

Formation of Korean heritage school teachers' transnational identity

Hye Young Shin & Shelley Wong

Abstract

This study investigated the complex and shifting professional identities of Korean heritage school women teachers as a transnational experience. Focus groups and individual interviews created a space for dialogic inquiry into their work experiences and personal and professional lives. The study explored teacher professional identity formation, influenced by intersections of gender and ethnicity within the institutional context of one of the largest heritage schools in the Washington, D.C. area. Teachers compared and reflected on their former and current teaching and learning experiences in Korea and the U.S., experiences raising 1st and 2nd generation children and volunteer experiences in U.S. schools, their workload, salary and status. The study reports on teacher pedagogical insights concerning *juepshik*, a traditional Korean cramming method of teaching, their thirst for knowledge, commitment to strengthen and revitalize the teaching of Korean and their aspirations to raise the status and power of teachers of Korean heritage language teachers.

Introduction

A fairly recent and emerging area in education research is teachers professional identity (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004). Traditionally, there was an assumption that teaching and learning, professional development, and teacher identity were inculcated, top-down, or done by others, but sociocultural research emphasizes development of teacher professional identity as a more two-way, dialogic, and open process (Wong, 2006) in which teachers reflect on their own experience (Flores & Day, 2006). Investigating the academic and professional identities of teachers is important because it affords a space to explore teacher agency, the potential of teachers to become change agents. Professional development which allows teachers to follow a self-directed, collaborative, and inquiry-based learning process may be more directly relevant to teacher contexts and learners' lives (Johnson, 2009). Communication is not a mere exchange of meaning but also the process of identity formation (Norton, 1997). As Kramsch (1993) argues, sociocultural identities are not static, deterministic constructs that teachers and students bring to the classroom.

When teachers enter pre-service teacher education programs, they bring their own beliefs, constructed from their own personal, socio-cultural, and academic experiences. Rather than being a "blank state", teacher beliefs are conceived as important constituents of their professional identity (Beijaard et al, 2004). These beliefs, as part of larger ideological systems (Confucian, hierarchical, patriarchal) may be very difficult to change (Levi, 2013). The way teachers become aware of and change their beliefs, dispositions, and professional practices may develop not from professors' lectures but from reflecting on their actual teaching practice, done by sharing and discussion with peers (Valcke, Snag, Rots & Hermans, 2010, p. 625). Teachers' professionalism influences not only their models of teaching, teaching contexts, teaching experience, and teachers' biographies but also their professional identity (Beijaard et al., 2000). Teacher identity is not only a function of their roles as teachers but also includes personal identification and perception, which is based

on teacher core beliefs continuously changing through experience (Mayer, 1999).

Along with research about less commonly taught languages and L2 teachers' identity, a growing number of researchers have started to explore the beliefs of heritage language teachers (Leeman, 2015). However, the majority of studies have investigated the attitude of students and parents toward heritage language learning, and few studies address issues particular to teachers. In addition, not many studies have investigated "professional identity" in relation to heritage language teachers' professional development.

Wu's (2011) qualitative case study investigated two elementary school heritage language teachers' beliefs about heritage language education and the ways they implemented instruction in Taiwan. The cross-case analysis of this study indicated that the teachers demonstrated strong motivation and dedication to heritage language and culture preservation, and they developed teaching strategies that were more substantively inclusive of student cultures. On the other hand, despite their strong motivation to succeed as teachers in a heritage school, these heritage language teachers generally expressed a weak recognition of themselves as "legitimate" teachers (Wu, 2011). Feuerverger's (1997) study on heritage school teachers shows that a lack of certification constrained their feelings of professional accomplishment. There is need for heritage Korean teachers to obtain credentials to improve their status and foster effective heritage language instruction (Liu, 2006).

Wu, Palmer, and Field (2011) found that the Chinese heritage school teachers in their study seemed to develop a weak sense of professional identity due to their perception of teaching Chinese as a secondary or volunteer job. Lee and Bang (2011) researched the experiences of four heritage language teachers in the U.S., focusing on the challenges they faced and the resources they drew upon for their teaching. From their research, they found that these teachers faced challenges such as lack of appropriate materials, developing support from parents who held ambivalent attitudes toward HL (Heritage Language) programs and limited connections to the larger teaching community outside of the heritage school (Lee & Bang, 2011).

