

Peer Relations and Tensions in the School Life of Finnish and Korean Students: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Drawing on cross-cultural qualitative research in comprehensive (primary and middle) schools in Finland and Korea, this article explores students' peer relationships as well as tensions and negotiations that occur between student agency and school control. Based on school observations and interviews with students and teachers, this article illuminates the meaning of friendship and patterns of peer interactions among students, both within and between genders. It also reveals how school control and student agency manifest in the issues of space, time, and appearance. The findings imply that students develop gendered identities and roles through peer relations and socialisation in school. This article also interprets sociocultural uniqueness and commonality concerning interdependency and independency observed in peer relationships. Finally, the article illustrates that while control over the appearance of students seems to be different in each country, the students' school lives are tightly controlled by regulations of time and space in both countries.

Keywords: peer relations; school life; cross-cultural; Finland; Korea; gender

Introduction

This article attempts to explore students' peer relations as well as the tensions that exist between student agency and school control. The article focuses on the meanings and patterns of students' peer relations as well as the exercise or restriction of student agency in terms of

space, time, and appearance. In data analysis, particular attention was paid to gender and sociocultural contexts observed in Finnish and Korean schools. For students, peer relations represent a refuge where they can enjoy themselves and feel safe from any hostile emotions that may exist at school. Peer relations also represent an arena where gendered identities and hierarchies are constructed (Tolonen 1998; Lahelma 2002; George 2007; Paetcher 2012). Although they have not been studied as thoroughly as school achievement, peer relationships and the exercise of agency are vital aspects of students' school lives. Students attempt to maximise their agency and secure more time and space for their peer relationships; they are sometimes willing to break official school rules to achieve this. In this paper, agency refers to students' attempts to challenge the systems and authorities that discipline them and make them compliant. Agency also refers to their ability to make and carry out their own decisions in this process (The London Feminist Salon Collective 2004; Gordon 2006). This study utilised empirical qualitative data regarding the students' school lives and analysed it from a cross-cultural qualitative perspective. This approach has not been actively attempted in previous studies. The cross-cultural approach means that analogical incidents in school life are explored in various cultural contexts and the focus is on similar patterns rather than differences. Such an approach helps to challenge the accepted familiarity permeating through schooling in each national context and enhances the sociocultural understanding of Finnish and Korean school life beyond simplified comparability (Lahelma and Gordon 2010; Jørgensen 2015).

Many qualitative and ethnographic studies have sought to uncover the hidden aspects of schooling (see, e.g., Jackson 1968; Willis [1977] 2004; Kim 1997; Paju 2011). Schools are not only places where knowledge and academic credentials are acquired; they are also vital arenas where young people share their values and cultural identities, increasing their agency through informal school life. Using an ethnographic and cross-cultural approach, Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma (2000a) analysed the official and informal school life of Finnish students,

highlighting tensions and negotiations between the students' agency and school control in the context of physical school environment. Kim (1997) elaborated on classroom life, classroom discipline and students' critical perceptions of it in a primary school context, motivated by the critical realisation that field-oriented qualitative or ethnographic research on school life had not been actively conducted in Korea.

Moreover, ethnographic studies have illustrated the segregation and clashes between peer groups based on their differing attitudes towards schooling and their socioeconomic backgrounds (Willis [1977] 2004; Öhrn 2011). Peer relations, gender and student agency have been the interest of several school ethnographies. In particular, Tolonen (1998) and Paechter and Clark (2007) elaborated on the practices of masculinity and femininity as gender constructions through boys' and girls' peer interactions. Gordon (2006) paid attention to the tension between girls' agency and their gender in the context of body-voice-space. Developing this tradition of school ethnography, several studies have employed cross-cultural perspectives. Gordon et al. (2008) focused on the exercise of women's agency in the contexts of schooling and transition to adulthood in Finland and the UK. Hjelmér, Lappalainen and Rosvall (2010) also explored students' agency in the time-space paths of Finnish and Swedish vocational upper secondary education.

School life in Finland and Korea – the institutional and sociocultural contexts

Finnish and Korean schooling, at the level of basic education, has some common institutional and social contexts. Both countries have implemented a nine-year basic education, which is a state-funded compulsory education including educational welfare such as learning materials and school meals. Furthermore, together with the rapid transition towards industrialisation after the Second World War and the Korean War, public education in both countries has proliferated. Education has been considered as a cornerstone for social development as well as an important

stepping stone toward an individual's social mobility (Korean Ministry of Education, n.d.; Simola 2005).

Along with these commonalities, differences can also be found within the basic education systems of both countries. In Finland, it is quite common for students to spend two to three years with the same class teacher and classmates. Contrary to this, classes and class teachers are reallocated annually in Korea. Moreover, the competitive ethos surrounding Korean education is often viewed as a distinctive difference when compared with the egalitarian ethos of Finnish education and society. Korean parents hope for exceptional educational success in their children; this, coupled with the pressure on students to perform well and the prevailing private-education market, constructs negative perceptions of Korean education internationally. However, these competitive signs can also be seen in Finland. Although not as excessive as the Korean education system, in Finland, ninth-grade students tend to recognise the importance of good academic results and feel pressure to enter upper-secondary educational institutions. The selection of students for upper-secondary school is based on their academic records during their basic education period (Finnish National Agency for Education, n.d.); it is also reported that pupil selection and school segregation implicitly occurs within and between urban lower-secondary schools, which is contradictory to the perception of Finland's egalitarian schooling system (Berisha and Seppänen 2017).

