

Examining the Experiences of Lesbian Prospective Kindergarten Teachers

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Abstract

This study analyzes the experiences of homosexual prospective teachers, examining how homosexual prospective teachers form their identities as members of a sexual minority and as teachers. Homosexual youths have experienced a long and pervasive history of discrimination in Korea, where homophobia is firmly rooted. Although multiple types of victimization ranging from verbal teasing to sexual harassment and physical assault are frequently reported at the high school level, many scholars state that actual harassment and discrimination based on sexuality begin early in life. Young children learn that there are dominant societal expectations of the expression of gender and sexuality. Without teachers' conscious efforts in the classroom, homophobic and heterosexist discursive practices become prevalent in their lives. This study analyzes the experiences of homosexual prospective teachers, examining how homosexual prospective teachers form their identity as members of a sexual minority and as teachers. For this research goal, I conducted narrative interviews with five homosexual prospective teachers. They majored in Early Childhood Education at college in Gyeonggi province. After collecting the interview data, I analyzed it based on ground theory. According to the research findings, participants experienced discrimination since the moment of awareness during which the homosexual individuals confirmed their feeling as homosexuality. They moved into the more matured identity development phases. At the same time, they also constructed their teacher identity. They showed the passion and enjoyment for teaching which are typically observed in the pre-teaching period. Due to the conservative atmosphere of Korean society, participants remained in the closeted teaching step and failed to reach the final step of the homosexual teacher identity development process. These research findings imply that it is necessary to define homosexual teachers as change agents, not as living a tabooed existence, who challenge heterosexual norms and homophobia, which starts as early as kindergarten.

Key words: homosexuality, homophobia, prospective teachers, kindergarten

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Introduction

Homosexual youths have experienced a long and pervasive history of discrimination in Korea, where homophobia is firmly rooted. According to a survey conducted by the Cultural Rights Human Rights Center, 58.5% of homosexual students have attempted suicide (Kim, 2009). They are 2 to 3 times more likely to attempt suicide than other students. Even if they do not attempt suicide, they are more exposed to alcohol and drug addiction, and more inclined to becoming runaways and school dropouts (Kang & Ha, 2005). As homosexual people who have been invisible start to find their own voices, an increasing number of students have reported harassment and discrimination from peers and teachers (Kim, 2009). However, there has been no official regulation to prevent homophobia in Korean schools. Instead, the department of education lets each school district remove any positive comments about homosexuality in the official guideline for sex education (Shin, 2017).

Although multiple types of victimization ranging from verbal teasing to sexual harassment and physical assault are frequently reported at the high school level, many scholars state that actual harassment and discrimination based on sexuality begin early in life (Bank, Delamont, & Marshall, 2007). Young children learn that there are dominant societal expectations of the expression of gender and sexuality. Unfortunately, name-calling and using anti-gay slurs starts as early as kindergarten. As they go up through the school years, children consciously or unconsciously learn about the critical consequences of not following dominant values. Robinson (2013) insists that teachers need to be involved even in the more subtle and indirect forms of homophobia among young children. Without teachers' conscious efforts in the classroom, homophobic and heterosexist discursive practices become prevalent in their lives, placing their positioning within heterosexuality (Butler, 1999; Epstein, O'Flynn, & Telford, 2000; Robinson, 2013).

It is the school that reinforces particular gender and (hetero) sexual identities. In other words, institutional arenas such as schools do not simply reflect or reproduce wider social relations of gender and sexuality. Rather, they are active in the formation of children's sexual/gender identities. Robinson (2013) emphasizes that early childhood education is part of the network that operates ideologically to determine what kinds of risk are acceptable

and what levels of social injustice will be tolerated publicly. Building ethical values and practices early in children's lives is critical, and this is particularly so in the context of gendered relationships and sexuality.

Kindergarten introduces children to their first educational expectations. Previous research shows that heteronormativity occurs swiftly in preschool and that it continues to be reinforced through the entire school education (Koch & Irby, 2005). Children start to learn expectations associated with gender relations in society, influenced by the socialization process. The role of the teacher in this period is critical since young children start to construct their understanding of self and others.

