

Through the voices of male teachers in South Korea: The journey to becoming an early childhood teacher

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Abstract

This study examined male teachers' identities and experiences as early childhood teachers in South Korea. Three South Korean participants, Donghun, Gijun, and Minsu (pseudonyms) were purposefully selected and engaged in individual semi-structured interviews lasting about an hour and a half. Findings in this study indicated that entering into the female-dominated profession of early childhood education is an uneasily constrained and cultural process for them. They were estranged from the people around them, including family, as soon as they committed to becoming early childhood teachers. They also faced challenges in their new profession in developing relationships with adults such as peer teachers and parents, as well as with their students. Frequently, they experienced the social expectation of early childhood education as "women's work." This study showed that the self-making of male early childhood teachers in South Korea is both internalized and externalized as a dialectic identity in a cultural context.

Keywords: *male teacher, early childhood education, teacher identity*

Introduction

Being human involves constraints and possibilities stemming from long histories of human practices ... people develop as participants in cultural communities. Their development can be understood only in light of the cul-

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tural practices and circumstance of their communities —which also change.
(Rogoff, 2003, pp. 3-4)

Human beings play roles as actors and actresses in a cultural play. We cannot live away from cultural communities and everyone plays different roles according to their individual characteristics. Sometimes we face conflicts with other members because of our differences and we compromise our roles in relationships with other people. In doing so, we find our own identities and look at ourselves within the circumstances of the culture (Park, 2009). In this study, I introduce a community and people finding and building their identities within it. The cultural community is that of early childhood education in South Korea, and the people are male teachers who teach young children. This paper examines three Korean male early childhood teachers' identities and lives. I focus on understanding how Donghun, Gijun, and Minsu (pseudonyms) see themselves as early childhood teachers within a Korean cultural context.

Perspectives

In this paper, I explore how male early childhood teachers as social actors are influenced by social forces in creating and reflecting upon their identities in their everyday lives. I hypothesize that male early childhood teachers develop a sense of their agency within the constraints of their own cultural and historical contexts.

Historically, early childhood education has been considered woman's work. Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), who popularized the concept of "Kindergarten", proposed women as Kindergarten teachers. According to Marenholtz-Bulow (2007), this idea was derived from "the principles of the science of motherhood." Froebel argued, "Woman's nature has unquestionably retained the stamp of its originality and spontaneity better than that of man ... the most original element of the woman's soul is maternal love, which at no stage of development and in no decline of the human race can belie the stamp of the holiest nature" (Marenholtz-Bulow, 2007, p. 45). Froebel believed only intellectually active women could and should teach young children. Froebel's educational ideas spread quickly throughout the world (White &

Coleman, 2000). The Asian world as well as the West applied Froebel's kindergarten philosophy to early childhood education.

However, times have changed. Gender imbalance in the early childhood teaching profession has been an issue in the field since the 1970s. Concerns about the possible implications of this gender imbalance have produced many studies in early childhood teacher education (e.g., Choi, 2003; Sumsion, 2005; Tobin, 1996). Nevertheless, the number of men choosing careers in early childhood education has not significantly increased, which has prompted investigations on barriers that men might perceive in the field. When male teachers do choose to go into this field, they are well aware that they are members of a minority group in education (Barnard, Hovingh, & Nezwiek, 2000).

Many scholars argue that the role of the male teacher is very important for young children. According to Neugebauer (1994), male children with few male teachers have few role models to serve as examples in their career decisions. Female children also need these male role models during their early years of education. Frances Schoonmaker (1997) said, "For children who don't have a father role model, a male teacher can be the central figure in their life. Kids need a balance, just like they need a mom and a dad" (cited in Barnard et al., 2000, p. 15). Recently, Sumsion (2005) has pointed out that relatively few empirical studies have focused on male early childhood teachers. She stressed that it is important to highlight the diversity of views held by these men about gender and gender roles in a context and to determine how these roles play out in their work with colleagues, families, and children.

