

## Teaching in the Era of COVID-19: From Narratives of a 25 Years of Experienced In-Service Korean Elementary School Teacher

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### Abstract

This study will examine a teacher's educational belief change in the situation of COVID-19. The participant of this study is a Korean teacher who hold 25 years of teaching experience. For the data collection, 5 times of interviews, 1 diary entry, 1 letter to her students were collected. In addition to this, researchers observed the participant's daily routine in the online teaching context, more than 4 times. With these data, the teacher's narrative has been studied. The Korean teacher experienced many difficulties. Though she was veteran teacher, it was something difficult to cope with. However, she tried to find the best for her students. There were colleagues and teacher communities, and she interacted with them. Her journey in the COVID-19 situation represented that there were no changes in her teacher belief. Preferably, it was the chance to achieve teacher agency and reconstructing and firming her teacher beliefs.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, teacher beliefs, narratives, teaching experience, teacher agency, South Korea

## INTRODUCTION

Since the 20<sup>th</sup> of January when the first case of the COVID-19 infection has reported, the education system in many countries has been under a crisis of finding exit from the pandemic situation. As the distancing among people should be remained as secure, many countries started to conduct 'online education', as the education also should be sustained (KICE, 2020). However, the lack of technical and pedagogical preparation for the successful implementation of the online education, schools and the actual teaching context; classrooms, has been in a chaotic situation (Mäkelä et al., 2020).

In the case of the America, whilst the COVID-19 was spreading, schools in districts were closed according to the countermeasure of their government, then online education; 'Learn at home' in New York and 'Coronavirus-Distance Learning' in California (KEDI, 2020), was conducted. In the situation of Korea, the support from the Korean government for conducting online classes was not sufficient, and it directly influenced not only to each provincial office of education (POE, hereafter), but also local schools' way of

conducting online classes (Lim et al., 2020). The teachers at Korean elementary, secondary, and high schools were not familiar with the online teaching. So, as the way to support the teachers, some universities in Korea that has experience of online teaching started to devolve the strategies of online teaching (Byeon, 2020). In this way, the face-to-face education has been drastically shifted to the online education (Mulenga & Marbán, 2020; Sintema, 2020).

Lim et al. (2020) studied the status of Korean elementary schools' online education in the COVID-19 situation. Though online teaching became the burden for Korean teachers, they were adapting and cooperating with the situation well, overall. In addition to this, the satisfaction result was appeared higher with teachers who hold more teaching experience. The support of the government or the POE was shown as important. But at the same time, the importance of the role and belief of teachers was also very significant, too. In this educational crisis, teachers are bound to be confused about their usual educational beliefs or identities. For teachers, the COVID-19 crisis was the moment that brought all-the-sudden-changes in the way they have been taught. Also, the condition for teaching was totally

### Contribution to the literature

- This study clearly shows the COVID-19's influence on schools, and reactions of Korean educational institutes and teachers.
- The power to overcome the facing difficulties was from the teacher self and colleagues in the practice, whilst the political support was not sufficient.
- This study would show the journey of a Korean teacher's teacher agency achievement and teacher belief re-affirmation procedure.

new and limited. As the situation has been allocated to the whole world, all these differences were obvious and there was no possibility to cope with. According to this situation, various unforeseen effects has revealed. Finding out how the teachers felt in this educational crisis, and what changes might have occurred in their educational beliefs and identities, is a very necessary study to understand the teachers' life and further preparation for the future education. The COVID-19 is ongoing phenomenon, now. The online teaching and learning seems to be going smoothly. However, does the education could be evaluated as conducted well from the insiders of the school – the teachers? The research questions for this study are:

- Q1. How was the Korean elementary school teacher's possessing teacher belief before the COVID-19?
- Q2. Is there any changes of her teacher belief between 'before' and 'in' the COVID-19?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Teacher Beliefs of Elementary School Teachers

The belief decides one's actual act. As teachers' behaviour directly affects to the effectiveness of education, possessing desirable beliefs as teachers is very important. Teachers' educational beliefs influence to the process of deciding perception, judgment, and action throughout the teaching process. The types of belief could be vary in relation to teaching itself and the reflective issues related to learners (e.g., beliefs about inclusion, about diversity), knowledge (epistemological beliefs), teaching components (beliefs about the curriculum, beliefs about the importance of learning content, beliefs about instructional media, teaching strategies, evaluation, etc.), parents, instructional context, and organisational dimensions (Tondeur et al., 2009). These teachers' beliefs influence the decision-making of teaching activities as a way of recognising teaching and learning activities (Bae, 1990).