Data collection and the process of analysis

For data collection, I selected two comprehensive schools in Finland and two primary schools and two middle schools in Korea. The schools were selected from middle or middle-low socioeconomic districts in order to gain a range of perspectives regarding the ordinary school life of students in urban environments. The selected schools were public schools located in urban districts in southern Finland and Seoul, Korea.

A compressed ethnographic time mode was used for the fieldwork (Jeffrey and Troman 2004) in all six schools. In Finland, I followed one Grade 6 and one Grade 8 class in each of the two comprehensive schools, visiting each school for twelve days between February and May 2016. In Korea, I followed one Grade 6 class in each of the two primary schools and one Grade 9 class in each of the two middle schools. I spent between five and eight days in each school from May to July 2016. The data collected consists of observation notes and interviews with students and teachers. The analysis presented in this article drew on parts of the data generated through this fieldwork.

In each case, I observed school spaces, such as classrooms, corridors, schoolyards, and cafeterias, where ordinary school life unfolds (cf. Hjelmér, Lappalainen, and Rosvall 2010). On the first day of my fieldwork, class teachers in each school arranged a time slot where I would introduce myself (as a researcher) to the students and explain the purpose of my stay. In the Finnish schools, I was reintroduced by the class teachers and called by my first name. By contrast, in the Korean schools, I was reintroduced and addressed as ‘teacher,’ a common title used in Korea to address someone who is older than the other parties (students). In both countries, I tried to establish an identity that was different to the teachers and hoped to be recognised as a non-authoritative adult (cf. Jørgensen 2015). The fieldwork generated a total of 184 A4 pages of field notes, in which all my observations, reflections, and emotions concerning the research process were written down. I reviewed these field notes to find additional interview questions and identify focal points of observation before I moved on to the next fieldwork location.

Furthermore, sixteen Finnish and sixteen Korean students, who were between twelve and fourteen years old (Grade 6, 8, and 9), participated in the fieldwork as student interviewees. Students in Finland were offered their choice of language for the interview; I conducted interviews in Finnish with nine students and in English with the remaining seven. In the Finnish

interviews, questions were directly asked in Finnish by an accompanying research assistant. I also communicated in basic Finnish with all of the Finnish participants to establish a rapport. All of the interviews were semi-structured; they followed the flow of conversation, and I asked improvised questions based on the interviewee's comments, thereby making it more like a conversation. With the Finnish interviews, it was difficult to conduct semi-structured interviews due to my language limitations. However, such a research design was useful to interview with the Finnish pre-teens, who were not sufficiently fluent in English. I also carried out interviews with four Finnish and four Korean class teachers to understand their perspectives and gain insights into the lives of their students in school. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, English, or Korean, and the length of the interviews varied between thirty-four and 117 minutes. All of the data sources complemented and confirmed analyses drawn from each other. At times, however, the data revealed diverse aspects and opinions concerning the same phenomena of school life. By combining and comparing data from the interviews and observations, I tried to approach a qualitative understanding of school life (Jørgensen 2015).

The observations focused on the following aspects: students' behaviour and interactions with friends and peers; teaching-learning practices; interactions between students and teachers; school rules and school decision-making processes; the structure of school spaces and their use regarding daily routines and events. In the interviews, I concentrated on obtaining further explanations and perceptions in relation to the aforementioned topics. School life is inherently complex, even though aspects of school life may be taken for granted by those who are accustomed to schooling and schools. During the Finnish and Korean fieldwork and data analysis, I employed a cross-cultural qualitative approach to analyse this complexity and challenge the familiarity of ordinary school life (Lahelma and Gordon 2010).

To understand and analyse the complexity of everyday school life, an analytical differentiation between the 'official,' 'informal,' and 'physical' layers of school life was

employed (Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma 2000a; Paju 2011). The official school encapsulates teaching-learning practices, curriculums, pedagogy, and formal hierarchies such as rules and tests. The informal school encompasses the unofficial interactions among students, among teachers, and between teachers, students, and other staff members. It also deals with the hierarchies among student groups and youth cultures at school. The physical school represents time, space, movement, sound, and voice. The physical layer regulates the use of time and school space, and the movement of students in order to create a controlled environment.

