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Crafting a third space: Integrative strategies for implementing critical citizenship education in a standards-based classroom[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In the transformative era of globalization, traditional conceptions of citizenship are challenged by a new idea of citizenship education in which students are empowered to get involved in civic actions designed to promote social justice. This single case study extends scholarship on critical citizenship education by illuminating the experience of a South Korean elementary teacher who effectively implemented the teaching of critical consciousness and social action skills in the standards-based social studies classroom by responding creatively to the mandated standards. The findings highlight three instructional strategies that the teacher created to deal with dilemmas recognized in the practice of critical citizenship education. Practical implications are provided to help teachers, teacher educators, and school leaders craft better opportunities for children to be engaged in critical citizens.

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Introduction

In the transformative era of globalization, traditional conceptions of citizenship are challenged by a new idea of citizenship education in which students are empowered to get involved in civic actions designed to promote social justice. In 2015, the United States, South Korea (Korea, henceforth), and many other nation-states witnessed youth publicizing their concerns about human rights violation and their rights as citizens by engaging in peaceful civil disobedience (Ramirez, Salinas, & Epstein, 2016). The increasing vibrancy of democracy has great implications for educators with education practices that advocate students' ability to critique and challenge social injustices, which should become a significant part of citizenship education (Niemi, 2012).

Despite the efforts to transform citizenship education, in this era dominated by neoliberal education reform, much of what students are experiencing worldwide is still considered a *curriculum of compliance*, leaving little room for developing critical consciousness and social action skills (Leahey, 2014). In the United States, for example, market-driven education reforms have enhanced the alignment of state-level curriculum standards, standardized testing, and school accountability systems, perpetuating the myth that "what is good for the capitalist class is good for the rest of us" (Ross & Vinson, 2013, p.20). This centralized education system has conflicted with grassroots efforts aimed at providing students, teachers, parents, and local community members with great involvement in curriculum development and empowering them to become critical thinkers, decision-makers, and active social agents (Ross, 1996). The creation of Common Core Standards, which were crafted by Gates Foundation consultants, also reveals the intensification of corporate-driven education reforms in

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which students are encouraged to avoid critical thinking, critical consciousness, and pertinent actions and instead fit themselves into a one-size-fits-all national curriculum in order to become competitive (Ross & Vinson, 2013).

In response to the detrimental aspects of capitalism, such as the gradual collapse of public health and education and the epidemic of economic exploitation and cultural marginalization, educators and scholars in the fields of social studies education, multicultural education, and teacher education have broadened the discussion of critical citizenship education with their conceptualization of moral obligation which transcends the corporate-driven aims of education (Grant, 2016). Social reconstructionists and critical pedagogues thrust social studies in the front line of education innovations aimed to develop transformative citizens (Evans, 2010). Even before the start of World War II, a social reconstructionist movement—led by faculty members of Teachers College and gaining popularity in the 1920s—suggested “an activist role for teachers to facilitate social reform” (Lagemann, 2000, p.123). In the field of multicultural education, Sleeter and Grant (2008) suggested *education that is multicultural social justice education*, which centers on empowering students to become critical thinkers and social activists based on an increased consciousness about institutional/structural injustices. As emphasized by these scholars and educators, critical citizenship education serves as a vehicle to resist the privatization of public goods and services and create a socially and economically just society.

Given the imperatives of critical citizenship education, why is it that its implementation has been scant in the reality of teaching and learning? In response to the reality of critical citizenship education, the vast majority of scholarship has focused on explaining the reason for its limited implementation (e.g., Chilcoat & Ligon, 2000; Queen, 2014; Wade, 2004), and suggested that teachers who are committed to teaching critical consciousness and social action skills often encounter the reality that a critical citizenship education approach often contradicts nation-state-level curriculum standards built upon mainstream norms and values, and that the approach is generally inattentive to practical questions of curriculum and instruction, having few models for teaching about diverse forms of oppression (Sibbett, 2016; Young, 2011). Compared to the secondary and college level, the absence of deep examination of what and how teachers teach critical citizenship in classrooms is far more apparent at the elementary level.

Complementing this scholarship, I sought the experience of an elementary teacher who responds creatively to the mandated standards and more effectively engages in curricular reform for critical citizenship education within and around the constraints of a given school system and society. The research questions that prompted the study were: What are the obstacles that the teacher faces in the teaching of critical consciousness and social action skills? What are the specific strategies that the teacher creates to deal with the specific obstacles and teach critical consciousness and social action skills in the standards-based elementary classroom?

Review of literature and theoretical framework

Critical citizenship education against neoliberal education reform

In the increasingly competitive global market, the purpose of public schools in many nation-states has been closely linked with neoliberal education reform efforts designed to increase the economic productivity of the nations by creating within-nation competition. In the United States, since the development of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, reform efforts designed to effectively respond to global competition have created and solidified the curriculum standards, and initiated newer approaches such as Core Curriculum State Standard and Race to the Top. The curriculum standards movement has also compelled us to adopt the myth that it is “a seemingly fair way to distribute institutional rewards” (Leahey, 2014, p.59), diverting attention away from questions of whose curriculum it is and who it benefits.

At the structural level, the development of social studies curriculum standards has also undermined democratic reform efforts to help students become critical thinkers and transformative citizens. The alignment of curriculum standards, the textbook industry, and high-stakes testing in the school accountability system has contributed to the narrowed social studies curriculum, whereby teachers feel pressure to teach to the test and students are expected to memorize facts such as antiseptic portraits of the government (Leahey, 2014). More inherently, curriculum centralization undervalues teachers' and students' rights to make decision about what is worth learning and experiencing and leads them to internalize intellectual and social compliance, leaving little room for developing critical thinking, critical consciousness, and social action.

Critical citizenship education provides a pathway to interrupting the devastating effects of neoliberal education – such as denigrating humanistic approaches to teaching and learning, decontextualizing curricula and teaching, reducing education to the massive accumulation of test scores, and undermining a democratic principle that public schools should serve the public interest rather than those of corporates (Ross & Vinson, 2013)—and realizing the ideals of democratic society, where everyone comes to public spheres as rough equals and participates in decision-making that affects their lives. As a pedagogical approach, it seeks to develop students' active engagement in the democratic ideals of justice equity. Guided by Freire's concept of praxis, critical citizenship education emphasizes the development of critical consciousness combined with that of social action (DeJaeghere, 2009). Specifically, it aims to develop students' ability to critically analyze larger social systems that maintain asymmetrical power relations and utilize individual acts of power to transform such social systems (Silva & Langhout, 2011).

In recent years, the enthusiasm of education reformers for critical citizenship education has not waned. Critical citizenship education has been advocated by numerous educational innovations such as transformative citizenship education

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