Teachers' educational beliefs had been divided into two dimensions earlier. Kerlinger and Kaya (1959) conducted research to assess 'traditional beliefs' and 'progressive beliefs' on education. They argued that teachers adopting traditional beliefs, are applying high emphasis on discipline. The teachers also tend to consider the subject matter as the utmost, and

emphasises moral standards. In the case of teachers adopting progressive beliefs concentrate on individual differences, social learning, and the interests of the pupil. According to Woolley et al. (2004)'s recent study, teachers' educational beliefs were divided into 'traditional educational beliefs', 'traditional management beliefs', and 'constructivist educational beliefs'. Though they divided the teachers' beliefs into three dimensions, their categorisation could be divided as two dimensions of 'traditional' educational beliefs and 'constructivist' educational beliefs as Kerlinger and Kaya (1959) argued.

Teachers who hold traditional belief in education are rather instructive in their teaching (Niederhauser et al., 1999; Stofflett & Stoddart 1994 cited in Sang et al., 2012). In their belief, teaching is about transferring information to the students, and therefore, they pay high attention in offering instructions, that is, teachers speak, and students listen. This places students into a passive position in the classroom, and the expected role for the students is a simple task management given from the teacher (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992). On the contrary, teachers who hold constructivist belief in education pay more attention on guiding students. Learning is new experience. Once new experience has input, students reconstruct their exiting knowledge. Teachers with constructivist belief, therefore, determine their role rather less active compare to the traditional educational belief holders, that is, teachers more tend to support and students do. In their classroom, students are expected to take the active main role and they remain as supporters of students' activities (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). According to the stance of a teacher, or the shared stance of group of teachers' on teacher belief and learning would influence to their teaching and therefore influence to the process of knowledge construction of students in their classroom. Prawat (1992) argued that a strong belief in teaching and learning, that is, teachers' educational beliefs, also affect to the way of implementation of education policy as teachers' educational beliefs are bound to have a lot of influence on their teaching activities according to their perception and interpretation of a policy and its implementation into their classroom. This belief is also about their own judgment of "capability to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 2005, p. 307) of the self. This is the matter of

“self-efficacy” (Ehren, 2021, p. 63), and the self-efficacy is an important element of agency (Bandura, 2005).

### Teacher Agency

Agency concerns about the time and space. It is something people ‘do’ in the given time and space based on individual’s accumulated experience from the past and its interpretation. There are many perspectives of looking at teacher agency (Lee & Kim, 2021), and among them, we take the ecological perspectives (Biesta et al., 2015) that sees the teacher agency as something that can be achieved in the given situation via the interaction among the subjects. According to Biesta et al. (2015), “rather than seeing agency residing in individuals, agency is understood as an emergent phenomenon of actor-situation transaction” (p. 626). So, the agency contains the action of people, and “work-related activities and behaviours individuals or collectives engage in and how these shape their professional identity” (Ehren et al., 2021, p. 63). The definition of agency is as below:

... [A]gency is not simply a matter of individual capacity (and belief is merely a subset of this). As an ecological construct it is also subject to structural, cultural and material influences. Teacher professional discourses are to a large extent as they are because of the teachers’ positioning within their professional environments, and their agency(or lack of )is heavily influenced by factors which are often beyond their immediate control (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 629).