Initially, the data was coded in a theory-driven way using the three aforementioned layers of school life. Although these three layers were intertwined, the distinctions between them were helpful in analysing the complex data arising from my field notes and interviews. In the second stage of coding, which was mainly data-driven, I discovered that ‘friends and peers’ is a meaningful and vital aspect of students’ school lives; this has also been illuminated in previous studies (Lahelma 2002; George 2007). Subsequently, I mainly analysed the data of the informal school and partially intertwined data from the official and physical schools in order to focus on the peer relationships of students. At this stage, I also identified emergent themes: the meaning of friendship; how girls and boys interact in their peer groups; girls and boys play different roles; and students seek agency in space and time. In the third stage of coding, I closely examined the coded data to find patterns from a cross-cultural perspective. I synthesised the analyses by combining and relating the data from Finnish and Korean schools. Using this cross-cultural approach, I generated two themes: Finnish and Korean students interact with their peers in individualistic and collectivistic cultures, and a competitive atmosphere is not distinctive among students; student agency in appearance is manifested, however it is regulated differently by school rules in each sociocultural context.

The meaning of friendship

For most of the students, ‘hanging around’ with their friends was their favourite aspect of school life, and this motivated them to attend school. Several students said that they liked meeting their friends and learning about interesting subjects at school, and others mentioned that they did not feel interested in learning at school but still enjoyed spending time with their friends. During lessons and break times, students shared their feelings and stories with others, through face-to-face interaction and communication on digital devices. The topics of these conversations varied from hobbies and complaints about homework and teachers to emotionally laden topics such as quarrels with parents and various incidents in peer relationships.

Paju (2011) indicated the contradiction inherent in school life: the official school evaluates students as individuals, but within informal school life, students are afraid of being left out. The fear of being left out was also seen in the case of Anna, a high-achieving and confident-looking girl.¹ Anna did not enjoy skiing and spent sports day by herself because her best friend was absent.

Anna has been looking down all day today. She sat next to some other girls after lunch and used her smartphone. She said that her close classmate, Roosa, had decided not to come skiing today after her dentist’s appointment in the morning, and Anna didn’t know this beforehand (Field notes, Finland).

Similarly, Roosa expressed how she felt when she was alone and when she was with friends.

Roosa: I feel kind of nervous when some people stare at me, or if you do something, they stare at you, so you have to look like normal and behave. [...] It’s kind of stressful. [...] It’s kind of fun if you go with friends, you would feel okay (Interview, Finland).

¹ All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

The desire of students to connect with their friends and feel safe was most visible at school cafeterias during lunchtime, when many elements of peer relationships, hidden during official school time, tended to appear.

Class teacher: A basis of looking for friends is that, anyway, one doesn't want to be alone physically, to eat alone and not to talk with anybody. [...] I think making friends is essential for survival. It would be nice if kids would sit down in the cafeteria in sequence because the space is narrow [...] but they never sit like that. [they sit with their group] (Interview, Korea).

Some interviewees indicated that certain students wanted to be on their own. However, the majority of students appeared to avoid being alone at school by being part of a peer group. This could be interpreted that friendships, manifested by the protection and solidarity of such peer groups, are crucial social capital which helps students to cope with potential conflicts occurring in the relationship ecosystem (cf. Simmons [2002] 2011). Even though friendships were a source of emotional safety and mutual support for the students, they would also become a source of stress and conflict. The ambivalent aspects of these relationships – from emotional and academic support to conflicts surrounding power, hierarchy, and exclusion – were heard and observed within girls' and boys' peer groups.

How girls and boys interact in their peer groups

The belief that peer interactions are homogeneous according to gender should be challenged (Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma 2000a). Thus, it is dangerous to assume that all girls or all boys socialise in gender-divided peer groups. Some girls would spend break time playing football with their male classmates, and one of these girls was the boys' best friend. Likewise, there was a peer group that consisted of six girls and one boy, although the boy only joined occasionally (Field notes, Finland). In addition, Minho sometimes spent his free time accompanying female students as they shopped for cosmetics (Interview, Korea). Nevertheless, the importance of same-gender peer relationships clearly emerged from the data.

Many girls spent their break times with members of their peer group, who were their best friends at school. Female students were often more physically demonstrative than their male peers in expressing strong bonds of friendship and sharing their emotions with their close friends. They ‘linked arms and strolled together down the corridors’ (Field notes, Korea). In Korean schools, girls also went to the toilet together, even though some of them did not need to go there for its intended purpose. In the school toilets, two rows of cubicles were typically arranged across a corridor in the middle. For many Korean schoolgirls, the girls’ toilets were ‘informally official’ chatting places during break time. Similarly, two Finnish schoolgirls converted a classroom into a private space for sharing personal emotions by talking sneakily during a lesson.

Hanna and Leena move their desks and chairs and sit there, near the back wall, giggling and chatting in low voices. [...] The teacher stops his explanation and suddenly looks at Hanna and Leena with a smile. [...] They quickly put the phone back in the bag and keep talking in low voices. The teacher calls Hanna’s name and asks her a question, and she answers. After that, Hanna takes the phone out again and holds it underneath her desk and looks at it with Leena. They chat affectionately with smiling faces (Field notes during a math lesson, Finland).

Leena, a high-achieving student in math, invested her energy in maintaining an emotional bond with her best friend, Hanna. Leena often prioritised their relationship over solving high-level math problems. It seemed that Leena and other girls sometimes faced a dilemma between the emotional demands of their friendships and the demands of school success (cf. George 2007).