Most kindergarten teachers, however, have prejudicial beliefs toward sexual minorities. According to the survey, 80% of the prospective teachers surveyed held negative feelings toward queer people. It is important to provide teachers with opportunities to challenge inappropriate, negative, and stigmatizing attitudes (Petrovic & Rosiek, 2007). Many teacher researchers suggest that sexual minorities in the school setting can play an important role in creating an inclusive environment for sexual minorities and in challenging the deeply rooted heteronormativity in society (Griffin, 1992; Harbeck, 1992; Jennings, 1994). Homosexual teachers can serve as change agents who challenge heterosexual norms and homophobia, which are reproduced and generalized through school education.

However, it is not easy to meet homosexual teachers and to see how they struggle in the heteronormative culture of the school. This is because schools are markedly less gay-friendly in climate for teachers, than for students. Previous research suggests that lesbian and gay teachers experience significant harassment and discrimination on the job (Harbeck, 1992). Teachers are routinely fired for being gay or lesbian.

It is impossible to even imagine the existence of homosexual teachers in Korea because homosexuality is regarded as extremely taboo, a form of social deviance. Recently, studies of sexual minorities have increased gradually in Korea in the areas of mental health and legal issues, but there are few studies on sexual minorities in the school. Academic attention needs to be given to homosexual teachers and prospective teachers who can serve as active agents for change.

This study analyzes the experiences of homosexual prospective teachers, examining how homosexual prospective teachers form their identity as members of a sexual minority and

as teachers. For this research goal, I conducted narrative interviews with homosexual prospective teachers. A deeper understanding of homosexual teachers is required for transforming the hetero-biased curriculum into a balanced one (Kumashiro, 2004). The best way to do this is to listen to the stories of members of a sexual minority who have experienced discrimination. This will help us to understand the discrimination and exclusion from their perspective and to understand what they suggest for challenging the prevailing homophobia in the school.

The following is a theoretical review to understand homosexual prospective teachers. This includes a review of previous research on the social context surrounding sexual minority teachers and academic discussions related to the development of a multidimensional identity within a gender minority.

Theoretical Background

Homosexual teachers in society. Despite the recent attempts in academic discourse to foster an atmosphere accepting of sexual minorities in the workplace, Sears (1993) found that homosexual teachers have not been welcomed in the school. In other words, sexual minorities in the general workplace tend to be discussed with the principles of equality and non-discrimination in mind, but homosexual teachers are excluded from this discourse.

Many scholars have argued that homosexual teachers are still considered problems rather than victimized minorities who need immediate protection. Blount (1996) argued that homosexual teachers have been defined as a social evil for a long time. In her research examining the public perception of sexual minorities in American schools, she reported that until the 1970s, most people strongly rejected the idea that gays and lesbians could be hired as teachers.

Harbeck (1992) explained that Anita Bryant's campaign fostered a social atmosphere against homosexual teachers. Bryant, a social activist who advocated religious fundamentalism, claimed an idealized family model and portrayed homosexual teachers as sexual predators who forced children into sexual activity. Bryant's campaign was followed by the Briggs Initiative, which intended to prohibit sexual minorities from becoming teachers (Harbeck, 1992).

Since Bryant's campaign, gay and lesbian teachers have been recognized as "problems" in American society. Lipkin (1999) stated that most sexual minorities have no choice but to hide their sexual identity. Once gay and lesbian teachers identify their sexual preference, they confront the most immediate and extreme threats. Such heterosexual moral assumptions for teachers show that there are contradictory messages from the school. Many school districts have tried to make a gay friendly environment for homosexual youths. It, however, does not mean that gay and lesbian teachers are allowed to openly identify their sexual identity in the school. All of the teachers are supposed to be heterosexual, which is considered to be morally normal. Under the double expectations, they have to remain in the "closet."

Jennings (1994) points out that as long as society does not completely remove homophobia and heteronormativity, homosexual teachers will remain problematic beings in the school. According to Jennings, teachers are not supposed to be homosexual because their fundamental role is to deliver to their students the dominant values and knowledge of society. As long as heterosexuality is mainstream, gay and lesbian teachers are contradictions in society.