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to situate the investigation of heritage school teachers identity construction in the context of the Korean community heritage schools and U.S. society as a whole as a transnational experience within the framework of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1962; 1978; Lantolf & Poesner, 2013). Many researchers have emphasized the role of heritage education to increase international competitiveness in foreign/second language education (Lee & Shin, 2008). Intellectual communities that research heritage education usually focus on second language learners, identity, or language instruction, but few journal articles can be found regarding heritage teacher identity and ideology. This study explored Korean heritage school teachers' identity. The research questions were:

- 1) How is teacher identity shaped by their transnational experiences in Korea and in the U.S.?
- 2) How are these identities shaped by their experiences as women?
- 3) What are the implications of understanding teacher identities and experiences for improving Korean heritage language education?

Research Design

The research site for field observation is Open Gate (pseudonym) Korean Heritage School in Virginia, which is one of the largest heritage schools among those schools affiliated with the Washington Association of Korean Schools (WAKS). WAKS is one of the fourteen regional branches of the National Association of Korean Schools (NAKS). According to statistics from a recent NAKS report in 2007, there were 1,011 Korean heritage schools consisting of 8,771 teachers and 54,947 students nationwide. According to a 2013 report issued by the Korean Education Center in Washington D.C., WAKS has 83 member schools, including 838 teachers and 4,133 students in Washington D.C. metropolitan area. The Open Gate Korean Heritage School consisted of 250 students and 30 teachers in 2013.

The research site was a well-established heritage school with a history of 26 years. There were twenty-three classes with nine different levels of proficiency offered for students between the ages of 3 to 18 years old (pre-kindergarten to high school), with two classes offered for adult learners. Korean history was a required course, and activities related to Korean culture (e.g. Taekwondo, Korean traditional dance) were offered as elective classes. This school was in session on Saturdays only, with class time from 9:30AM to 1:00PM. Classes consisted of two and a half hours of Korean language instruction and 30 minutes of Korean history.

The research questions were posed to understand the changing situation, status, and positionality of Korean heritage language teachers in terms of their profession. We aimed at exploring the general viewpoints and beliefs of participants regarding their careers as teachers through focus group interviews with a small number of teachers in a comfortable discussion format. At the same time, we conducted one-on-one in-depth interviews to create a space for participants to tell their stories. This narrative method of inquiry assisted in capturing the teachers' transnational life experiences, which affected the shaping of their identities as teachers in both the U.S. and Korea.

Data from the project was gathered through five focus groups and follow up in depth individual interviews with 6 selected participants. There were a total of 5 focus groups of two hours each. The focus groups varied in number of participants from 4-6 persons. Altogether, there were 24 focus group participants.

Field Work

Participant observation at Open Gate Korean Heritage Language School took place over a five month period from February 1- Jun 14, 2014. It included classroom observations, attendance at weekly teacher meetings, and informal interactions with numerous administrators, parents, and teachers. From classroom observations, we explored how the teachers' personal and professional identities and beliefs regarding pedagogy and ideology were exhibited in

interactions with their students. Attendance at weekly and monthly teachers' meetings as well as informal follow-up discussions and informal conversations with teachers outside of the classroom provided many opportunities for understanding teacher identities in the context of their work.

Participants

The criterion for participants to be included in the study was a minimum of three years of teaching experience in a Korean heritage language school. The profiles of the participants for both focus group and in-depth interviews were that they were all female teachers in their 30s to 50s and had from three to twenty-five years of experience teaching in Korean heritage schools.

Name	Gender	Age	Years of Teaching	Academic experience in the U.S.	Teaching experience in Korea	Korean teaching related degree
Soo	Female	40s	10 years	No	Yes	No
Hee	Female	30s	5 years	No	Yes	No
Young	Female	40s	3 years	No	Yes	No
Jung	Female	40s	8 years	No	No	No
Kyong	Female	50s	20 years	No	No	Yes
Yoo	Female	50s	12 years	No	Yes	No

Profile of Six Participants in In-depth interviews

The additional special circumstances the participants shared in common were that they were all first generation immigrants to the U.S., non-native English speakers, were all visible racial minorities as Asians in the U.S. , and that they were all bound by traditional Korean female gender roles.

