, the concept of agency is fundamental to being human and plays a key role in self-development and adaptation (Bandura 1990, 2001). Having agency does not negate the impact of structural factors on decision-making and self-efficacy but acknowledges that agentic capacity develops through an interactive process of observation and learning (Bandura 2006). Although facing adversity, adolescents continue to respond to their environment and build their agency (Kim and Gewirtz 2020; Nunes et al. 2023).

Individual, family and social contexts shape the developmental trajectories of agency (Bandura 2018; Nunes et al. 2023), whereas vulnerable youth develop and execute agency through social relationships in contested situations (Gonzalez and Ruiz-Casares 2022; Munford and Sanders 2015). Scholars recognize that agentic capacity can be limited, especially in challenging environments characterized by ‘thin’ or ‘bounded’ agency (Evans 2007; Morrison et al. 2019; Munford and Sanders 2015). For example, foster care youth choose to learn when certain conditions are met (Berridge 2017), or they find support and resources through negotiation with child welfare workers (Munford and Sanders 2015).

### 2.2 | Benefits and Challenges of Kinship Care Across Cultures

Kinship foster care is favoured for children needing OOHC across diverse cultures and societies (e.g., Dolbin-MacNab and Yancura 2018) because it helps children and youth maintain family connections (Burgess et al. 2010) and has demonstrated better stability as well as better educational and emotional outcomes compared to those in foster care (Shovali et al. 2020; Winokur et al. 2018). However, the relatively better outcomes often conceal the challenges faced by children and their caregivers in grandparent kinship care, regardless of whether the

placement was formally or informally arranged (Choi et al. 2016; CWIG 2022; Dolbin-MacNab and Yancura 2018; Lee et al. 2016).

Poverty, parenting stress, and poor physical and mental health among caregivers are well-documented challenges for both formal and informal kinship families (e.g., Jung et al. 2021; Lee et al. 2016; Xu et al. 2021). Kinship care is associated with stigma (Farmer et al. 2013), negatively affecting children’s self-esteem, self-efficacy and school experiences (An et al. 2020). Children raised by grandparents often have to fend for themselves, experience difficulties integrating into their communities and hide their living situations (Bae and Park 2013).

### 2.3 | Korea’s Child Welfare Systems and Kinship Care

During rapid industrialization and the shift to nuclear family households, Korea mainly depended on congregate care as the primary form of OOHC. Acting upon recommendations by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 2003), the Korean government has established foster care options in home-based settings and has transitioned ‘child- or youth-led’ households into kinship foster care (Kang et al. 2014). The central government does not directly oversee children in OOHC, including those in kinship care, leaving the authority and supervision largely to social service agencies. A high caseload among social workers results in little or limited case management of families in kinship foster care (Kim and Chung 2015; Lee 2024). Coupled with the expectation of a long-term stay in kinship foster care, minimal reunification efforts are encouraged (Lee 2024; NCRC 2025), and various reforms have been slow and ineffective (Chung et al. 2022).

More than half (57.3%) of Korean children in need of OOHC were in congregate care in 2022 (Child Fund of Korea 2024; Lee 2024). In contrast, 15% have a cumulative prevalence of entering congregate care in the USA (Covington et al. 2022). Among those in Korea’s family foster care, 87.9% were with kin (NCRC 2025). In 2021, most children (72%) in kinship foster care were with grandparents, known as ‘surrogate care’ (Child Fund of Korea 2023).

### 2.4 | Vulnerability of Grandparent Kinship Families in Korea

Much research on kinship families in Korea explores the challenges, stigma, loneliness and poverty experienced by grandparents and their grandchildren in both informal and formal caregiving settings (Bae and Park 2013; Ju et al. 2009; Jung and Kang 2023; Jung et al. 2021; Lee et al. 2017). Grandparents have reported difficulties in raising their grandchildren due to poverty (see Jung et al. 2021). Meanwhile, grandchildren say that their lives are filled with many unanswered questions about their parents and secrets related to their existence (Kim and Yoon 2015), along with stigma (Jung and Kang 2023) and feelings of loneliness (Lee and Yu 2019).

Research indicates that not all grandparents exhibit nurturing parenting (Kim and Chung 2015), as both informal and formal

placements often happen because of parents' divorce and economic instability. Even when children were placed formally, no comprehensive assessments of the living environment or the grandparent caregiver's capacity were made because of workers' limited skills and high caseloads (Kang et al. 2014), resulting in poor outcomes for children in kinship foster care (Kang et al. 2017).