So, agency is not the fossilised notion. It is something achieved and constructed alongside one’s experience in a place at the moment. In the school setting, individuals in the classroom are all agentic beings. Through the interactions and positioning in the space as appropriate and as expected, the new experience becomes a new layer of knowledge, and the people in there achieve agency through the experience. Teachers’ past experience shaped their “personal competencies (skills and knowledge)” and “beliefs (professional and personal), and “values” (Ehren et al., 2021, p. 63). These are function in their experience status quo, then combined with the new experience, they achieve their teacher agency. Priestley et al. (2015) argued that the role of belief in achieving performance subjectivity is important and that teachers should understand their beliefs to identify perceptions, judgments and decision-making, and individual and collective discourse that motivate them (Lee, 2020, p. 6). The belief or values on teaching and learning of teachers is appeared as their identity. This identity, then, influence to their achievement of teacher agency (So & Choi, 2018). Through the input of new experience, the meaning of their experience and their teacher agency is constantly

reconstructed. Therefore, teachers are developing via their teaching, that is, exposure to new experience. Through this, they achieve teacher agency, and in the process of teacher agency achievement, past experience, new experience, understanding of one’s role in the context, perception and belief on one’s given role in the given place at the given time. These all revealed as teacher positioning, teacher identity, and teacher agency.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 occurred in Korea on January 20, 2020. The South Korean government raised the alter level of the COVID-19 infectious disease crisis from ‘caution’ to ‘alert’ and began to deal with the situation in earnest from January 27, 2020. At that time, schools in Korea were on their winter vacation, so the educational situation was not worrisome. Sooner or later, the COVID-19 situation in Korea began to drastically change not only the social condition but also the educational situation. On 23<sup>rd</sup> of February, 2020, the government raised the risk alert level for infectious diseases to the highest level, ‘serious’. On the day, the Ministry of Education (MOE) postponed the re-opening of kindergarten, elementary schools, middle schools, and schools for special educations national wide for a week. From then, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March, the second postponement of school re-opening was stated, then, the third postponement was proclaimed on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March, the fourth postponement was announced on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March. Then, the online opening announcement were made. That was unprecedented incident. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders of high school and the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders of middle school started their first online school. Then, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April, the first and third graders of elementary school joined in the online school, and it was the last two level of online school opening.

School re-opening was postponed for 49 days. Starting from the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, from the seniors of high school to elementary level, school classes began sequentially opened. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of June, all school level were re-opened and students could physically have allocated to their classrooms. Though schools re-opened, as the COVID-19 has not ceased. To cope with the situation, as an alternative, under the MOE’s guideline, local POE and schools made decisions to operate the blended form of online and offline school as appropriate to each local situation.

### Research Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

Narrative study is a way of exploring individual stories that reflect social context. Narratives are one of the ways to express and understand experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and are not objective reconstructions of life, but rather interpretation of how life is perceived (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative represent the linear of events throughout the time of

people’s life (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Thus, narratives reveal the meaning of individual experiences, showing how they function as parts of the entire life (Polkinghorne, 1988). The narrative reveals a connection that exists between a sequence of events that seems chaotic and meaningless. Through this, it becomes a framework provides temporal continuity to a discontinuous world of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). In addition to this, the narratives revolve round a serious of questions, including what happened, who was in the experience and why the person acted in that way (Park, 2006). Through the narrative study, alongside with the participant’s experience interpretation, the meaning construction is being done at the same time. As a means of symbolising events (Ricoeur, 1991), it is not just a mimic representation, but a creative activity that organises our experiences and knowledge about the world in an understandable form (Park, 2006).

The whole procedure of the research has been conducted by following Clandinin and Connelly (2000)’s suggestion on narrative inquiry. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the focus is on the content of the experience as a research phenomenon and research methodology, while using narratives as a data analysis and presentation. In narrative inquiry, the meaning is more on the procedure rather than the results. It emphasises the value of co-construction progress as a continuous and relational procedure.