The Korean and Finnish schoolgirls performed rituals of ‘strolling and talking,’ which implied intimacy and care, the culturally internalised versions of femininity (cf. Gulbrandsen 2003; George 2007; Paechter and Clark 2007). These daily rituals appeared to be the dominant culture among girls; thus, Bora, a middle-school girl who ‘used to live in the playground’ in her primary-school days (Interview, Korea), seemed to adapt to the culture of strolling and

talking, even though it constrained her physical mobility and the use of the school space (cf. Paechter and Clark 2007).

However, the emotionally supportive aspects of the girls' friendships would turn into the other side of the relationships at times. Several girls mentioned that they felt more stressed due to their friends rather than their schoolwork. Unspoken and unreconciled emotions among girls' peer relationships were heard in the interviews.

Jimin: I used to get along well with Daeun before, but I fell out with her. One day we played dodgeball in the playground. [...] Daeun is very close to Soobin, so she wanted to play dodgeball with Soobin. We used rock-paper-scissors to decide teams; Soobin got on Team A, and I got on the same team, but Daeun was supposed to be on Team B. Daeun asked me to let her be on the same team with Soobin, just once. She held me with her hand, but I shook it off, because I fell out with her and was irritated as well. But then she seemed to feel bad because of it. [...] [sigh] Daeun, Soobin, and three other girls hang around together. They are popular in my class. [...] After that, Soobin and another girl asked me if I'd been insulting Daeun. I hadn't done it, but it seems that somebody spread the rumour.

JY: How do you get along with Daeun these days?

Jimin: So-so. I feel upset [...] I met Soobin on the street since then. [...] I said hello to her first, but she ignored me (Interview, Korea).

One sociocultural assumption behind the covert aggression of female friendships is that they are socialised to conduct themselves as 'good girls' who should be kind to others and keep all aggression invisible in situations of conflict. As appeared in Jimin's case, the popular girls employed indirect tactics, such as spreading a rumour, in order to highlight Jimin's moral defects. They also excluded her by using their hierarchical power within the peer group (cf. Simmons [2002] 2011; George 2007).

Meanwhile, the bond that is created through physical contact and the conflicts that accompany hierarchical power were also indispensable elements of boys' peer relationships. The excerpt below describes how Minhó and his friend utilise 'manly' physical pranks to strengthen their friendship.

Minho: We trip up each other while walking along corridors. [...] We get to know the trick, how to make [each other] feel bad and use it [...] make each other tripped (Interview, Korea).

Likewise, in the following episode, the boys' interactions imply the construction of an informal hierarchy through the performance of hegemonic masculinity.

While everybody is changing their clothes in the changing rooms, several boys who came in first hang around in the gym. [...] Alex hides himself inside large curtains on the walls. Four boys rush over and block Alex from escaping from the curtains. Alex tries to escape from the other side, then the boys rush over and block him again. Alex and the boys repeat this behaviour three times until Alex finally escapes from the curtains (Field notes during a physical education lesson, Finland).

For the boys, their bodies seemed to be an arena where they could manifest their masculine identities and construct or conform to hierarchies in their peer-relation ecosystem. Showing their physical capabilities by performing pranks could be interpreted as a collective sociocultural process where they construct their hegemonic masculinity as part of their identity (cf. Tolonen 1998). However, there were also several boys who displayed 'non-masculine' or 'feminine' traits. During breaks, some boys maintained close physical contact by putting their arms around each other's shoulders or sitting on one small chair together and keeping their bodies close to each other. Minsu, a sporty boy, made a heart shape with his arms and showed it to his class teacher in a cute way in order to negotiate his request with the teacher. Jihoon fed his friend by picking up his food with chopsticks and putting it close to his friend's mouth when they brought their lunch due to the strike of school food-service employees (Field notes, Korea). Juho respected the official school by actively participating in lessons, even though his friend sitting next to him, who was a rebellious and inattentive student, showed Juho his mobile phone during math lessons (Field notes, Finland). The informal positions of Minsu, Jihoon, and Juho among their peers appeared to be stable. They always had friends at school and seemed to stand well with their male and female peers.

McCormark and Anderson (2010) suggest that patterns of hetero-masculinity are diversifying, partly due to the rise of metrosexuality in popular culture, and thus boys are able to express conventionally 'feminine' behaviours without being bullied. In the same vein, the pattern of Minsu, Jihoon, and Juho's interactions and expressions sometimes transgressed the range of 'hegemonic masculinity' (cf. Paechter 2012). Previous studies (Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma 2000b; George 2007) have argued for the necessity of dispelling the gendered myth that characterises female relationships as bitchy, jealous, exclusive, and malicious and characterises male relationships as simple and accessible. In this study, the boys and girls shared their private emotions through physical contact, and conflicts and matters of hierarchy arose when they interacted with their peer groups. However, the construction and sustenance of these power relations appeared somewhat differently, according to gender.