## 2.5 | Current Study

There is a notable gap in research linking adolescents' understanding of their lives to the development of their sense of control. Previous studies on adolescents' career plans and hope (e.g., Kim and Suh 2024) have shown their perseverance and anticipated challenges, but few have explored how agency influences their decisions. Additionally, although disadvantages may limit their capacity (Morrison et al. 2019; Munford and Sanders 2015), it remains unclear how these disadvantages impact adolescents' pursuit of agency. The current study aims to deepen our understanding of the agency of vulnerable children, a topic rarely examined in Korea's kinship care. Specifically, we investigate how experiences of separation from their parents shape adolescents' lives, who they rely on or seek support from, and how they leverage their agency to create opportunities for a better future.

## 3 | Research Designs and Methods

### 3.1 | Study Design, Participant Recruitment and Consent Processes

This study aims to elicit responses from both adolescents and their grandparents by selecting a grandchild–grandparent pair in each kinship family. The study's protocol and interview questions received approval from the institutional review board (IRB) at the authors' institutions. To be eligible, adolescents had to be between 12 and 18 years old, raised by grandparents without a parent present, and both the focal adolescent and the grandparent needed to agree to participate in the interview.

Potential kinship families were mainly recruited through the city's foster care agency and social service organizations for formal and informal grandparent kinship families. The first author visited the foster care agency, and its workers provided a list of eligible grandparent kinship foster families. We also contacted social service agencies for their assistance with recruitment. Based on the lists and names of prospective families, the first author made contact to gauge their interest by phone. If they agreed to participate, arrangements were made for both interviews to be conducted at their home.

Each interview with a grandparent or adolescent began with a discussion of informed consent, assent and confidentiality. This discussion included the right to refuse to answer questions or to withdraw participation from the study. Additional assurances were given to adolescent participants that their identities would remain confidential and that their data would not be shared outside the research team, including with their grandparents. Grandparent participants received a \$45 cash incentive, whereas adolescent interviewees received approximately \$25.

Given the sensitive nature of the questions, the first author conducted all interviews at the family's residence. If possible, the grandparents were interviewed first, followed by the adolescents. The interviews, which lasted between 30 and 100 min, were recorded with permission. The grandparents were asked about their sources of income, housing, sources of support, challenges in raising their grandchildren, reasons for taking on their grandchildren, and their hopes and plans for their children, as well as the biological parents of the children in their care. The interviews with grandchildren focused on their relationships with grandparents and other family members, their experiences and challenges in school, friendships, social activities, their experiences with biological parents, and their hopes and dreams for the future. Sensitive questions, such as those related to stigma, followed cues from adolescent participants as part of inquiries about their friendships, future expectations and how they navigate difficult circumstances.

### 3.2 | Profiles of Families in the Study

The children and grandparents in the study are diverse in age, gender and reasons for kinship care (Table 1). Primary caregivers interviewed were grandmothers, except for two grandfathers. Seven of 22 families had both sets of grandparents, and the rest had a grandmother-headed household. A little more than half of the families (13 out of 22) had one grandchild in their care, and the rest had two or more. Most children spent their entire childhood in kinship care, except for five cases who moved in with grandparents between the ages of 6 and 12. The reasons why children moved in with their grandparents were often complex and multifaceted. Placement at birth or during infancy was usually precipitated by out-of-wedlock birth, quick dissolution of cohabitation or marriage, domestic violence, parental mental health and substance abuse problems. Although 6 of 22 were in informal kinship families, they did not differ significantly from the 16 formal kinship families regarding reasons for care or other characteristics. All children had a father or mother alive, except for one case where both parents passed away.

### 3.3 | Analytic Approach

All interview sessions were recorded and later transcribed verbatim in Korean. The first author reviewed the transcripts for accuracy and consistency and then organized them by family. The research team primarily used Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) allowed us to identify themes while incorporating our insights (Braun and Clarke 2006). Additionally, its method of recognizing patterns and themes within the context was helpful for our analysis, especially because the study included two interviews—one from a grandparent and another from a grandchild from the same family.