Findings and discussion

The core beliefs and identity shaped from one's own experience which teachers draw from when they enter a classroom and teach or participate as learners in a professional workshop for teachers, are not easily changed (Valcke, Snag, Rots, & Hermans, 2010). Therefore, while designing professional development programs, it is beneficial for teacher trainers to understand the cultural contexts in which teacher identity is shaped. What emerged from the analysis of the interviews and focus groups was a complex and shifting process of identity formation that was transnational in character and gender-specific. The data from this study showed that the professional identity of Korean heritage school teachers was shaped from their former education and experiences in Korea and the U.S. The women reflected on their family and cultural values and raising 1st or 2nd generation Korean children. A number reflected on their opinions of the U.S. educational system and their observations and insights gained through volunteering in their children's public school which they compared to teaching in Korean heritage language schools and attending professional development sessions provided by WAKS and NAKS.

Former education and experience in Korea: Teachers often develop a teaching method based on their own experience, regardless of their academic training (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). Although participants in this study believed that the traditional Korean teaching method, such as rote memorization, a focus on grammar, and paper-based tests did not work well for the improvement of Korean American students' overall Korean proficiency, they still taught in these traditional ways, since that was the way they had been taught. In addition, they reported they did not have any opportunity to learn and practice alternative teaching methods. Several teachers in focus group interviews and in-depth interviews described the teaching methods they had experienced as students, and how hard it was for them as teachers to change. A teacher from the focus group interviews explained why she used the methods she had learned during her school years in Korea.

Since I am teaching at a heritage school, I end up teaching in the Korean way. I found that I taught

students with jueepshik (주입식, cramming method of teaching) style. With Korean style teaching, students should use rote memorization for their learning, but I want to discard this method and change my teaching style. However, I don't know the American teaching methods because I haven't had any U.S. educational experience.

Kyong also agreed that traditional teaching methods didn't work well for improving speaking ability in the target language, saying, "We, Korean teachers, learned English for more than six years in Korean public schools, but we can't communicate with Americans in the U.S., right? When I recall my experience of learning a foreign language in Korea, I only remember that there were grammar-focused lessons and paper-based tests. These are not effective for improving students' communication ability in foreign languages."

In the case of teachers who have attended professional development classes offered by WAKS and NAKS and have tried using other new methods in their classes, they also stated that it is hard for them to change their old habits in teaching. A teacher mentioned, "I wanted to teach the way American teachers teach, but it was very hard for me to change my habitual behaviors learned from Korean education. So, I still teach students with jueepshik (주입식: cramming method of teaching)." Along with teaching methods, classroom management methods and ways for dealing with students are also adopted from the teachers' own learning experiences. A new teacher who started teaching Korean at a heritage school explained how she disciplined her students:

I made a lot of mistakes at the beginning since I didn't know about U.S. education. I just followed the Korean style. I sometimes used corporal punishment when I taught in Korea, and a lot of times, I verbally scolded my students here when they didn't follow my direction since I was not permitted to use corporal punishment in the United States.

As Korean teachers shared their experiences in Korea and contrasted those methods with their experiences in the U.S., they contributed to the development of a Korean American transnational identity and pedagogy through the critique of *juepshik* (주입식: cramming method of teaching).

Women, family and cultural values: All of the Korean heritage school teachers participating in this research were female. Gender roles (*sung yokwahl*: 성 역할) in Korean society may influence an individual's decision to become a teacher and provide for women motivation to enter the teaching profession. Teaching is considered a suitable job for women in that it allows them to keep their traditional role as a mother and pursue their career at the same time (Shin, 2014). Since the primary responsibility for women in Korea is childbirth and childcare, Korean women often miss opportunities for economic independence and upward social mobility. Teaching is one of the few careers that is socially acceptable for women to pursue after marriage in Korean society (Shin, 2014). In the case of the HL teachers, they (in some cases) perceive teaching in heritage schools as the best job for their situation.

Young was a public school teacher in Korea, and her former experiences in teaching led her to become a heritage school teacher in the United States:

My mother always emphasized the role of women. She told me that raising a child is the number one priority for women, so if I wanted to have a job, I had to find a job that could be balanced with housework. That's how she persuaded me to be a music teacher. I was able to teach piano at my house while I took care of my children. I didn't want to be a teacher, but I had to follow my mother due to the traditional value of obedience to parents.