Girls and boys play different roles

The Finnish and Korean students seemed to experience school life in the twenty-first century, where women's rights are seemingly enhanced. My field notes documented cases of several girls assuming leadership roles, either in the official school – as a student council member, chairperson of their class, or top achiever – or in the informal school – by organising a class party or breaking school rules. However, gender norms were still present at school and revived through peer interactions and socialisation led by adults. Although diverse and implicit compared with traditional norms, gender-divided roles were constructed and consolidated when students interacted in mixed-gender circumstances. For instance, girls' roles as caregivers emerged from the field notes and interviews, where small-group activities in lessons were described.

Yuri says, 'Teacher, please don't send Jiho to our group. If Jiho is with Dohyun, they chat all the time [without doing the group work]'. But Jiho ends up in the same group as Yuri. Yuri asks 'What would you like to do, guys?' to her group members. They decide to rewrite the

lyrics of a song. [...] Two girls, Yuri and Yoonah, go to the teacher's computer and search for the original lyrics of the song. Yuri comes back to her seat and says to the other kids, 'Hey, do it quickly!' (Field notes during a Korean lesson, Korea)

Veera: I, for example, have to always do everything. Usually I am in the same group with the boys, and they just mess around. But usually we get really good feedback (Interview, Finland).

As seen from the preferences of the students to sit and chat with classmates of the same gender, this mixed-gender group-composition was not 'natural' for them. It is interesting to note that many teachers organised mixed-gender pairs or small groups during lessons and that gender balance was often emphasised as an important criterion: 'If boys sit with boys and girls with girls, it doesn't help the lesson to proceed' (Class teacher, interview, Korea). Implementation of group activities and consideration of gender balance was more noticeable among Korean teachers. In the aforementioned excerpts, girls seemed to internalise the 'feminine' identity and, therefore, met their teacher's expectations by helping other members (cf. Hey and Bradford 2004, 697). The teachers' emphasis on gender balance is reminiscent of the social recognition of gender roles, where girls are expected to be more industrious and responsible, and boys are expected to be more playful and rebellious (cf. Paechter and Clark 2007; Gordon et al. 2008). Meanwhile, the behaviour of the girls can also be interpreted as a desire to fulfil the demands of school success. Even though Yuri and Veera attended schools in middle-low socioeconomic districts and were not achievement-oriented students, they might have fulfilled the role of self-regulating and responsible learners, driven by neoliberal education policies and social ethos.

In relation to gender roles, my observations also included a photographer who visited one school to conduct a photo shoot for the students' graduation album; the photographer suggested that the girls pose in a traditionally feminine manner (e.g. putting their hands together neatly on their knees). Most of the girls followed his instructions. However, Jisu posed by raising her forearm and clenching her fist. Her classmates smiled and laughed loudly at her, although their smiles and laughter did not contain any nuances of teasing or mocking. Her class

teacher neither espoused Jisu by making a counter-comment to the photographer nor advised Jisu to change her pose to be more feminine. All of the teachers at the school participated in the photo shoot; the male teachers wore formal suits, and they all had a similar masculine haircut; their hair was not dyed or permed. The female teachers' clothes were more varied, but all were quite formal and feminine. Their hair tended to be bobbed or long.

Jisu exercised her agency when she attempted to 'perform her gender' in a way that was comfortable for her. However, the photographer seemed to think that her 'performed gender' did not correspond to her 'real gender' and strongly suggested that she comply with cultural norms, where a gendered binary-distinction is constructed, with males posing in a masculine way and females posing in a feminine way (cf. Butler 1988, [1990] 2008). During my observations, it appeared that Jisu's class teacher and classmates accepted her tomboy character in daily school life. However, for Jisu, peers and adults who espoused her identity were scarce. In the photo shoot, her classmates and teachers performed their gender in a way that did not transgress any cultural norms. This episode denotes how gender roles are constructed by socialisation at school and influence student agency.

In summary, in spite of the fact that the girls empowered themselves by adopting important roles and making their voices heard in both the official and informal schools, they also performed or felt pressure to perform feminine roles in school life. This implies that twenty-first-century schools may still function as places where traditional gender roles are covertly reproduced.

Somewhere between together and alone, but not competitive

Students reach adulthood in school through an official and informal school life that reflects the dominant culture of society (Gulbrandsen 2003). In my observations, the teenage students sometimes resisted, ridiculed, or made fun of these social expectations, nevertheless, these

sociocultural elements were reflected in their school lives. For example, Korean students displayed interdependent behaviour. The field notes below demonstrate that food is one area in which the interdependent and collectivistic culture of Korea is clearly manifested. The students' class teacher suggested that they bring ingredients to make *Bibimbap* (mixed vegetable rice) due to the strike of food-service employees in the school. The students interacted closely with their small-group members and close friends while preparing and eating Bibimbap.