Many scholars deny the public belief that homosexual teachers are harmful for young students. Many teacher education theorists argue that openly gay teachers can become role models for both homosexual and heterosexual students (Griffin, 1992; Jennings, 1994; Martinoble, 1999; Sanders & Burke, 1994). They highlight that the presence of gay and lesbian teachers can challenge prejudices and assumptions about predominant heteronorms and make the school a more open space. In fact, Rofes (1999), in her qualitative research with gay teachers and their students over a long period of time, proved that openly gay teachers helped students to abandon prejudices about traditional gender roles and heterosexual relationships and move toward a more inclusive environment for all minorities. So far, I have discussed homosexual teachers. Previous research showed the social beliefs regarding and educational expectations of them. In the next section, I will review the academic discourse on homosexual teachers more on their personal level.

The multifaceted complexities of the identity formation of homosexual teachers. Identity implies a subjective experience of the self that defines the essence of the human

subject. As human subjects, sexual minorities should shape their subjectivity in the process of establishing relationships with the outside world, and at the same time form an identity as sexual minorities in a heterosexual society.

Homosexual people experience the process of homosexual identity formation that integrates their personal with their social identity. The initial model for the development of homosexual identity is Cass (1979)'s six-step model. Her model, regardless of age, includes identity awareness, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity integration (identity synthesis). She then tested the six-step hypothesis and then proposed four steps: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, and identity pride and synthesis.

Troiden (1989) supported the model of Cass (1979) and examined the development process more closely in age-related aspects with respect to individual differences. He proposed sensitization, identity confusion, identity assumption, and commitment. Sensitization occurs primarily before puberty, and an individual who experiences this period finds himself different from others, which unfortunately leads to negative emotions, but this leads the individual to the next level during adolescence.

The models of Cass (1979) and Troiden (1989) focus on male homosexuality, but subsequently influenced research on female homosexuality. Models that describe the process of homosexual identity development for lesbians include the lesbian identity development model of Chapman and Brannock (1987), McCarn and Fassinger (1996), and Sophie (1986). These models are all four levels and are summarized in the following table.

Table 1. *Models of Lesbian Identity Development*

McCarn & Fassinger (1996)	Chapman & Brannock (1987)	Sophie (1986)
Awareness	Incongruence	First Awareness
Exploration	Self-questioning/Exploration	Testing/Exploration
Deepening/Commitment	Self-Identification	Identity Acceptance
Integration & Synthesis	Choice of Lifestyle	Identity Integration

Homosexual teachers undergo a multifaceted identity development which includes homosexual identity and teacher identity. They experience coming-out at different levels. As a teacher shapes his/her sexual identity, he/she improves his/her classroom teaching (Jackson, 2007). The development process of the homosexual identity is parallel to that of

the teacher identity, which leads to changes in classroom teaching. Jackson (2007) divided the identity development process into three steps: pre-teaching, closeted teaching, and post-coming out. For the pre-teaching step, Jackson (2007) explains that the stage is the most important period in that a homosexual prospective teacher sets the general outlines for his/her dual identity formation before entering an actual classroom. Once he/she enters the classroom, he/she has to make decisions about whether or not they do coming-out in school. This task is very difficult for the individual because it has the potential for a very deleterious side effect. One who is publicly identified as gay or lesbian risks being fired or marginalized in his/her school. Considering the nature of the school, it is hard to expect that the school will be inclusive toward openly homosexual teachers. However, if a teacher did a successful coming-out in the classroom, they tend to more fully devote their time and energy to classroom instruction (Jackson, 2007). In particular, the whole curriculum tends to be transformed from teacher-centered to student-centered. This process will be a driving force to transform homophobic environments.

So far, I have examined the social context surrounding homosexual teachers and reviewed the theories about the general identity development experienced by individual homosexual teachers. In the next section, I will explain how I recruited homosexual prospective teachers in Korea and conducted narrative interviews with them.

Method

Data Collection

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of lesbian prospective teachers. For this purpose, I conducted narrative interviews with prospective teachers who wanted to be kindergarten teachers. Narrative interviews are more effective when the narratives of the participants are the main focus of the study (Kim, 2009). Participants in narrative interviews should be able to recall and talk about their lives and have the strength and maturity to look inside themselves (Wicks & Whiteford, 2006).

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of prospective teachers who

identified themselves as lesbian and who wanted to teach kindergarten. The research participants were lesbians, who are extremely invisible to the general public. In other words, it is so hard to find a lesbian prospective teacher that many people believe they simply do not exist. Snowball sampling is most commonly used when it is difficult to find participants who are identified easily.