Yoo also was a public school teacher in Korea, but she quit her job as soon as she got married. She elaborated on why she decided not to choose other jobs in the United States:

My primary goal was raising my children by myself. I had never thought about my career before the youngest entered college. I studied to get a certification to work at a pharmacy when my youngest son was a senior. It was very hard for me to study because of English. Even though I passed the exam and got the certification, I was afraid of working in American society. I love being a teacher. My own kids are proud of me because I am a teacher. I am proud of myself, too. I believe teaching is a job that can be respected by others.

Raising 1.5 or 2nd generation Korean children: As mentioned earlier, most heritage school teachers are the first generation of immigrants and were educated in Korea. They are also mothers of 1.5 or 2nd generation Korean children. The teachers stated that when they teach their own children, they face cultural differences in terms of learning methods. A teacher shared her experience with her U.S.- born son, mentioning, “When I studied in Korea, the most essential learning method was memorization. I always told my son that memorization was the best way to learn. But he resisted, and told me I was too oppressive. He told me that those Korean methods didn’t work because he was doing group work and projects in his school.” Another teacher added, “I learned from raising my children in the U.S. that even small children learn to take responsibility for doing their own school work and develop presentation skills through practicing and talking aloud in front of the class. The American class environment seems very free. However, my Korean heritage school class environment is different because I don’t give students that much freedom.”

Professional development: The main workshops teachers attended were the semi-annual workshops provided by WAKS (Washington Association of Korean schools), or the annual workshops sponsored by NAKS (National Association of Korean Schools). The teachers who attended the teachers’ workshops frequently reported that they strengthened their professional identity as a teacher since they gained confidence through validation of the content of what they teach and improved self-assurance regarding their job.

The workshops also helped the teachers improve their pride, dignity, and positive self-image as a teacher. A teacher in a focus group mentioned, “My self-image as a teacher has changed a lot through the Korean teachers’ workshops. I was able to understand and improve my status as a teacher.” Another teacher stated the following about her workshop experience:

I am a mother, and I didn’t study Korean education or literature. Therefore, I have never thought I had a certain status as a teacher. However, after I attended several Korean language teacher workshops, I feel that I am different from other Korean mothers in that I am more qualified to be a teacher compared to them. I became a teacher because I wanted to teach my own kids well. My professional identity improved when I understood the role of teachers in heritage schools.

Another teacher added her opinion about the teachers’ workshops, mentioning, “Five years ago, there were no good opportunities for me to improve my teaching ability since the lecturers only talked about what they did and showed off their accomplishments. However, these days I learn many things.” Another teacher in the focus group interview asserted that the workshop experience was beneficial for her as a new teacher:

I got a lot of useful information through the workshops. It was hard for me to get this information by myself. I tried to get information regarding Korean teaching, but I didn’t know enough about the field in general. I received a variety of information from the workshop, such as teaching methods, websites, games, and so on. These are very useful things for new teachers. However, I am not sure whether experienced teachers benefit as much from them (as the new teachers).

On the other hand, many experienced teachers argued that the speakers or workshop leaders didn’t have enough knowledge or experience about Korean heritage schools in the U.S., so the

workshops were not very helpful for them to improve teaching practices that could be used in the classroom. Their main dissatisfaction regarding the workshops was they felt that the program content of the workshops was repetitive and did not address their needs as teachers. Teachers were critical of the selection of community leaders as workshop leaders rather than educators who could motivate them professionally.

Volunteering in a public school - experience from the U.S. educational system: Among those who participated in the interviews, several teachers had volunteered in the schools their children attended. Most of them told me this volunteer time was the only chance for them to explore the U.S. educational system:

I didn't have any teaching experience when I started teaching at a heritage school. So, I wrote down what I wanted to teach, explained it in class, and asked students to copy what I wrote. It didn't work. Students complained about my teaching style. During my volunteering in classrooms at an American school for my kids, I observed how American teachers taught. I was impressed by their teaching style, which was theme-based teaching, focusing on one task and giving a lot of freedom to students. The American teacher's methods I observed were more effective than mine, I think. I learned from the observations that I had to communicate and interact with my students.