There are five stages of narrative research. The first stage is *living in the field*. It is the starting point of narrative inquiry. Researchers are constructing narrative of the researcher’s own experience. At this stage,

researchers discover research topics through their lives and experience. It is also the moment of arrival to the venue of meeting with the participant. The second stage is *from field-to-field texts*. At this stage, the stories from the participant is told and shared with the researcher. The third stage is *composing field texts*. In this stage, researchers reconstruct the participant’s experience. The field text in this stage is the data about the field, that is, field notes, interview transcriptions, photos, letters, journals, diary entries etc. The fourth stage is *from field texts to research texts*. Researchers find and create the meaning of the participant’s experience. In this stage, the three aspects; justification, phenomena, and method are examined then the phenomenon of the context is translated. At this stage, researchers should move toward research texts that can enhance the uniqueness of story pieces while achieving narrative unity (Downey & Clandinin, 2010). The fifth stage is *composing research texts*. At this stage, the main focus is on the sharing of research outcomes. Researchers retelling the participant’s narrated life experience.

Through the narrative inquiry, researchers can understand the phenomenon associated with the research participant. In this study, through the research participant’s stories of teacher life in the era of COVID-19, the participant’s teacher belief, teacher identity and teacher agency achievement could be studied in-depth. The details of the research procedure are shown as in [Table 1](#).

#### Data Collection & Analysis

Starting from the narrative of the researchers, participant selection, interviewing the participant,

[Table 1](#). Research journey

| Research Procedure   | 2020.<br>Oct. | 2020.<br>Nov | 2020.<br>Dec. | 2021.<br>Jan. | 2021.<br>Feb. |
|--|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1 - Selection of the research topic<br>- Building up the research design   | V             |              |               |               |               |
| 2 - Recruiting the research participant<br>- Conducting pilot study (preliminary interview/02.Oct., 2020)<br>- Diary 1 (25. Oct., 2020)  |               | V            |               |               |               |
| 3 - <b>1<sup>st</sup> face-to-face interview (18. Nov., 2020) &amp; School Observation</b><br>- Producing the 1 <sup>st</sup> interview’s transcription<br>- Researcher meeting for data analysis  |               | V            |               |               |               |
| 4 - <b>2<sup>nd</sup> face-to-face interview (25. Nov., 2020) &amp; School Observation</b><br>- Checking up the 1 <sup>st</sup> interview’s transcription<br>- Producing the 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview’s transcription<br>- Researcher meeting for data analysis |               | V            |               |               |               |
| 5 - <b>3<sup>rd</sup> face-to-face interview (02. Dec., 2020) &amp; School Observation</b><br>- Checking up the 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview’s transcription<br>- Producing the 3 <sup>rd</sup> interview’s transcription<br>- Researcher meeting for data analysis |               |              | V             |               |               |
| 6 - <b>4<sup>th</sup> face-to-face interview(09. Dec., 2020) &amp; School Observation</b><br>- Checking up the 3 <sup>rd</sup> interview’s transcription<br>- Producing the 4 <sup>th</sup> interview’s transcription<br>- Researcher meeting for data analysis  |               |              | V             |               |               |

Table 1 (continued). Research journey

| Research Procedure  | 2020.<br>Oct. | 2020.<br>Nov | 2020.<br>Dec. | 2021.<br>Jan. | 2021.<br>Feb. |
|---|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 7 - Collecting additional field data (Memoir, a letter to her students and etc.)<br>- Researcher meeting for data analysis and researcher text constructing<br>- Research participant and researchers co-constructing the research text<br>- Achieving the final confirmation of the research text from Jang-geum |               |              | V             | V             | V             |

Table 2. Collected data sets

|                               | Interview | Diary entry | Letter to her students | Field data | Additional field documents (i.e., timetable) |
|-------------------------------|-----------|-------------|------------------------|------------|--|
| Numbers of the collected data | 5         | 1           | 1                      | 4          | 3  |

collecting various data, data analysis, securing the trustworthiness of the research were examined and checked several times.