I contacted the leading members of a social network of lesbians and asked them to introduce some homosexual prospective teachers willing to participate in my research. I started with one participant of the social network and then used her contacts to identify other potential participants for my research. They shared other contacts who might be interested in participating in my research. Using this snowball sampling, I could increase the sample size. Five homosexual prospective teachers volunteered for the narrative interviews.

This qualitative research was based on a comprehensive design using in-depth semi-structured interviews with five participants. The following overall questions guided this research: What is your experience as a sexual minority? What is your experience as a prospective teacher?

The interviews were conducted during the summer and fall of 2017. I met with each participant individually once or twice. The interviews were at a time and place convenient to them. It took about an hour each time. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Participants

All of the participants lived in Gyeonggi province. They were majoring in Early Childhood Education at a four-year college. Two participants, <Pre-Teacher 3> and <Pre-Teacher 4>, were juniors in college. The other participants, <Pre-Teacher 1>, <Pre-Teacher 2>, and <Pre-Teacher 5>, were seniors in college and finished their required field work and internship at kindergarten. After graduation, all of the participants wanted to be kindergarten teachers. For the income level, participants reported a broad range of annual income. <Pre-Teacher 1> and <Pre-Teacher 2> considered their families as middle class. <Pre-Teacher 3> and <Pre-Teacher 4> assumed that they lived in low-middle class households. <Pre-Teacher 5> said that her family's income was low and she received a

national scholarship to pay for her tuition.

Except for <Pre-Teacher 1>, the research participants did coming-out only to close acquaintances. All of the participants recognized their sexual identity in junior high school. The following table summarizes the background information of the participants.

Table 2. *Background Information of Research Participants*

Participants	Major	The Age of Coming-out	The Range of Coming-out
Pre-Teacher 1	Early Childhood Education	15	The Whole School
Pre-Teacher 2	Early Childhood Education	14	Close Friends
Pre-Teacher 3	Early Childhood Education	14	Close Friends
Pre-Teacher 4	Early Childhood Education	15	Mother, Close Friends
Pre-Teacher 5	Early Childhood Education	16	Close Friends

All participants in both countries signed informed consent documents and were informed of the research process before I conducted the study. They were assured that the confidentiality of their participation in the research would be maintained, that their participation would be voluntary, and that they could stop participating at any time.

Data Analysis

The collected narrative data was analyzed using grounded theory divided into open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. I categorized concepts in open coding, conducted categorical and process analysis in axis coding, and derived core categories, outlined the story, and summarized relationship statements with hypothetical types in selection coding.

This process involved dividing the transcribed text into meaningful content segments, coding each segment according to an evolving set of themes. I solidified some possible categories and continuously modified the list throughout the analysis procedure. Based on the recurring phrases and themes, I examined the ways the categories and the data were

arranged. In order to confirm whether my interpretation of the research data was consistent with what the research participants said, a member check process was carried out. The analysis results are as follows.

In the following, I attempt to identify some of the recurring themes throughout the narratives, paying special attention to what participants experienced during their identity construction both as a sexual minority and as a teacher.

Results

Exclusion and Prejudice in the Past

Participants experienced discrimination and exclusion from the time they first felt that they were different from other girls their age. They were in the context of ongoing coping with difficulties related to diverse forms of heterosexism and had been exposed to a number of coming-outs and coming-ins in their everyday lives.

Even though all the participants disclosed their homosexual identity to a select group of people, in general, they struggled to hide their homosexual identity. If they succeeded in hiding their homosexual identity, they could avoid direct violence and oppression. However, they were still hurt by the words and actions of people:

My best friend's involuntary outing occurred in junior high school. Her homeroom teacher found out about her homosexuality in counseling time and called her mom to tell her everything. She had a very difficult time. All the students in our school kept their distance from her. I did not tell her my sexual identity but felt sympathy for her. I was willing to spend time with her. One day I happened to meet her mom. All of a sudden, she asked me, "Is it you?" I was so surprised and immediately denied it, "No. I'm not!" I knew the meaning of her question. I was fully aware what would happen to me, once I admitted it. <Pre-Teacher 3>

<Pre-Teacher 3> was extremely careful not to expose her homosexual identity. She saw her lesbian friend experience humiliation and suffering and eventually drop out of school. <Pre-Teacher 3> told that even though she managed to hide her homosexual identity, she suffered from high levels of stress and anxiety.