The first author's ability to speak Korean enabled the study participants to feel comfortable sharing their lived experiences. The remaining authors shared the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds as the participants. We acknowledge that our shared cultural backgrounds are likely to influence our analytical perspective. To avoid bias, we reflected on our position of power

**TABLE 1** | Sample characteristics (youth = 22<sup>a</sup> and grandparents = 22).

Youth participants		Grandparent participants	
Characteristics	N	Characteristics	N
Gender		Gender	
Male	13	Male	2
Female	9	Female	20
Age range and grade		Current age/range	
Age range	12–18	Age range	51–87
Elementary school (Grades 5 and 6)	8	Between 50 and 59	2
Middle school (Grades 7–9)	4	Between 60 and 69	10
High school (Grades 10–12)	10	Between 70 and 79	5
Age when kinship care started		Aged 80 or older	5
Between birth and 2 years	12	Grandparent marital status	
Between 2 and 5 years	5	Single/divorced/widowed	16
6 years or older	5	Married	6
Family and kinship status		Status of biological parents	
Reasons for kinship placement <sup>b</sup>		Both alive	17
Alcohol/domestic violence/MH	6	One alive	4
Out-of-wedlock/teen birth	8	Both deceased	1
Father in debt and incapable	5	Type of grandparent kinship care	
Physical abuse	3	Formal kinship care	16
Parent did not want custody	15	Informal kinship care	6

<sup>a</sup>One child was only briefly engaged at the beginning of the interviews. The information gained from the child's caregiver was mainly used.

<sup>b</sup>The number is likely to be an undercount. Many families had more than one reason, which does not add to the total of 22.

as educated professionals and sought feedback from peers and others to inform our interpretation of the data.

All authors decided early in this study to focus on centering the adolescents' narratives. The first author initially coded the transcripts under large themes informed by interview questions (e.g., friendships and future). The first author then coded subthemes related to agency (awareness and making choices). Another member read all transcripts several times and independently identified several large and small themes. Then, three authors developed and finalized the analytical codes (see Figure 1). Our findings are derived from the full interview data, but the developed themes focus on addressing the research aims. Given our focus, the themes identified in this study most accurately reflect the data; however, we recognize that not all themes can be addressed in a single paper.

#### 4 | Findings

The study explores adolescents' development and exercise of agency, identifying three interconnected prominent themes: abandonment, surrogate parenting and agency (see

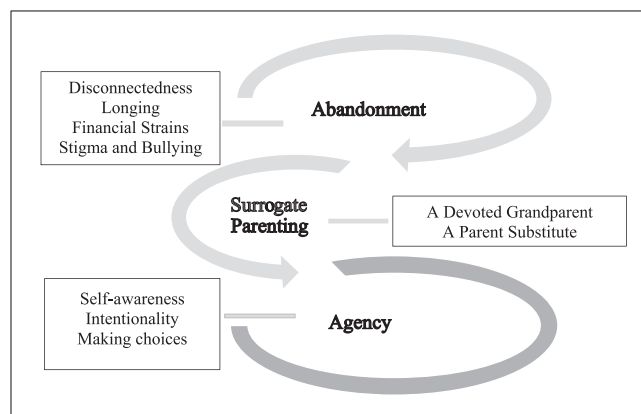
**FIGURE 1** | Analytical flow and themes.

Figure 1). The first theme provides the context behind their challenges, whereas the second theme focuses on the extent to which nurture and support can mitigate these challenges. Finally, we demonstrate how individuals can become authors of their own lives despite traumatic experiences and adverse circumstances.



## 4.1 | Consequences of Abandonment

The circumstances under which children come to live with their grandparents can differ from one family to another, but by any standard, children were emotionally, socially and financially 'abandoned' by their parents and faced cascading psychological, social and financial consequences. About one-third (36%) of children were born out of wedlock, involving unknown fathers, because the Korean birth registry did not require it for unmarried mothers. Other cases involved abandonment of the children after a divorce or due to paternal alcohol abuse, domestic violence or maternal mental-health challenges. The cascading effects of abandonment are reflected in the following subthemes: disconnectedness, longing for a parent, financial strains, stigma and bullying.

### 4.1.1 | Disconnectedness

I have not seen either of my parents. I do not know whether they are alive or where they are.

(Minho, male, age 17)

My grandson came to live with me when he was five months old, and I raised him alone. Thus, he does not remember his parents [...] There has been no contact, so we do not know his parents' whereabouts.

(Minho's grandmother, age 61)

Raised by his maternal grandmother, Minho had no memories of his parents. After his mother abandoned him following an out-of-wedlock birth, he briefly lived with his father. Soon after, his father no longer wanted to be part of his life, so he relinquished his parenting duties to his grandmother. Both parents disappeared from his life. Minho shared a small apartment with his grandmother and younger sister, and he accepted his circumstances with wisdom beyond his years.