The data were collected in four methods: interview, diary entries, letter, and fieldnotes. Additional documents from the field (such as timetable and teaching materials that she was using before the COVID-19) was also collected. The interview was conducted in total of five times (one preliminary interview, then 4 times of in-depth interview). In the interview, the questions were given promptly, semi-structured. In the interview, questions in relation to her previous teaching experience, the reason that she decide to become a teacher, her daily life, any events she wants to state, etc. before and in the COVID-19 were asked. The Korean science teacher's diary entry about her feeling in her classroom at the COVID-19 situation was also collected. The letter to her students was the data researchers unexpected, but she provided it to us. It was fulfilled with love for her students, so researchers could feel the close relationship of her and her students. We asked some questions in relation to the letter and diary at the interview scene. In addition to this, one of the researchers observed the participant's school life 4 times, then produced several fieldnotes.

Following this entire process of narrative inquiry, this study reconstructs narratives as a story based on topics, plots, and patterns covering the experience and social context of the participant's changes in educational beliefs and identity experienced in the COVID-19 situation. The interview scene was the place where researchers and participants create meaning about their experience by sharing narratives in a given space and time. The five times of interview were five times of invitation to a new meaning-making-stages (Kramp, 2004), and researchers were revisiting the space through the data analysis procedure. Two researchers of this study were looking at all the data sets altogether five times (see Table 2). In the meeting for data analysis, the arising themes from transcribed interview data, and other data sets collected were categorised and revisited several times according to the themes.

The researchers were collected, negotiated and discussed their opinion on the data, at the scene. For the

trustworthiness (Polkinghorne, 1988) of the collected data, all the data collection and analysis of the data has been following transparent procedure (Webster & Mertova, 2007), then all the data sets have been triangulated. The entire procedure was conducted through discussion, confirmation and review of the participant and researchers.

### The Research Participant: Jang-geum

In narrative study, the stories from the participant is not only the starting point of the research, but also the ending. For the in-depth study on a teacher experience in the era of COVID-19, it was really important to invite a Korean teacher who would share his/her stories and opinions with an open-minded attitude. The teaching experience of the participant and the rapport with researchers was also the important aspect in the selection of the participant. By considering these aspects, we contacted to Jang-geum. She could tell us a wide variety of ideas from her own experience of struggling as a teacher by comparing 'before' and 'in' the COVID-19 situation. After the explanation about the research, Jang-geum had agreed to join in this research, and become the participant of this study.

Jang-geum is a teacher, researcher, wife and mother. She holds master's degree in practical education. She is married, and has three children. She grew up in an emotionally stable rural family, then moved to a city for her university study. Jang-geum liked reading books since she was young. She loved books as a child, but all she had was textbook. So, visiting her relative's house was the chance to explore various books. For her, books were a tool to create a framework of behaviour, judgment, and values.

I loved reading books. I have enjoyed reading books since I was very young till now. In elementary school, textbooks were the only books I could access, so when I went to my relatives' house, I used to feel ecstatic when I stand in front of many books that were stuck in the bookshelf. I think I have enjoyed every single books. I experienced some sort of chemical reactions caused by book reading, and that may constructed

my current behavior style, judgment, and values (Diary 1 – 25<sup>th</sup> of Oct., 2020).

She said that she lived with a grandmother for a long time. She also reminded her as a person who always tried to emulate her. During her school days, she was familiar with an ethics teacher. The teacher showed big interests not only in books, but also in politics. Jang-geum was saying that maybe that is the reason she become interested in the areas, as well.

She became a teacher by following her father's suggestion. She is a veteran teacher with rich field experience for more than 25 years. She was working in schools in various region from local to rural. The school size where she has been worked also varying. Her current school, where she has been working for 6 years now, is allocated in a small town in the middle of South Korea, and the size of the school itself is also small. The number of the students at the school is 60 in total. For the last 6 years, she has been teaching music and science for 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> graders. As she is a subject teacher, she does not meet students as much as their homeroom teacher. However, as the school size is very small, and due to her caring personality, she knows almost every student in the school. She also familiar with the town and school surroundings.

## FINDINGS

### Before the COVID-19

#### *A growing teacher*

When Jang-geum was young, she studied hard by herself, and others surrounding her also studied hard. So, when she became a teacher, her expectation for her students was that of a 'students who are good at studying themselves'.