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If one does not conceal her homosexual identity like <Pre-Teacher 3>, one is subject to direct oppression and prejudice. The case of <Pre-Teacher 1> shows the details of the consequences of such disclosure. She said that her homosexual identity had become known to the school voluntarily as well as involuntarily. She described the various forms of assault that she faced in school:

I got a lot of assault, especially verbal assault from my classmates. "She is lesbian!" "How do lesbians have sex with each other?" "It's dirty!" Whenever I heard these, I felt alienated and abandoned. I had serious emotional problems. Fortunately I had a friend who I could talk with about my mental issues. However, I was afraid what would happen to my friend just because she was close to me. I wanted to save my friend. I did not want her to be in trouble. I had to keep my distance even from her. Then I still could not overcome depression. <Pre-Teacher 1>

As <Pre-Teacher 1> said, other participants also experienced such psychological issues as alienation, isolation, and anxiety. Since they did not have any role-models and professional counselors, they could not figure out their situation. They felt marginalized and alienated from society. Some participants told that they relied on alcohol and tobacco to forget these emotional distresses. <Pre-Teacher 4> reported that homosexuals are exposed to much more alcohol and tobacco than their straight friends:

It is a fact that homosexual persons drink and smoke much heavier than straight people. I admit that my straight friends also drink a lot. It is hard to tell the difference. We have different reasons to drink and smoke. I also drank in high school. The biggest reason I drank alcohol was because I was lesbian so I could not express my feelings to the girl that I love. <Pre-Teacher 4>

Whether they were coming out or not, participants in my research suffered from homophobia, which is inherent in our society. The participants were placed in a school environment where homophobia and heterosexism prevail. Their identity was discredited and silenced. They encountered blatant and subtle forms of homophobic harassment, ranging from direct threats of dismissal to casual displays of heterosexual privilege.

As Troiden (1989) explained, participants felt socially different during childhood before defining themselves as lesbian. They moved into the awareness phase of the McCarn and Fassinger (1996)'s model. Once they confirmed their different feeling as homosexual identity, they confronted discrimination, exclusion, humiliation and suffering, which

lesbians and gay men experience in society. Whether participants open their sexual identity, they, as lesbians, experience the negative views and treatment of an interwoven network of legal and social rules presented as normal (Lipkin, 1999). There are many previous studies focusing on the gay and lesbian people's miserable ends such as depression and suicide, school dropout and runaways, and homelessness and low socio-economic status. However, the participants were not passive victims without voice and choice. They did not drop out of high school and run away from home. They wanted to survive in society and do something for change. Participants evolved their identity into the exploration and deepening phases of the McCarn and Fassinger (1996)'s model.

Finding a Dream to Become a Teacher in the Present

Participants reported that they explored their sexual identity and developed knowledge by collecting correct information about homosexuality. In this process, they struggled to figure out how to develop professionally and plan for the future rather than limiting themselves as passive victims who usually ended up with a miserable end. For a career plan, they chose to become a teacher. It means that they needed to go through the teacher identity development process. This section shows what they experienced in the pre-teaching step, which Jackson (2007) explained as a begging part of the teacher identity development process.

The main reason that all the participants chose a teaching career is that they agreed it was necessary to change the conservative school culture. In particular, they felt that school teachers need to admit their ignorance and prejudice about homosexuality. <Pre-Teacher 1> and <Pre-Teacher 4> mentioned that many school teachers have little knowledge about sexual minorities:

I told you I got counseling in my high school. Three times a week, but the counseling was not satisfied. The counselor did not know such terms as coming-out, outing, and LGBT, which are supposed to be basic for talking with homosexual individuals. She was a nice person, but she just did not know anything about homosexuality. Although we met frequently, our counseling was processed very slowly. <Pre-Teacher 1>

Teachers are simply ignorant about homosexuality. Elderly male teachers are the worst cases. They are so patriarchal and confined to Confucian thoughts. They simply refuse to accept that

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homosexual people exist in our society. When you have class in high school, you have to listen to their stereotypical thinking, which will never be changed. <Pre-Teacher 4>