Few adolescents maintained regular contact or had meaningful relationships with either their mother or father and received no regular financial or emotional support from their parents.

### 4.1.2 | Longing for Parent

The desire to have a relationship was most pronounced among younger participants. Euna (female, age 12), who, along with her sister (age 10), had recently been physically and emotionally neglected by their parents, recently reconnected with their mother. The mother, who gave up custody, promised an overnight camping trip after Euna's sister begged to spend time together. Even Euna showed excitement, but Grandma was worried because she would have to handle her granddaughters' disappointment and longing if the promise was not kept.

As children age, they still long to connect but have low and resigned expectations. Active in his middle school activities and church, Gijoon was reluctant to talk about his alcoholic father but became reflective when asked about his mother.

Well, never mind my father. On the other hand, I sometimes wish to meet my mother occasionally. I never met her. [After a pause] However, what if we can see each other? It would be useless. It is not very sensible. That does not mean I do not miss her.

(Gijoon, male, age 16)

The grandmother recalled her grandson's coping with parental absence during childhood. Gijoon's grandmother was acutely aware that no amount of her devotion and love could satisfy his deep longing.

He was attending an art therapy camp. In his drawings, I was featured prominently at the center while his father was small at the back .... One day at the camp, Gijoon was asked by the counselor what he had buried in the sand on the playground; he responded that it was his parents.

(Gijoon's grandmother, age 61)

An unfulfilled desire for parental love has developed into a profound feeling of estrangement and rejection towards the parents of some older youth. Aram (female, 17) is a high school senior whom her paternal grandmother has raised since she was a baby. Her father is remarried, but she has not met his new wife or been to his house. She labels her father as 'a total stranger'. Aram has never met her mother, but she is not interested in learning about her and sees her as someone who abandoned her.

### 4.1.3 | Financial Strains

All but one family in the study can be considered financially struggling or precarious at best. For one economically stable family, sustaining their living standards was possible because of the grandfather's pension and an unmarried aunt's salary. For most families, two primary sources of financial support were monthly 'child-only' cash benefits for children in care and subsidized low-income housing. Despite receiving these two benefits, many families suffered from crushing poverty.

The grandparents were resigned to the lack of support from either parent, as few parents maintained contact or showed interest in helping out. Asked about child support, Siwoo's grandmother (age 83), whose son had a good-paying job and a new partner, said, 'No. My son does not give money ... He does not love his son and has no affection for his son.'

Even those caregivers who stated they could 'get by' worried about meeting the growing needs of their grandchildren. One grandmother considered financial difficulties as the most significant concern when raising her two grandchildren, Unmi, age 17, and her brother, 15.

It is the living expenses. We did not pay much in the past—no school tuition or other costs. When they were young, we just got by with a little. Now, as the children grow older, it becomes more

challenging. They need more. They eat more, not my granddaughter but my grandson ... The refrigerator door is constantly open and shut! My granddaughter says that she plans to earn money once she graduates from high school. She keeps talking about making money when she gets into college.

(Unmi's grandmother, age 79).

The children often sacrificed extracurricular activities because they lacked financial resources. A male high school student refused to take the bus from his school because it required an additional fee. Instead of taking the school bus, which would reduce his commute, he took the subway and then a bus, willing to sacrifice a few extra minutes of sleep in the morning.

#### 4.1.4 | Stigma and Bullying

The social stigma of living only with grandparents is deep-seated and profoundly felt among children in this study. Poverty worsens the stigma of living solely with grandparents. Chanwook has lived with his grandparents in the same neighbourhood since infancy. He enjoyed school and had close friends in his neighbourhood. However, he wished for:

No discrimination between students living with grandparents and those living with parents! People would talk behind me at school or other gatherings, saying, 'He has no parents,' to differentiate me from others. [...] It is not easy to cope with my grandmother attending school events like graduation, unlike my peers, whose parents attend.

(Chanwook, male, age 16)

The stigma of growing up in kinship care has led to bullying experiences for several youths. Aram, Minh and others believed they were teased and bullied because they did not live with a father or a mother, especially during elementary school. Aram endured intense bullying from a group of girls from kindergarten through sixth grade. One was especially cruel, causing both physical and emotional suffering. She continues avoiding people and skips school frequently. Minh was subject to severe physical bullying for several years by older delinquent boys. However, he did not divulge the extent of the abuse to his grandmother, and the bullying stopped only after his uncle intervened and pressed charges against the group. His grandmother surmised that 'bad' kids picked on her grandson because 'he was an easy target, having no father and no mother and being small.'

