

Surviving the patriarchal school: A case study of Korean female teachers' strategic shifting of feminist teacher positionality

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ABSTRACT

Reflecting on the growing recognition of gendered inequality in schools and society, we explore how three Korean female elementary school teachers who identify themselves as feminist navigate, negotiate, and secure their positionality as feminist teachers against the dominant school discourses. Individual interviews, artifacts, and observations of their community meetings are collected as data and analyzed based on the feminist poststructural understanding of discourse, agency, and positionality. The participants negotiated and solidified their positionality as feminist teachers and strategically infused feminist perspectives into and beyond the school context despite multiple constraints and backlash. The authors conclude that more studies should focus on the multidimensional aspect of teachers' positionality to understand and change the patriarchal status quo.

INTRODUCTION

Schools have long imposed gendered performances and reproduced patriarchal discourses (Kelly & Nihlen, 2017), reinforcing a system of deep inequality, thus, "limiting our children's capabilities to be fully human" (Richardson, 2015, p. 3).

It is imperative that schools include feminist voices to actualize education as symposium towards a socially just society.

In order for schools to function as "a site of new ideas, social reorganization, and social mobility" (Richardson, 2015, p. 25), educators have made efforts to bring feminist perspectives to the curriculum and problematize patriarchal discourses through feminist pedagogy (e.g., Gallagher, 2000; Ollis, 2017; Vickery, 2016; Wagner, 2014).

While it is important to acknowledge how educators successfully incorporate feminist perspectives into school settings, it is also important to address what challenges teachers face in real-life teaching (Hook, 2019; McKnight, 2018). We found that the limited extant literature shared challenging incidents in the context of higher education (e.g., McCusker, 2017; Hook, 2019), but not so much in K-12 settings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Borrowing the Poststructuralist view, we understand that a teacher's identity is shaped by the normative idea of what considers to be good teaching (Zembylas, 2003); it should be placed and understood within multiple discourses that surround the teacher subject. Teacher agency is exerted through reflexive awareness within structured discourses (Davies, 1997).

Teacher's ongoing reflexivity allow them to acknowledge the suppressive force of the dominant discourse, and at the same time, motivate them to utilize other discourses that allow them to strategically exercise their identities as feminist teachers. Researchers have previously identified several discourses that surround Korean female teachers (Ahn & Kim, 2013; Koo, 2009). We summarize the discourses relevant to our study topic as follows.

- 1) Female subjects in South Korea
- 2) Teacher subjects in South Korea
- 3) Female teacher subject in South Korea

METHODS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the proposed study, we explore how three Korean female elementary school teachers who identify themselves as feminist navigate, negotiate, and secure their positionality as feminist teachers against the dominant school discourses that depoliticize curriculum and pedagogy. More specifically, we ask:

- 1) What dominant discourses do female teachers encounter in schools when they attempt to bring feminist perspectives to the schools?
- 2) How do the dominant school discourses affect the way in which female teachers develop their (feminist) teacher identity?
- 3) How do the female teachers negotiate their positionality as feminist teachers against the dominant school discourses?

Data collection methods include interviews, artifacts (books and blog posts that the teachers have written), and observations from the teachers' triweekly meetings.

FINDINGS

We identified two major discourses present in schools: Gender/feminism-related and school/education-related discourses. The former includes stereotypical discourses around those who are perceived to be different from the mainstream gender identities (i.e., LGBTQs) and negative perceptions about feminism, all of which is related to the Korean society' hetero-patriarchal discourses (based on stereotypical binary understandings of gender and normative understandings sexuality) that predefine gender identities/roles/expectations and family structures. The latter discourses were related to the roles of teachers as nothing more than those who teach academic knowledge (i.e., non-controversial and factual knowledge) to students, non-opinionated individuals who blend in seamlessly into the bureaucratic system while perceiving children as innocent beings who should avoid knowing controversial and sensitive topics of the society. The female teachers from this study strategically navigated those discourses by keeping their stances to a small group level before bringing them to the larger group of teachers; negotiated their teaching practices by constantly facilitating conversations with administrators on what they can do and cannot do in schools; persuade and sought agreements from parents; gradually introduce gender equity-related topics to students by using real-life examples and prompting questions.

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Our findings show that apolitical and patriarchal discourses were present at the school which constrained the teachers' agency to enact feminist pedagogy. Incorporating feminist perspectives in the K-5 curriculum and pedagogy seemed to be an arduous process that required strong commitment and strategic agency from the teachers. It involved complicated, on-going negotiation processes and repositioning of feminist teacher identity due to the stratified school culture that favored supposedly apolitical, but in fact, patriarchal curriculum and pedagogy; it was far from a simple equation such as one wherein feminist beliefs transfer directly into feminist practices. However, the teachers from the study negotiated and solidified their positionality as feminist teachers and strategically infused feminist perspectives into and beyond the school context despite multiple constraints and backlash. This resulted in expanding the boundaries of knowledge and the practices socially permitted in school, i.e., what had been traditionally an apolitical and patriarchal curriculum and pedagogy. We discuss the dominant school discourses that constrained teacher agency, particularly when the teachers attempted to disrupt the unjust status quo. We also draw from the findings strategies for enacting feminist pedagogy. We conclude that there should be more studies on both the challenges and accomplishments of teachers who attempt to realize symposium at schools by bringing feminist perspectives to K-12 classrooms.

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QUESTIONS?

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