As <Pre-Teacher 1> and <Pre-Teacher 4> criticized, most teachers turn a blind eye to homosexual issues. However, their blindness is far from neutral. Other participants reported teachers' abusive expressions about sexual minority issues:

I was shocked when a teacher who goes to church condemned homosexuality as a sin. He talked about Sodom in the Bible. I was shocked again when many classmates listened carefully and agreed with that. <Pre-Teacher 5>

A teacher in my high school said that homosexuals are vulnerable to AIDS. I really thought that homosexuality was a disease. My (lesbian) friend even thought that she would be really sick. His "teaching" drove me and my friend into a big shock. <Pre-Teacher 3>

<Pre-Teacher 5> and <Pre-Teacher 3> told that they had no choice but to pretend to be straight because they had only teachers who mentioned homosexuality as sin and illness. Whether the attitude of a teacher to homosexuality is turning a blind eye or despising, all the participants agreed that their access to potential mentors, role models, and career-advancing information was limited. They shared a strong desire to do something about the homophobic school climate. The participants assumed that their decision to become kindergarten teachers would have a positive effect on challenging the current school setting. <Pre-Teacher 2> believed that the influence of the teacher was more direct, especially that the change of thought of young children was important:

I like kids a lot and I wanted to change prejudices among kids a lot. When I was a kid, I heard a lot of pink for girls and blue for boys. The problem starts there. And boys play with robots and girls with dolls. These stereotypes do not seem to be changed easily unless someone does something. I want to let the children choose what they want to do. <Pre-Teacher 2>

<Pre-Teacher 2> emphasized not only her plans to do something for early childhood education but also her willingness to be around children. This is why she decided to become a good kindergarten teacher. She also expressed a strong compassion for small children. She emphasized that she just felt rewarded when she stayed with children:

I simply like babies too much. And my parents were divorced when I was young. I really enjoy playing with kids. My friends told me that I lack affection from my parents. Maybe I need

someone to give my love unconditionally. Anyway, I really like kids. This is why I applied to the early childhood department. So far, I am happy with my decision. <Pre-Teacher 2>

Participants had the hope that the school culture could be changed if homophobia and heteronormativity were challenged. In addition, pure love for children and the passion to devote to the educational scene were also driving forces for them to become teachers. In other words, they had great potential to be good teachers for young children.

In this development phase, participants actively explored their feelings of difference from mainstream society and sought the knowledge and the assumption of a lesbian identity. At the same time, they also developed a deeper understanding of their professional identities. While they accepted their sexual identities, they started to construct their teacher identity. Just as Jackson (2007) emphasized, participants displayed their passion and enjoyment for the job, which are typically seen in the pre-teaching step.

A Good Teacher and an Expected Reality in the Future

Participants reported that they developed greater self-knowledge and made choices regarding their sexuality, which are typically observed in the deepening phase. All of the participants are currently prospective teachers. However, some participants have worked at kindergarten as an intern. They reported their teaching step, which Jackson (2007) divided into closeted teaching and post-coming out. While they developed their identities as sexual minorities and as teachers, they reflected on their attitudes and strategies as lesbian teachers in future classrooms.

When asked about their teaching in the future, the participants linked their teaching strategies with their past experiences. They were aware of the difficulties faced by sexual minorities because they experienced exclusion and discrimination during their own growth. <Pre-Teacher 3> showed a strong willingness to provide a safe environment for homosexual children:

When I found I had deep affection for a girl in my class, I was really confused. I thought that I was wrong or sick because my sexual identity was not formed yet. I never learned about homosexuality before I myself loved a girl. Even when I was a kid, I liked to play with girls rather than boys. I think I need to share my experiences. When I realized about my sexual orientation, I had no one to

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talk with. I felt like I was trapped in a small box. Because I had no mentor, I studied and I figured out my experiences on my own. I want to be a good mentor to my students. <Pre-Teacher 3>

While she emphasized a safe environment, <Pre-teacher 5> also reflected on her past experiences. However, she highlighted the changes for both homosexual and straight students:

I think that homosexual students in high school are mostly confused about themselves. The problem happens at that time. They experience isolation and depression. How about straight ones? They think that it is OK to despise them. If you want to fix it, it is too late. It is important to have a chance to know about homosexuality before sexual identity is formed. Before people found their sexual orientation, they have to learn about different sexual identities. This will make a school an inclusive environment for everyone. <Pre-Teacher 5>