Male teachers' lives in early childhood education are influenced by their various environmental and situational contexts and social networks. Their senses of agency are developed and their identities are largely constituted through continuing dialogue with children, parents, and colleagues. In particular, this impacts how they relate to people in everyday socio-cultural contexts (Tobin, 1996). The situated contexts in which they interact influence their emotions, especially causing them discomfort because people think teaching young children is a woman's job. Choi (2003) reported that most Korean male early childhood teachers have faced many difficulties from preservice teacher education to inservice teaching. These male early childhood

teachers' experiences may well influence their emotions in teaching and their teacher identities. Parkinson (1995) claims that identity, emotion, and social context are all intertwined:

In effect, the identity claims involved in getting emotional are based on role commitments and derive at least partly from the individual's position in pre-existing interpersonal social networks. Transactions with others are often shaped by predefined communication channels that are provided by the social institutions and groups to which we belong or to which we lend our selves. (p. 199)

I believe that early childhood male teachers' identities are partially constituted by their individual positions in an already existing interpersonal society: some people might call this "deviant" and others "normal." As a minority group in a female-dominated profession, they sometimes need to be social negotiators and to resist imposed criteria in order to find themselves in their everyday lives. Influenced by Confucian viewpoints, traditional Korean society clearly distinguished between male and female roles; taking care of young children and educating them has been considered woman's work (Cho, 1999). Although early childhood programs in Korea have finally begun to accept men, the profession is nevertheless deeply biased along gender lines.

In this study, I investigate how three Korean male early childhood teachers internalize their roles as teachers from the outside, due to the effects of social forces, and how these teacher roles reveal themselves in their relationships with children and adults.

To examine male teachers' identities and lives as early childhood teachers in South Korea, I asked three questions: (a) What factors affect a man's decision to become an early childhood teacher? (b) How is the male early childhood teacher's self constructed and re-constructed through the social interactions he experiences in a particular socio-cultural context? (c) How do male teachers see themselves as professionals in early childhood education?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in Korean early childhood teacher education because it is informed by teachers' everyday lives as part of the available literature on relevance. As a data source, this study can help support counseling for male early childhood preservice and inservice teachers because few studies have focused on understanding their identities and lives as early childhood teachers. Male early childhood teachers' narratives can show their versions of negotiation and struggle. This demonstration that male early childhood teachers in Korea are active agents in their everyday lives is likely to be useful in the climate of considering teachers' gender imbalance in South Korea.

Subjectivity Statement

I believe that the world is very complex and continuously changing. Although individuals have different cultures and different thoughts and experiences, societies tend to pursue universality and exclude distinctiveness. I believe teachers are different from one another just as children are different from one another. From my position as a female teacher who taught young children in preschool and student teachers in college, and as a female researcher who has been involved in studying teachers' lives, I may have pre-established thoughts on what male teachers' lives look like. Thus, in this study, I might have a tendency to retain my pre-formed thoughts instead of allowing the participants' true lives to emerge via their responses. These assumptions about the findings of the study may muffle the participants' real voices. To ensure that the participants' voices are heard, I tried to be cautious about my own assumptions about the research topic. In order to monitor my subjectivities and personal biases, I listened carefully to the voices of my participants to increase the validity of the study.

Method

I obtained IRB approval for data collection in March 2007. Three participants were selected by snowball sampling (Merriam, 1998); the data were collected from March-July 2007. After signing an informed consent form, each participant took part

in three semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in Korean by the author, who is Korean. The interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours each, followed procedures for qualitative interviewing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), and were audiotaped. I transcribed the interviews first in Korean by using a word processing program, and I translated the transcriptions into English later.

Participants

The three participants were in their early thirties at the time of the study. They all completed their compulsory military service as undergraduates. They graduated from four-year-university programs in southern South Korea. They all hold early childhood teacher certification. Minsu transferred from science education to early childhood education after his military service; Donghun and Gijun got their M.E.'s in early childhood education. Gijun taught for two years in a private preschool in a capital city, while Donghun and Minsu taught for six years and two years, respectively, in public preschools in small cities. Table 1 briefly lists the characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. *Participants in This Study*

Name (Pseudonym)	Birth Year	Degree	Began Teaching
Minsu	1977	Bachelor's degree (early childhood education)	2005
Gijun	1974	Bachelor's degree, Master's degree (early childhood education)	2004
Donghun	1973	Bachelor's degree, Master's degree (early childhood education)	2000