Torn by the weight of stigma, Gijoon's grandma explained how she only shared the information with the homeroom teachers.

My grandson did not want his friends to know that neither his mother nor father was with him at home. Even if he and another student committed the same mistake, he would be labeled as someone without a

parent. I dislike such labeling and have shared my feelings with his homeroom teacher.

(Gijoon's grandmother, age 66).

Perhaps because of the extensive stigma, most of the youths in the study kept their living status to themselves. A few were open with their friends about their kinship care status, but most kept it private. They were discreet about their kinship status, as was Unmi (age 17): 'They know I live with my grandmother. However, they do not know I live only with my grandmother.'

## 4.2 | Surrogate Parenting

Kinship foster care involves assigning a relative as a foster parent, but this is usually considered a temporary placement option in the USA and other countries. However, Korea's 'surrogate' care is long-term. The presence of a dedicated grandparent and a parent substitute eased adolescents' challenges and boosted their sense of agency through their support.

### 4.2.1 | A Devoted Grandparent

Regardless of the reasons for kinship care, many grandparents, though not all, are dedicated to raising their grandchildren until they reach adulthood. Devoted grandparents make choices for the benefit of their grandchildren, including working for additional money for the family and trying 'not to repeat mistakes' for the second time.

Namjun's grandfather was well beyond retirement age when Namjun's biological mother passed away. Suddenly, the grandfather, aged 75, had to raise a young, motherless 5-year-old with an absent father who was unable to care for his son because of alcoholism and sporadic work history. Determined to raise him 'right', he refrains from using corporal punishment with his grandson, a departure from his past. Their house is dilapidated, but they intend to stay there so Namjun does not have to change schools.

For adolescents with devoted grandparents, hardship is present but softened. Some, like Inhae, cannot imagine living without their grandparents. Her father physically abused her, and she came to live with her grandparents after the court's intervention.

I used to think about whether I wanted to live with my parents. [...] Nowadays, I do not wish it anymore. I heard that my grandfather had always loved me since I was a baby. I appreciate that my grandparents took me in. Both my grandmother and grandfather have treated me so well. Moreover, he does everything I ask.

(Inhae, female, age 12)

The family lives in a tiny government-subsidized, two-bedroom apartment without a living room, and she is given the second room. Her grandparents continue working, and Inhae is at the centre of their lives.

Not all grandparents, however, were devoted or receptive to their grandchildren's needs. Some accepted their harsh reality, remained indifferent because of ill health or resented their charge. When asked what she wished for her grandson, one grandmother interrupted, saying that her grandson 'needs to figure out his own life since there is no one to rely on'. The sentiment was common among uncommitted grandparents. Yohan's grandmother, at age 65, is single and relatively young but felt she had no choice but to care for her two grandchildren. After having two children, her daughter remarried and gained custody of them. However, the mother neglected and physically abused the children. The grandmother had to take them back despite her disability but openly discussed how stressful it was to raise two grandchildren and the possibility of sending them to an institution within earshot of her grandson.

#### 4.2.2 | A Parent Substitute

Some children were fortunate to have an additional extended family member, such as an aunt or uncle, willing to offer financial, social and emotional support to bridge the gaps in their needs, in addition to their devoted grandparents. The most extreme cases involved an unmarried aunt or uncle who had become a de facto parent, living together or sharing resources with the adolescent.

Inhae's aunt lives one floor below a government-subsidized apartment where Inhae (age 12) lives with her grandparents. Unmarried but employed, the aunt eats dinner almost every night with her parents and Inhae after work. Not only does she give her niece an allowance, but she also spends most evenings reviewing her niece's homework and helping her with it.

Like Inhae's aunt, Chanwook's uncle acts as a parent.

My son is not married. Perhaps because he has been living with us since Chanwook was a baby, he has developed a great deal of affection for him. He pays fees for after-school programs and other expenses. My grandson listens to his uncle and loves going out with him.

(Chanwook's grandmother, age 66)

For a struggling adolescent, having an aunt is a relief: Aram has experienced many difficulties in her life and does not get along with her grandmother.

I am close to my aunt. She is like a mother figure to me. [...] Among all my family members, she is the one with whom I can communicate most easily. Moreover, she buys things for me when I ask. Sort of a mother role?