<Pre-Teacher 3> and <Pre-Teacher 5> shared their willingness to actively embrace sexual minorities in an inclusive context, when they become teachers. <Pre-Teacher 1> and <Pre-Teacher 2> criticized the teaching materials and activities of the current kindergarten. From their perspectives, the curriculum is far from value-neutral. It is natural only for heterosexual people who have a traditional form of family:

I've said it before, but I do not support the assumption that pink is for a girl and blue for a boy. When I look at the kids' teacher materials, a mother always wears an apron and a father wears a necktie. All the family pictures show that there are a mom and dad. In addition, many kindergarten activities are related with the fixed roles of mom and dad. Why do we have to assume that there are a mom and dad in a family? My mom and dad were divorced when I was very young. My memory of my dad is very vague. I think I need to talk about that part. <Pre-Teacher 2>

I do not like the sex education for young kids. I know the sex education is necessary. I have seen the kindergarten teaching materials from the school district. All the pictures of the materials show the couple of a man and a woman. But this is ... I do not think so. I would rather make my own version of sex education. I would say that I will teach sex even for my kids. I want to fight. <Pre-Teacher 1>

They felt uncomfortable with the traditional gender roles and the family images which have been taken for granted in the school. As seen from the above quotes, the image of the family depicted in the current school curriculum is close to the internalization of the middle

class family ideology (Groneberg & Funke, 2011). In portraying only a father and mother who raise their children, various types of families are excluded. As <Pre-Teacher 2> pointed out, it is not only the homosexual couples but also the families living with their grandparents, and the single parent family who are excluded.

The participants said they would like to challenge heteronormativity at the kindergarten level. However, at the same time, some participants perceived that it was very difficult to make a change in the field of education. <Pre-Teacher 4> was worried about whether they would be able to overcome the solid atmosphere of heterosexuality in kindergarten:

When I talk with other lesbian teachers who work in kindergarten, it is hard to work. Many kindergarten presidents let their teachers keep long hair styles. Even though short hair styles are allowed, there are tacit dress code policies. I don't think this atmosphere will be changed in the near future. Once I work as a kindergarten teacher, I might melt in that atmosphere. I am not sure if I can change the reality. <Pre-Teacher 4>

When they talked about the reality, they pointed out that they needed a teaching job for their livelihood. All the participants said that they would not marry. Economic independence is necessary for the survival of non-married women in Korea.

For this reason, it is impossible for them to directly or indirectly identify themselves as sexual minorities in pre-school settings. <Pre-Teacher 2>, who hopes to reduce gender bias, says that if there is a confrontation with the kindergarten director over homosexual issues, she might avoid arguments with the director:

I really like to argue with her on the issues. I do not think I can do that. I have a small heart and I am not strong. If she keeps talking against homosexuality, I would ignore her. As long as I shut my mouth, nothing will happen. However, if she is going too far, I will stand up. Of course it means quitting the job. <Pre-Teacher 2>

The participants hoped to become good teachers and wanted to challenge the oppression and prejudice which occur in early childhood education. All of them emphasized that they wanted to bring about change by becoming teachers rather than passive victims who simply endure prejudice and discrimination in everyday life.

Participants reported that they developed greater knowledge about their individual communities and the whole sexual minority community, which are seen in the deepening

phase. All of the participants supported that heterosexuality needs to be challenged, not only because it is discrimination, but also because it inevitably leads to patriarchy and its system of domination. <Participant 1>, <Participant 2>, and <Participant 5>, who have worked as intern teachers at kindergarten argued that young kids learn stereotyped gender roles and a father-headed family ideology. They displayed strong commitment to challenge these stereotypes and this ideology. However, their teaching identity is considered to be the closed teaching step, which Jackson (2007) explained as the middle step of the teacher identity development process. They did not think that they could come out with their sexual minority status in kindergarten. <Participant 5> even called it, a “suicidal behavior” in Korea. Even though Jackson recommended that teachers who reach post-coming out show strong commitment and change the whole school community, it is hard to observe this step actualized among participants.

The narratives of the five prospective teachers portray what they experienced in the past as sexual minorities, how they linked their past experiences to their current career choices, and what they wanted in future as kindergarten teachers. In the following, I summarize their responses and describe the limitations and contributions of my study.

