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. 18). It is imperative that schools include feminist voices to actualize education as symposia 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; Vicker, 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 (Hock, 2019; McHight, 2018). We found that the prevailing cultural norm was challenging incidents in the context of higher education (e.g., McCusker, 2017; Hock, 2019), but not so much in K-12 settings.

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 positions 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’ [twice] 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., LGBTIQs) 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) predefine gender identities/roles/expectations and family structures. The latter discourses were the roles of teachers as more than nothing than those who teach academic knowledge (i.e., non-controversial and factual knowledge) to students, non-privileged individuals who blend in seamlessly into the bureaucratic system while perceiving children as innocent beings who should avoid knowing controversial 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; persuaded 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 task 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 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 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 symposia at schools by bringing feminist perspectives to K-12 classrooms.

REFERENCES

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QUESTIONS?

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