Data Sources and Analysis

The uses of grounded theory in research have varied, but they generally take an analytically emergent and flexible approach (Pidgeon & Henwood, 2004). In order to study how people act and react in context, the researcher collects primary data, makes multiple visits to the field to develop the categories of his or her database, and presents theoretical hypotheses. Thus, all variants of grounded theory include the follow-

ing analytic strategies for the discovery of theory: (a) simultaneous data collection and analysis; (b) pursuit of emergent themes through early data analysis, (c) discovery of basic social processes within the data; (d) inductive construction of abstract categories through comparative processes; and (e) integration of categories into a theoretical framework that specifies causes, conditions, and consequences of the study's processes (Charmaz, 2003, p.677). I adopted this research design and analysis in order to reveal the lives of Korean male early childhood teachers with grounded theory as the analytic framework.

As a primary instrument, I designed my initial data collection setting, collected data, analyzed the data, and revised the sampling for further action. The purposeful sampling selected participants, the criteria for data collection, and the process. The individual interviews with participants as data sources served many purposes. In the first interview, the conversation focused primarily on participants' previous experience, their central ideas in teaching and learning, and the ways in which they saw themselves as individuals and professionals. In the second interview, participants were asked about their views of children, parents, and peer teacher cooperation; they were also asked to share stories about a significant teaching experience. The last interview focused on their views of Korean society and early childhood education. In addition, participants had opportunities to clarify the researchers reflections on data from other sources.

A total of 13 hours of interviews (4.5 hours per teacher) were audiotaped and transcribed. I used inductive data analysis strategies, including open-coding techniques and memo-writing. I followed Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) guidelines as an analytic method based on Charmaz's (2000, 2003, & 2006) constructivist grounded theory approach. I tried to identify themes that gave insight into the three male teachers' identities and lives as early childhood teachers in Korea. I kept asking questions of my data and wrote my initial reflections about whatever I noticed. Next, starting the open-coding process, I underlined words, phrases, and sentences and wrote codes in the margin. When there were repeated words or phrases, I highlighted them using different colors for constant comparison. I began to re-visit codes and categories to come up with my themes. I attempted to develop categories and generate

initial themes to explain how gender could impact these teachers' teaching experience and identities as teachers.

Results

In this study, I focus on four themes: social expectations for Korean male early childhood teachers, challenges in teaching young children, challenges of building relationships with children's parents, and thoughts about future male early childhood teachers.

Social expectations for Korean male early childhood teachers

Gijun's experience shows the pervasiveness of stereotypes about masculinity in Korean society. He discovered a commonly held image of female teachers in early childhood education even before he started his undergraduate study. People around him disagreed with his career choice and told him he was crazy:

When I went to interview to enter my university, I had to wait for my name to be called in the classroom. When somebody called my name as "Mr. Kim in early childhood education," I raised my hand and answered, "Here." Then everybody in that classroom laughed at me. In this way, everybody thought being a man in early childhood education was like a *taboo* ... when I got admitted into the school, my mom pulled my leg, saying, "*you need hair pins like a girl.*" ... After entering the University, I felt that people had different expectations about me. They wondered who I was and what I would do, and I was also stressed out because of that. (Interview transcript, Gijun, 03/14/07)

In a similar vein, Donghun had a difficult time working as a male teacher in a female-dominated environment. He appealed to people not to compare him to women teachers, but just to think of him as a good teacher:

Frankly, I like drawing and music in my classroom. Of course, usually I don't like making something. One day, one of broadcasting companies

visited me and asked to do a report on my job on TV. I agreed. But, the broadcaster asked me to do something like the image of a woman in early childhood education. He always asked, “Why don’t you dance with the kids?” I told him, “Please, don’t foist the *feminine image* on me. I don’t like to perpetuate that image of early childhood teachers.” And then, I told him, “We don’t do that all the time. Honestly, as a man, I have a masculine attitude and use it whenever I read story or sing a song to my kids. I don’t want to copy the feminine style of a woman teacher.” Now I don’t change my mind. *I have my own style* which is different from *women teachers’ styles* [To illustrate this style he copies a woman’s voice and tone]. (Interview transcript, Donghun, 03/08/07)

Although other people expected Donghun’s behavior to be similar to that of a female early childhood teacher, he resisted this expectation, claiming, “I have my own style.”