Discussion

This qualitative study used narrative interviews in order to listen to the stories of homosexual prospective teachers. During the interviews, I tried to understand what they experience in the process of constructing their sexual identity and their teacher identity. Initially, participants experienced a vague feeling of being different and marginal from their peers in childhood, which Troiden (1989) termed as pre-sexuality. Lipkin (1999) says that this usually happens in the preadolescent stage. This is non-sexual feeling. However, they soon confirmed their feelings as homosexuality. McCarn and Fassinger (1996) call this moment awareness. Since then, sexual minorities immediately face various prejudices and discrimination.

The participants also experienced various types of discrimination and exclusion from the time they first recognized their own sexual orientation. They faced directly or indirectly

negative responses in everyday life. Even though they desperately hid their homosexual identity, they were hurt and angered by the fact that their sexual orientation was denied. In the stage of awareness, homosexual individuals are exposed to a wide range of discrimination (Sohpie, 1986). In extreme form, they are forced to drop out of school and are even driven to death. This is why they have higher school dropout rates and higher suicide rates (Epstein et al., 2000). In addition, there are few positive role models for sexual minorities (Martinoble, 1999). Participants in my study also fully knew all the sufferings experienced by sexual minorities and that there were few role-models available. <Pre-teacher2> even said that she felt so “alone in the world.”

While participants moved into the exploration step of homosexual identity development, they have accepted their homosexual identity and have some connections with other homosexuals. They supported the necessity to change the school education. This was the main reason for their becoming teachers. They hoped that they would take a teaching job instead of becoming subjects of passive suppression in general. It meant that they would go through a doubled identity development process, combining homosexuality and teaching. As Jackson (2007) explained, they moved into the pre-teaching step of the Jackson model as well as the exploration phase of the McCarn and Fassinger (1996)’s model.

For the future, they have a strong willingness to help homosexual children and to challenge the traditional images of gender and family. They emphasized their willingness to actively embrace sexual minorities and their families when they become teachers. They also highlighted that it was impossible for them to achieve this goal by themselves alone and they assumed that more teachers needed to be involved. Kumashiro (2004) argued that it is difficult for teachers to sustain their passion and commitment to change the heterosexual culture of school. Koch and Irby (2005) emphasized the necessity to challenge all traditional assumptions about sex role behavior and gender identity in the early years. Fortunately, participants who worked at kindergarten sensed that stereotyped gender roles and patriarchal ideology prevail in the kindergarten curriculum. They agreed that it is necessary to encourage gender-neutral education at the kindergarten level. However, they did not think that they would move into the post-coming out step, the final step of the Jackson (2007)’s model. They told that it is impossible for sexual minorities to do coming-out in their work-place.

Conclusion

There are some limitations of this study. The participants in this study were not experiencing extreme forms of discrimination and oppression. They could hide their own gender identity, or at least they were protected by their family. They have completed their school education and are now waiting for graduation, which means that this study is limited in showing both the extreme forms of discrimination and exclusion experienced by sexual minorities.

Nevertheless, this study contributes to a visualization of sexual minorities who were thoroughly discriminated against and silenced in the field of educational research in Korea. Homosexual teachers have not been allowed to exist in history. The most frequent question that I got during my research was, “Is there really such a person?” This question was raised from the fundamental belief that a teacher is “normal” which means straight. The combination of homosexual identity and teaching profession is itself a contradiction. This study not only visualized homosexual teachers, but also defined them as active change agents rather than passive victims.

Even in the oldest US history of the homosexual rights movement, the existence of sexual minority teachers has been denied. The biggest reason was the fear that homosexual teachers would be dangerous to their students if they revealed their homosexual identity. However, contrary to this concern, many researchers have found that the presence of homosexual teachers provides a role model for homosexual youths and helps the whole school culture toward diversity (Griffin, 1992; Jennings, 1994; Martinoble, 1999; Sanders & Burke, 1994). In fact, the homosexual prospective teachers in my study wanted to be passionate and dedicated teachers for their students. They also expressed their commitment to all students. They would help young kids to abandon prejudices about typical gender roles and move toward a more inclusive environment for acceptance of all families and a more gender-neutral education.

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