In Minsu's group, three boys put all the Bibimbap ingredients into a big bowl and mix them using one hand each, wearing plastic gloves. Then Minsu and another boy eat the Bibimbap straight from the bowl using their own spoons although another boy gives them disposable plates, which had been mentioned by their class teacher as part of the preparation. In Yeona's group, six girls eat Bibimbap together using two big bowls. Yeona's friend from another class comes over to her. With one hand, she scoops up a spoonful of the Bibimbap using her spoon and puts it into her friend's mouth. Then she puts another hand close to her friends' chin so that her friend doesn't drop rice on her clothes (Field notes during lunchtime in a home classroom, Korea).

Other situations that revealed interdependent peer relations arose in the Korean schools when some students would ask their friends to carry their books and pencil cases to the next classroom / their home classroom when they went to the school nurse's office / had to stay to listen to comments from teachers after the lesson. However, the Finnish students carried their own things in their school bags during break time or at lunchtime; episodes of food-sharing or feeding scenes, similar to the aforementioned Korean cases, were not observed in the Finnish schools. These cultural differences were also reflected in the structure of the toilets at the schools. In all of the Korean schools, only multiple-toilet rooms were found, whereas in the Finnish schools, single-toilet rooms separated by a thick door and walls were more prevalent.

The relatively interdependent or independent peer relations may be interpreted as reflecting the more collectivistic Korean culture and the more individualistic Finnish culture;

Korean youths are expected to develop more intimate cooperation skills, whereas Finnish youths are raised as individualistic, self-reliant persons (Triandis 2001; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010). Furthermore, I infer that the educational welfare system is related to this interdependent or independent ethos. Although most of the learning materials are freely provided in primary and middle schools, the Korean students borrowed food and utensils from their classmates when they forgot to bring materials from home for their home economics lesson; I also observed that Korean students were encouraged to teach each other in some lessons (e.g., math) where more frequent individual guidance was needed. Meanwhile, Finnish students did not need to borrow food or utensils from each other because these were supplied in the home economics classrooms. Moreover, Finnish classes were sometimes split into two groups and some lessons taken according to different timetables; therefore, the students could receive their teachers' individual guidance more often.

In fact, the collectiveness reflected in the peer relations of Korean students and the relative emphasis on independence in Finnish school life seemed different from the typical images of Korean 'competition hell' and Finnish 'educational utopia' in relation to each country's educational climate (Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014). An academically competitive atmosphere among peers was not seen among the Korean and Finnish students in this study. During breaks on the day of term-end exams, many Korean students studied together, asking and explaining expected questions to their peers and friends. The Finnish students also showed their homework to friends who had not done it beforehand. However, many of the students were conscious of their own and their peers' school achievements.

Olli: I'm not that good at school [...] my friends are like nine [out of ten] [...] pretty good numbers (Interview, Finland).

Minho: The ones who have high school marks are reliable (Interview, Korea).

Subin: If somebody isn't good at studying but just likes fighting [...] then I could be badly affected, so it's good to keep away from him (Interview, Korea).

School grades, the most valued capability at school, seemed to influence Olli's self-perception in relation to his friends, and they were a relevant standard of evaluating peers for Minh and Subin. An interesting point to note here is that the three students were boys, all achieving different grades, and their schools were located in either middle or middle-low socioeconomic districts. Unlike the macho working-class boys of previous studies (Willis [1977] 2004; Tolonen 1998), who deemed displaying academic aspirations as being nerdy and girly, the three boys seemed to think that academic ability did not harm boys' masculinities.

In sum, in spite of the variations in terms of gender and sociocultural contexts, establishing and maintaining relationships with friends and peers appeared to be the most enjoyable and critical task for students. Meanwhile, most of the students interviewed perceived that, in their school lives, 'catching two rabbits' – studying and friends – is crucial. This leads to tensions and negotiations between the official and informal schools.

Students seek agency in school space and time

In contemporary life, perhaps, the most powerful ideology is that of the future; Finnish and Korean students were not exempt from the pressures and expectations placed on them, and that they place on themselves, in the name of a yet-to-come future. Not only high-achieving model pupils but also many other students perceived that succeeding at school and improving their marks, or at least accomplishing their school work were important. Many of the participants interviewed connected their thoughts with such future directions as high schools, universities and finally entering their dream careers.

On the other hand, these students were also adolescents who lived their lives with an attitude of *carpe diem* (cf. Park 2002). Tensions appeared strikingly when students sought to expand their territory of the informal school by maximising their agency. In spite of the diverse practices implemented in each of the Korean and Finnish schools, there was one universal

feature: The students' use of time, space, and their physical movements were constantly regulated by timetables and school rules – when to be, where to be, and how to behave – all of which made the schools 'like school' (cf. Foucault [1975] 2003; Park 2002; Hjelmér, Lappalainen, and Rosvall 2010). For instance, during my observations in the Finnish schools, I noticed the technics of micro-penalty reflected in the web interface Wilma. On Wilma, information concerning students' time (lateness, absence, etc.) and behaviour (disturbance, active participation, etc.) was marked and delivered to students and their guardians. It seemed to represent a form of digital surveillance technology (cf. Foucault 1984). While adapting proficiently to the school rules, students simultaneously maximised their leeway by seizing opportunities within the closely woven time-space regulations (cf. Jackson 1968; Willis [1977] 2004; Hjelmér, Lappalainen, and Rosvall 2010). In one Finnish school, where students had to leave school buildings, stay in the school yard and be supervised by teachers during breaks, one student exercised his agency and skilfully sidestepped this rule:

JY: Have you ever broken some rules?