Challenges in teaching young children

In their relationships with children, the three participants often recognized how their gender influenced their interactions with children in class. For Donghun, one event in particular influenced his identity formation as a teacher:

I remember an episode during my student teaching. At that time, there was allegation of sexual abuse against a male principal. At that time, I was a junior in university and was a student teacher in a 4-year-olds’ classroom. One child misbehaved and I caught her by the waist. The child strongly said to me, “You are a man. So you must not touch my body.” At that time I thought she might have been taught that by her mom. After that, I had to consider that part of being a teacher. Since I had been a teacher ... if boys would make a mistake like a toilet problem, I could handle it. On the other hand, if girls would make a mistake like that, I would bring them to the next classroom and ask the [female] teacher to take care of it. At that time, *I was very serious*. (Interview transcript, Donghun, 04/01/07)

This episode shows how a male early childhood teacher considers his gender identity when dealing with young children. Harter (1998) suggested, “From a

looking-glass-self perspective, others' approval of the self should be most readily incorporated as approval of oneself as a person" (p. 583). In Donghun's case, other people's viewpoints influenced his self-perception as a teacher. When he said, "When the incident happened, I took it very seriously," he was experiencing events differently from his female colleagues. The little girl's response to his gender taught Donghun how to handle similar situations later on. In this situation, even children can reproduce "authoritative discourse" (Bakhtin, 1982). Young children use society's words "to call forth a world that mimics rather than reproduces [their] own" (Tobin, 1996, p. 24). They learn from the adults' world and reiterate the idea, "Female teachers can touch young children and male teachers can't." This issue shows how male early childhood teachers understand the different standards for men and women in the field.

Challenges arising from relationships with adults

Male early childhood teachers also face challenges arising from their relationships with children's parents and their colleagues. Their status as minorities in the field of early childhood education impacts their self-regulation and selection of appropriate behavior. Minsu could not help adopting a stereotyped perspective of the women-dominated profession and reflecting a "looking-glass-self" (Harter, 1998, p. 570) -- as a man who is a teacher -- at the same time. He shared how he negotiated the stereotyped discourse:

I had a difficult time in my relationships with parents in my classroom. I think that Korean parents doubt that male early childhood teachers can do a great job for their kids. It was very difficult for me to overcome the parents' stereotyped view in my classroom. I got many chances for discussion time with them especially during the first month of the new academic year. And I worked harder than anybody. After one year, contrary to their expectations, they began to think that teacher Minsu was a good teacher after all ... female early childhood teachers are very detailed and more organized more than me. The results of female teachers' work in the classroom are elegant. On the other hand, my classroom was not elegant. I was surprised at their work.

Especially, I'm impressed by Korean woman's aesthetic sense ... Honestly, in that respect, I could not catch up to them. I am not good at even using scissors. So I tried to find my style. For instance, I like animals. So if the children collected stickers after doing the right thing, I made a big animal picture with those stickers. They loved that ... (Interview transcript, Minsu, 03/25/07)

Minsu's statements show how the "self" can never exist independently of one's cultural-historical existence. According to Neugebauer (1994), men are sometimes viewed as less able than women to care for and educate young children. Male early childhood teachers cannot help but experience their society's stereotyped views. Nonetheless, to share his philosophy and to invent himself as an early childhood teacher, Minsu had to develop a unique and engaging style in the classroom. The idiosyncrasies of his teaching style allowed him to create a space for himself and feel comfortable as a male early childhood teacher. He wanted to demonstrate his real identity as an early childhood teacher through negotiation between his classroom practice and existing prejudices.

Thoughts about future male early childhood teachers

Olsen (2006) proposed some strategies for recruiting men into early childhood education: hiring men as assistant teachers, aides, bus drivers, and cooks; advertising in publications read by men; getting athletic teams at the college to come and read to children; giving financial incentives and so on. However, Gijun and Minsu had different ideas. They stressed that being a good teacher is more important than being a male or a female teacher in the early childhood classroom.