(Aram, female, age 17)

Having dedicated and nurturing grandparents, a parent substitute or both provides children with a sense of security and helps reduce financial struggles. Despite the significant challenges of parental abandonment, surrogate parenting by grandparents,

aunts and uncles can help adolescents maintain a more optimistic outlook on their future.

### 4.3 | Sense of Agency

To varying degrees, all adolescent participants have demonstrated their agency. Younger participants were often optimistic, though without concrete plans. But older participants were more somber and candid in their future outlooks and their choices and actions towards a better future went far beyond what would typically be expected at their ages. This section highlights self-awareness, intentionality, and decision-making as the key features of their agency.

#### 4.3.1 | Self-Awareness

Adolescents displayed remarkable self-awareness. They were conscious of their situation, the opportunities available to them and the choices they could make. Recognizing the societal stigma associated with their family structure indicated acute self-awareness. This understanding was evident even among some younger adolescents.

Bong's (male, age 12) favourite subjects are arts and physical education. He sheepishly alludes that he is not academically oriented, unlike his older brother. Bong is talented in the arts, as demonstrated by the drawings and clay sculptures scattered throughout their tiny, shared bedroom. In the past, he enjoyed taking free art therapy sessions sponsored by a social services agency. However, he recognizes that paying for them is not feasible with the family's limited income. Instead, he has developed a new interest in cooking by watching and learning from his grandmother. Now, he dreams of being 'an artist chef who cooks as well as creates art'.

The educational choices of the adolescents in the study reflected both self-awareness and a reconciliation between their goals and limited circumstances, exemplifying bounded agency. For example, only 3 of the 10 high school participants planned to attend college in a country with the highest college enrolment rate (OECD 2023). The rest had chosen vocational high schools or had decided not to pursue higher education. Two out of four middle school participants aspired to attend vocational high schools.

Chanwook grew up with his cousins, who were close in age. His aunt and uncle have been good to him. Unlike his cousin, who is expected to attend a regular high school and then college, Chanwook plans to apply for a vocational high school, where he can find a job and save money for continuing education to become a pastry chef. Chanwook's choice reflects restricted opportunities. However, his choice is not just a consequence of his environment. Although bound by social and family factors, he is deeply reflective and prepared to take control of his life.

For some participants, however, self-awareness can lead to negative self-perceptions and a sense of resignation. Dajin (male, age 17) has been living with his grandmother because his mother left soon after giving birth, and his father passed away. Dajin's

difficulty fitting into school was rationalized as follows: 'I am just not good at adapting to group-oriented activities.' In his world, there was nobody with whom he could share good or bad news. He summed up his low expectations: 'Well, there is a saying that if you do not expect much, life will be more manageable. I have that kind of mindset. Given that I expect little, I become neither stressed nor happy.'

As adolescents develop a sense of self, they become aware of the perception of others, not just of their grandparents. Hwanki dislikes school because of 'other people's eyes' on him. His grandmother is incapable of providing guidance and support because of her old age and severe back problems. Even his father, alive and living in a different city, told him not to rely on his support and 'to live independently when grandma passes away'. His father's declaration made him feel 'at a loss'. He now realizes that he must be in the driver's seat for his future and is preparing to transfer to a vocational high school next year.

#### 4.3.2 | Intentionality

Self-awareness has motivated many children in this study to honestly assess themselves and their prospects in Korean society, shaping their future goals. Although those in fifth and sixth grades, still in grade school, did not articulate specific plans, adolescents in middle and high schools were more explicit in spelling out their intentions. Deciding on a high school, a career path or a college could have huge future implications.

Awareness can present an opportunity to advocate for their views and perspectives when they differ from those of their grandparents.

My grandparents encouraged me to attend college and pursue academic majors. It was stressful for a while, but now it is settled ... My grandmother thought I was a good student since I received awards in grade school. Being a good student in grade school does not translate into being a good student in high school. As I got older, I lost interest in studying. I am now interested in fashion and enjoy browsing through clothes.

(Kangsoo, male, age 17)

His lack of academic orientation may have initially disappointed his grandmother, but his intent to pursue this dream has converted reluctant grandparents. His grandparents now support Kangsoo's goal, albeit cautiously, to get into a technical college for fashion.

Interested in a vocational high school, Chanwook researched the application process and admission requirements. Responding to the interviewer's questions on the application, he responded: 'I need to prepare a portfolio and write an essay.' (Interviewer: What type of portfolio?) 'Well, pictures of dishes I made. The recipes that I created.' In preparation for his portfolio, he has been creating a range of dishes with the support of his grandmother. After learning from a neighbourhood friend that a

baking certificate could help him get into the school he wanted, he enrolled in an after-school course with financial support from his unmarried uncle.