Matti: Yes, a couple of times [...] you have to stay outside during breaks, but I have been, you know, in toilet rooms, and you, like, lock yourself there, nobody can come in. [...] I didn't want to go out. It was really cold (Interview, Finland).

Usually, the eyes of supervision are invisible, but students are also positioned to be seen. In the episode above, however, Matti exercised his agency by utilising the spatial characteristics of the toilet, fully sealed in walls and a door, and then made himself invisible in order to escape hierarchical surveillance and cold weather (cf. Foucault 1984).

In the following episode, the students banded together and forced their teacher to end the lesson earlier so that they could get full mileage out of their lunch break.

Half of the lesson had been spent posing for pictures for the graduation album.

Teacher: I didn't say that you should not eat lunch. I would like to continue the lesson until 12:25, but then your lunchtime would be shortened too much, so I will continue until 12:15.

Some kids buzz and make a noise. Practice of the main vocabularies in the chapter begins.

Right after finishing the word-practice, three students speak out.

Student1: Ah, it's over! Student2: Ah, eight minutes left! Student3: Ah, it's lunchtime!

At 12:10, the music signalling lunchtime plays through the speakers in the classroom.

Student4: Ooh, it's 12:15!

Teacher: Just a moment, let's read this sentence.

Students read the sentence after the teacher, raising their voices. [...] Right after the lesson ends, they open the back door and rush towards the corridor shouting 'Ooh!' (Field notes during an English lesson, Korea).

The students were usually positioned as objects of control; however, as shown in the aforementioned examples, they also positioned themselves as agents who extended the informal school by reconstructing space and time. The relationship between control and agency was far more complicated than just obedience and resistance (cf. Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma 2000a). The students exercised a variety of strategies when they faced limits to their agency: negotiating using cute or humorous behaviour, sidestepping, being insincerely obedient, utilising the maximum flexibility permitted by a situation or a teacher, besides challenging and resisting. The students were well-versed in 'the art of negotiation.'

Youthful agency and the regulation of appearance

All of the schools implemented school rules that regulated students' movements in a disciplined way; however, there were few rules that regulated the appearance of students in the Finnish schools. I observed a variety of dress and hair styles among Finnish students, from skinny jeans to dyed hair. In the beginning of my Finnish fieldwork, I showed the students a short film about the school lives of Korean middle-school students. Many students paid attention to the school uniforms of the Korean students as they were quite different to their own. Jussi and Oskari connected dress with their agency and individuality.

JY: What do you think of wearing school uniforms?

Sini: The uniform looks cute.

JY: Then who prefers your own clothes? Why do you think so?

Jussi: I wanna be myself.

Oskari: Everybody can be different so [they] have different styles (Field notes, Finland).

By contrast, appearance was a striking case of tension between control and agency in the Korean schools. Pupils' appearances were supervised according to regulations prohibiting the use of cosmetics. These regulations were strengthened in the middle schools where the students had to wear their school uniforms correctly and hair-dyeing was restricted. Through these rules, the middle schools disciplined the bodies of adolescents to be 'student-like.' The following episode shows how a student ran a risk for exercising her agency against the school rules that defined the normality and abnormality of students' appearance and clothing:

Yeona: I have broken [the rules of] make-up and clothes. Piercing is not allowed, either. Rings and bracelets are forbidden, but I have worn them.

JY: Mhm. By the way, what did you do with your school uniform?

Yeona: I had the hem of [my] skirts cut down. And I had my hair dyed. Once.

JY: Mhm. Do you also get penalty points if you have your hair dyed?

Yeona: Yes, two points. [...] Piercings or cosmetics are taken away. [...] [Some teachers] just take them away. [...] People who do that do it again even after getting points, so [the teachers] take them away and return them when we graduate (Interview, Korea).

This excerpt implies that the school regulations employed a meticulous level of coercion that partitioned the student body into several measurable units. The regulations also differentiated, compared, and excluded individual students. By doing so, the power of normality, on one hand, imposed homogeneity on students; on the other hand, it individualised them (cf. Foucault 1984). In this process, students shifted from bodies of agency to bodies of docility, which were optimised to produce efficient learning outcomes (cf. Foucault [1975] 2003; Park 2002).

However, a chasm existed between this bodily discipline and students such as Yeona, who believed their appearance to be a realm of agency and individuality.

When compared with boys, girls often found themselves in more complicated situations of agency regarding their appearance, mainly due to conflicting social messages. Outside of school, teenage girls' bodies are sexually objectified and commercialised by K-pop (Korean pop music) idol fashion (Kim 2011). This implies that the gaze of power is cast in ambivalent ways on the bodies of female students in Korea, where the degree of power varies according to age, gender, and social position (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010). Their bodies seemed to be battlefields, where their agency as an expression of 'individual freedom' (Bora, interview, Korea) and the conservative and collectivistic school rules prohibiting girls' bodies from being sexually appealing, along with a youth culture influenced by a sexually-objectifying pop culture (as shown in the student talent show – Field notes, Korea), were all entwined.