A teacher also added what she learned from her experience with American teachers in a public school:

I try to teach the way that I observed and learned from class volunteering in the U.S., but I find that I actually teach the way I learned in Korea. Working as a volunteer in American schools, I learned about 'freedom.' My students started their schooling here in the U.S., so they like the freedom. I try to let them to talk with each other after they read a story. I also try

teaching other subjects with the story. I think American teachers teach science when they teach math. Therefore, I ask my students the size and color of the animals during storytelling times. My students are American. So why do I have to write a Korean style lesson plan to submit to the principal?

Korean heritage school teachers have a hard time managing students in school, and they believe students show a lot of off-task behaviors since they don't take the Saturday heritage school seriously. When teachers had the opportunity to observe the public school classes as volunteers, they observed how American teachers managed their classes, dealing with the students who needed special attention. A teacher stated that she applied the methods she learned from her observation and that they worked, saying, "When I volunteer at my kid's classroom, I specifically observed how an American teacher draws the students' attention. I found the common methods the teachers use, and I follow the methods, and my students like it because they are used to it." The other teacher mentioned she learned from the observation of an American class that there are differences in teaching between American and Korean teachers.

I watched what American teachers taught when I volunteered. I realized that Korean teachers lecture and expect students to memorize the things the teachers teach. In contrast, American teachers teach the methods and process of learning. Korean teachers give information with lecture style, but American teachers interact with students by talking with them. I was surprised when the teachers got feedback from even small children.

Implications for Improving Heritage Language Education

This study indicated that teachers expressed the desire for more professional development. They indicated a preference for workshops that supported bottom-up teacher reflection and critical awareness of their transnational educational experiences.

Korean heritage school teachers' transnational professional identity was formed through their former foundational education and experiences in Korea, their family and cultural values as women raising 1.5 or 2nd generation Korean children and professional development experiences in the WAKS and experience with the U.S. educational system through volunteering in the U.S. schools.

This study found that professional development could be an effective tool for raising the professional status and power of Korean heritage teachers and introducing more effective teaching practices. However, not many professional development opportunities were provided to Korean heritage teachers. In addition, because they were not required to have teacher licenses or professional certification to teach, their work was devalued. Studies of Asian women faculty of various disciplines have shown a gendered division of labor in which women are the "last hired and the first fired", are underpaid and face systemic discrimination (Li & Beckett, 2006)

Conclusion and recommendations

By providing opportunities to compare and contrast transnational educational contexts, heritage school teachers can work collaboratively to address the challenges they face in their own classrooms and utilize human resources as a form of social capital (Grant & Wong, 2008). More collaboration, networking and, interaction with Korean heritage school teachers and also heritage language teachers of other less commonly taught languages can be attained by attending local, regional, and international foreign language education conferences and workshops.

In addition, heritage language teachers can implement a "Community of Practice" approach (Wenger, 1998) to support each other by spotting problem and providing their own methods as solutions to the problems they identify (e.g. classroom management, developing teaching materials, and creating learning activities). In this way, they would not need to rely solely on professional development workshops from outside "experts", which may not meet what the teachers' themselves identify as the issues they need to improve instruction. Forging a community

of practice could also help them increase self-confidence as colleagues interact on a regular basis and improve themselves through sharing their resources, experiences, and tools (Lin, 2008).

Furthermore, as agents for the transformation of the status quo in heritage schools, it would be helpful for teachers to write guided self-reflection journals through a combination of structured questions. Teachers can document their findings and use those findings to compare their experiences with their peers. This could help empower each individual teacher's voice. Finally, there are a variety of social media and technologies that could facilitate this process such as Google documents, blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. Incorporating Korean and English medium technologies can enhance Korean teacher's pedagogical repertoire and draw on their bilingual expertise. The challenges that Korean Language teachers face are similar to English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and teachers of other foreign and second languages (Valeo & Faez, 2013). The gap in professional salaries between Schools of Business and the Humanities including English and Modern Languages has increased dramatically (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2007). In addition, the problem of adjunct and part-time instead of full-time employment with benefits leads to greater attrition in the field (Valeo & Faez, 2013).

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