A purposeful act may indicate how developing minds consider given situations and carefully weigh their options with outcomes in mind. Several adolescent participants shared how they intentionally try to overcome barriers or perceived problems. Minho experienced severe bullying during his early school years.

Neighborhood bullies picked on me because I was small for my age and had no parents. [...] Some of them still live in the same neighborhood, but no longer harass me since I became strong by participating in sports.

(Minho, age 17)

His grandmother believes that bullying was related mainly to his social status as a parentless child in a tough neighbourhood with early delinquent children. However, this deliberate plan to get physically stronger was one area he could control, unlike the absence of his parents in his life.

Aspiring to attend college has placed much pressure on some adolescents to study, leading them to seek different ways to improve their academic standing. Unmi is in her last year of high school and is a good student, but she admits, 'My grades need to improve for a respectable 4-year college.' She needed college prep lessons to improve her score for an upcoming entrance exam, but she understood her family's financial struggles. Her grandmother says Unmi is an introvert and is mindful of the family's precarious economic status. To find a way to achieve this desirable outcome, she had to overcome her usual shyness:

Last spring [a few months before the interview], I approached my teacher and consulted about a scholarship. There was funding to help low-income students prepare for college. I applied and received a Samsung Dream Scholarship worth \$ 2100. I can use it for cram schools [for college entrance exams].

(Unmi, female, age 17)

She is hopeful despite her constant worries about college and her grandmother: 'Since I have a dream, I expect a better future. Therefore, I also know what I need to do moving forward.'

#### 4.3.3 | Making Choices

Becoming the authors of their own lives requires adolescents to be aware and intentional and take action that will have consequences. Minho was unsure about what he wanted to do with his life, but he wanted to support his younger sister and grandmother. That desire encouraged him to apply for a technical high school and bypass college.

I was interested in electronic circuits or electrical work. So, I consulted with a guidance counselor at



my middle school, and the counselor told me about this high school. It is in the area and fits my needs [...] Once I graduate, an electronics company could hire me. The counselor said I could get into a company like Samsung Electronics.

(Minho)

This choice enabled him to form friendships with individuals who shared his interests and career aspirations. Unlike in middle school, he now enjoys school, which focuses on hands-on training and apprenticeship. His excitement and relief were palpable.

Ohyun (female, age 17) also chose a vocational high school for technology. When asked why she chose the school, she was demure and stated, 'I did not know what I could do. My teacher made a recommendation.' On the surface, she appeared passive and took advice from her teacher. Her grandmother, who praised her granddaughter for being mature beyond her age, offered the context for her school choice. Her shy granddaughter did not discuss her school choice in advance.

Over the years, she received many awards, which I collected all ... My granddaughter made a school decision alone. She is a good student. I thought she was going to attend a regular high school. To my surprise, she did the applications all by herself. She told me about it only after. She was harshly reprimanded for that.

(Ohyun's grandmother, age 65)

Making choices is critical to an adolescent's growth and reflects agentic capacity. However, not all adolescents were given options. Aram's violent outbursts constantly stressed her grandmother. Explaining her unhappiness, she discussed how her grandmother had not allowed her to make a choice.

People feel happy when satisfied with something. However, I never experienced such satisfaction [...] I did not want to attend my school [a vocational high school for commerce]. I am not good at accounting. She [Her grandmother] believes I will get a job immediately after graduation. That was in the past. It does not happen now.

(Aram, female, age 17)

Because of frequent absences, Aram is at risk of failing her junior year. She would have chosen to be an anime character graphic artist, capitalizing on an artistic talent that her grandmother recognizes. Nevertheless, she is resigned to fate and expresses a sense of hopelessness.

## 5 | Discussion and Implications

This study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of adolescents in grandparent kinship care, highlighting their sense of agency under limiting and challenging circumstances.

Three interconnected themes—abandonment, surrogate parenting and agency—highlight the contexts in which adolescents form their identities while processing trauma and relying on kin. Our findings contribute to the growing emphasis on listening to children, particularly those from underserved populations (Harkin et al. 2020), on unpacking the contexts of exercising agency (Abebe 2019) and on recognizing their capacity to be part of the decisions that shape their lives (Bandura 2018).