Discussion

This article sought to understand the meaning and pattern of students' peer relations and the tensions and negotiations that appeared in the process of exercising their agency within or against control. Undoubtedly, the students placed friendships at the centre of school life. Both boisterous and obedient students found joy at school when they could extend the informal school over the tightly woven official school by secretly chatting with their friends or breaking rules. However, the meaning of friendship and peer relations was ambivalent for both genders. The girls' emotional bonds and conflicts were heard and observed, as previously depicted (Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma 2000b; George 2007). Conflicts and hierarchies also existed among boys' peer relations, although the pattern of hierarchy and exclusion seemed to be more physically oriented.

As for the interactions within and between girls and boys, the Finnish and Korean students seemed to develop to some extent gendered identities and roles through peer relations and socialisation at school. Concepts of femininity and masculinity were constructed and strengthened through patterns of peer interactions during break times. Gendered roles were expected in the mixed-gender small-group work and demonstrated in the photo shoot episode, both of which were organised by adults. Although Finland and other Nordic nations are considered to be 'feminine' cultural areas where the emotional roles of men and women overlap (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010), gendered patterns appeared among the teenage students in both Finland and Korea. Several Finnish researchers have indicated that some teachers have different expectations for how boys and girls use their bodies and voices at school. These researchers have also noticed that a gendered division exists in upper-secondary vocational education and labour markets (Gordon 2006; Gordon et al. 2008; Hjelmér, Lappalainen, and Rosvall 2010). These gender norms are beneath the surface nowadays, but they still persist. The accepted dichotomous notions about gender need to be further problematised from sociological and ethnographic perspectives by elaborating on the process of how gendered patterns permeate peer cultures and how socialisation influences students' identities and agency. School life could be enhanced if the school functions as a place where students encounter diverse roles and identities, recognise that there are diverse ways of doing a boy or girl, and realise that transgressing stereotypical gender roles is perfectly acceptable (Paechter 2012). This issue is closely related to how young people grow to view themselves positively and establish a culture of gender equality.

The students acquired social skills which were somewhere between 'along and together' through diverse occasions in schooling. The socially acquired balance between independency and interdependency in peer relationships appeared somewhat differently in Finnish and Korean schools. Moreover, an academically competitive spirit was not distinct in peer

relationships of either the Korean or Finnish students, although many of them were conscious of their own and others' school results and connected the results to their self-perception and social status among their peers. An interesting point to note is that the Finnish students, whose social climate is less competitive, had more independent peer relationships; meanwhile, the Korean students, who live in a competitive society, had more interdependent interactions with their peers. According to the Korean students and teachers, the stress experienced by students was mainly linked to out-of-school circumstances: private education (cramming schools or private tutoring) and parents' expectations regarding educational success. For them, school was an enjoyable place where they could escape from such burdens and hang out with their friends. It can be assumed that the sociocultural emphasis on self-reliant and cooperative attitudes is related to the educational welfare system. Based on my field notes, I interpret that the educational welfare system in Finland encouraged the students to interact more independently, whereas the Korean students occasionally encountered cases where they had to deal with a lack of individual teaching and the preparation of lesson materials by relying on the interdependency among peers.

These findings and interpretations highlight the complexity of sociocultural and institutional contexts surrounding educational phenomena, which cannot be explained by dichotomous comparisons. While recognising the competitive social ethos in which Korean school life and peer relationships are set (Cho and Kim 2009), I also argue that the experiences of students in specific sociocultural contexts are more than 'educational utopia' versus 'competition hell' (Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014).

As for student agency and school control, it is noteworthy that students who expressed themselves through their appearance were considered normal in the Finnish context but problematic in the Korean context. Even though the self-expression of both Finnish and Korean students seemed to be closely linked with individualism and the globalised fashion industry,

the traits of power shown in the school regulations appeared differently according to the sociocultural contexts of each country. Korean schools could be understood to hold more aspects of a disciplined society where students' bodies are elaborately controlled for productive learning, while Finnish schools seem to have been shifting towards a self-governing society where freedom and responsibility of learners are highlighted by neoliberal education policies (cf. Foucault (1975] 2003; Han 2015). Despite these differing sociocultural contexts, the school life of Finnish and Korean students was tightly controlled by time-space regulations, and teachers expended considerable energy preventing the informal school from invading the official school. As some student interviewees implied, a solution for conflict-reduction would be enabling rather than prohibiting. These solutions include supporting students' agency in making school rules in more democratic ways, such as discussion and voting; using more interactive and participatory lesson methods; and providing sufficient time and diverse indoor-outdoor spaces for breaks.

Tension and negotiation between control and agency is a growth process in which young people move from reliance and conformity to autonomy and independence. School life could be improved if the students' desire to increase their agency is understood and encouraged by social recognition and an accepting school culture.

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