I don't think the role of a teacher can be different by gender. Because some women teachers like dynamic activity more like physical activity. I think every person has a different character. Some female teachers are more outgoing than male teachers. Although that reality exists, people say male teachers are such and such. Female teachers are such and such. If I need help, as teachers we will cooperate with each other regardless of gender. (Interview transcript, Gijun, 07/08/07)

Some people say we need more male teachers in early childhood education. But, I think we need more good teachers. I disagree that children will be more feminine without male teachers. The role of the teacher depends on the teacher's character. I worked with female teachers who were like men. I think young children need various experiences ... Because of this, some parents send their children to the Taekwondo gym. But I think that makes a stereotyped image of man, which is that the man is strong. Young Korean children feel that dad is stricter than mom. Some of the boys came to me and said, "Yes, sir," as if I was a Taekwondo teacher. I don't like that. We need teachers with warm hearts whether they are male teachers or not. (Interview transcript, Minsu, 07/29/07)

If people want to recruit male teachers because they worry children will be more feminine, they are reproducing existing gender stereotypes. As Giljun and Minsu said, people might focus on particular behaviors of the men or the women according to the strictly structured Korean culture. However, Gijun and Minsu wanted to focus on teachers' roles, rather than gender roles, so that people could understand and recognize good teaching in given contexts. They wanted to be accepted and recognized as teachers rather than as male teachers.

Discussion

To become a male early childhood teacher in a female-dominated profession is an uneasily constrained cultural process. As this study shows, the self-making of male early childhood teachers in South Korea is both internalized and externalized; it is a dialectic identity within a particular cultural context. Male early childhood teachers constantly construct and reconstruct themselves according to the situations they encounter. In particular, through their relationships with young children, parents, colleagues and other people, male teachers experience the cultural process of becoming an early childhood teacher in a way that tends to create within them the conviction of "autonomy" (Bruner 2002).

Male teachers' lives in early childhood education are influenced by their various

situational contexts and social networks. Their sense of agency is developed and their identities are largely constituted through continuing dialogue with children, parents, and colleagues. In particular, this process influences how they relate to people in everyday socio-cultural contexts. These contexts influence their emotions: in particular, male early childhood teachers feel uncomfortable because people think teaching young children is a women's job.

The findings of this study describe the extensive journey that these early childhood male teachers took to find their own way, despite experiencing many challenges in overcoming their struggles in real teaching contexts. Their learning and teaching as teachers was an ongoing process that shaped their identities. As the findings in this study suggest, male early childhood teachers in this study were emotionally engaged in constituting themselves through their teaching contexts. They were influenced by reality, knowledge, experience, and practice, and they constructed and reconstructed their identities as teachers in their everyday lives. In this study, Donghun comments, "Please, don't foist the *feminine image* on me." In both the teaching context and in the context of Korean culture more generally, male early childhood teachers faced challenging situations because of the notion that early childhood teaching is women's work. Although it was a struggle, Donghun was eventually accepted as "normal." Gijun stated that the role of a teacher should not be different according to gender. As Minsu said, "we need teachers with warm hearts whether they are male teachers or not." Being a good teacher for young children is a common goal that all early childhood teachers hope to achieve.

Male early childhood teachers' identities are partially constructed by their individual positions in an already existing network of interpersonal relationships. They are a minority in their profession, but they are dynamic agents as members of society. These male early childhood teachers play roles as social negotiators and resisters of imposed criteria and labels, instead representing themselves through their work. I believe more empirical studies examining male early childhood teachers' identities and lives will help us better understand their perspectives on teaching and their role in redefining what it means to be an early childhood teacher.

Educational Importance of the Study

People make judgments by labeling or categorizing others according to gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic class. However, this study shows the interpretive enterprise of male early childhood teachers in South Korea by including primary actors who have multiple interactions between or within those contexts. We need to recognize the individual's autonomy, as these male teachers represent themselves as agents not through other people's lens, but through their own. This paper will contribute to an understanding of the everyday lives of male early childhood teachers.

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