### 5.1 | Lived Experiences of Children in Grandparent Kinship Care

Children in kinship care experience loss and yearn for connections with their biological parents (Burgess et al. 2010; Farmer et al. 2013). Although the reasons for kinship placement vary across cultures (Dolbin-MacNab and Yancura 2018; Lee et al. 2020), our findings suggest that abandonment, rather than abuse, significantly contributes to Korea's grandparent kinship care. Emotional and financial abandonment exacerbate the families' precarious financial status and further expose children to stigma.

Our study found that having supportive and nurturing relatives can boost children's emotional well-being and resilience. The study's findings on the role of other kin, such as an uncle or aunt, acting as a parent substitute, are unique and reflect Korea's cultural practice of embracing extended family households to share resources and caregiving. While most grandparents in the study were fully committed to caregiving, we emphasize the importance of screening the caregiver's readiness, given the reluctance and fragility of some caregivers (Kim and Chung 2015).

Faced with adversity, the adolescents in our study, especially the older ones, actively evaluate their situations, plan carefully and make informed decisions, as observed in other vulnerable children (Bolin 2016; Munford and Sanders 2015). Being acutely aware of challenges and limitations does not mean they are hopeless or lead to inaction. Making bold but intentional choices without their caregivers' consent or knowledge presents compelling evidence of their readiness to chart their course (Bandura 2018).

### 5.2 | Strengths and Limitations

One of the limitations is that although many adolescents provided detailed and rich responses, some younger participants responded to the interview questions with simple yes or no answers or brief replies. Another is that, because of the sensitivity of certain topics, younger adolescents were allowed to skip uncomfortable questions, such as those about stigma. Additionally, we acknowledge that the study sample is not representative of either the grandparent foster families or informal grandparent kinship families in Korea.

Despite these limitations, the study reveals adolescents' honest and thoughtful reflections on their lived experiences. Another strength is the study's design. By incorporating interviews with both adolescents and caregivers, the study enhances validation and offers greater credibility to its findings. It enables consistent

and complementary analysis, allowing its findings to be amplified. At the same time, it confirms that adolescents have their idiosyncratic perspectives. Finally, this study adds to growing evidence of the strong presence of agency among vulnerable youth facing adversity.

### 5.3 | Recommendations and Conclusions

To meet the social and economic needs of adolescents in grandparent kinship families, Korea's central government should consider taking responsibility for all children in kinship care (Save the Children Korea 2021). This may include a designated funding stream for foster care subsidies for kinship foster families (Yoo 2024) and sustained efforts to reach out and support those in grandparent kinship care outside of the foster care system (Jung et al. 2021).

Working with disadvantaged youth requires recognizing that vulnerability does not mean powerlessness (Harkin et al. 2020). Paying attention to children's agency honours a child's right to express their opinion, as suggested by the UNCRC (see Jung et al. 2022). Not listening to children's perspectives disempowers them and hinders effective support (Gonzalez and Ruiz-Casares 2022; Munford and Sanders 2015; Toros and Falch-Eriksen 2025).

In light of the findings, practice could be improved by honouring adolescents' choices through assessing their opportunities and limitations (Coleman 2019). Although some children in kinship care may have clear ideas about their careers (Burgess et al. 2010), many adolescents require support in making educational and career choices (Berridge 2017; Kim and Gewirtz 2020). We recommend that social workers, teachers and allied professionals actively listen to adolescents' perspectives when preparing for future careers.

Additionally, clarifying the roles and responsibilities of child welfare agencies in delivering case management services is crucial for improving the well-being of adolescents and their caregivers. Korea's current practice models do not match those of other advanced countries (Chung et al. 2022). At present, heavy caseloads and staff shortages limit social workers' ability to support kinship families through effective case management.

Meeting the broader needs of all kinship families could be assisted by a national kinship navigator programme (Save the Children of Korea 2021). Kinship navigator programmes have been effective in providing information and referrals, as well as meeting the financial, social and psychological service needs of kinship families (Koh et al. 2021; Littlewood et al. 2020). Given the lack of consistent and effective service models serving kinship families in Korea, this programme could provide a bridge between all grandparent kinship families and service organizations.

The study's findings highlight the presence of agency even among vulnerable youth in Korea's grandparent kinship care. These youth deserve attention and support from their government and community to secure a better future and uphold their rights (Lansdown 2020). By acknowledging their agency despite

adversity, we can imagine societies that are responsive to their realities, concerns, hopes and aspirations.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study's findings are not publicly available because of privacy or ethical restrictions.

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