I was more interested in children who studied well because they were still young and full of intellectual curiosity. I also pay more attention on children who were gifted. However, the more I am teaching, the more I am interested in children who are not able to keep up with other children. In retrospect, I was thinking like, 'why the children can't understand when I explain and teach so hard?'. Well, I haven't experienced it as a student myself. It took me a long time to understand such children. I've never studied poorly before and there were students good at studying around me. However, the more I went through teaching, the more I opened my eyes. (Interview 1 – 18<sup>th</sup> of Nov., 2020)

Jang-geum was a growing teacher. As her teaching career increased, her thoughts on education gradually changed. At the beginning, she could have not understood the children who did not show growth in

learning compared to her efforts. However, she became a teacher who could open up her eyes to possess the attitude to understand her students.

Now I compliment the child and he compliments me. I feel like we're communicating with each other. We could read each other's minds. It was really rewarding to see him helping another kid who feel hardship to do the given task. By watching him change, I also have become a teacher who could wait and watch... I felt like I have become a teacher who could wait for a change while watching a child act out of context. (Interview 2- 25<sup>th</sup> of Nov., 2020)

As shown above, Jang-geum could become a teacher who could wait for their growth, in her small school. She felt rewarded to see her students changing and growing. Through her past teaching experience, she could perceive teachers as people who can wait and observe children with an open-minded attitude to assist their changes and growth.

She was arguing that the focus of education should be on the change in personality as well as learning growth. In her early days of teaching, she placed huge emphasis on learning foremost, then personality. As time goes, her belief in teaching was changing and Jang-geum recognised it all the sudden through the 'teacher evaluation' on her from parents and students. The assessment from the people on her was something Jang-geum never thought about herself before. So, it became the chance she was starting to think about her teacher belief.

I felt that education was about causing a change in a child's mind and thoughts. ... (ellipsis)... Yes, it is. If I look at parents' satisfaction every year... This time it's gone because of COVID-19..... The teacher's evaluation that I always heard in common said, 'My teacher puts a lot of emphasis on personality education' ... Kids and parents wrote down like that. Well, 'Am I a teacher who always emphasises personality education every year?'. That's what I thought and at the same time, that was the moment I started to be wondered about myself as a teacher. (Interview 2- 25<sup>th</sup> of Nov., 2020)

Changes in Jang-geum's thinking about 'education' also affected to her perception on learning from an objectivist perspective that emphasises students' acquisition of knowledge to a constructivist perspective that emphasises students' experience, meaning making and knowledge creation via newly imported experiences.

Jang-geum was also arguing that the most important thing in the classroom is leading them to 'participate' in classes with interest, not teaching contexts simply as

suggested in science textbooks. To do so, in her classroom, the lesson was starting firstly from the explanation of the relations of the contents of the day and its implication in the real life.

Jang-geum: I'm in charge of science. Every time I start a new unit, I start to talk first about why we should study this in our lives and how it is being used in our lives. Then I move on to the explanation about what they need to learn in the unit. The reason children should know this? If I tell them how it is used in real life first, then the children take the class more interestingly.

Researcher: Have you used this teaching method before?

Jang-geum: I think I'm teaching with an increasing emphasis on understanding. ... (ellipsis) ... It's a change in learning values. In the past, it was important to study well. But now, I think I'm focusing on meaningful knowledge more. (Interview 2 - 25<sup>th</sup> of Nov., 2020)

Jang-geum was trying to create participative atmosphere in her classroom. Rather than focus on the knowledge itself, she was focusing on the meaningful knowledge by explaining the ways of implications of the knowledge in the real life.

### *Jang-geum's teaching life*

She has been working for a long time in big schools before she has been assigned to her current small rural school six years ago. That was a huge shift of the working environment of her, and it affected to her perspectives on interaction.

If it was a big school of 40, my sense of belonging is one in 40. Now, it is one in 6. That's how much I possess a sense of belonging. I feel much more responsibility. I look around the school and see the growth of my school and my children very directly. In a big school, it seems like having more chance to talk with others in there, but it is not. If you're in a big school, as a homeroom teacher, only the students in the class is the people you will meet. It is something like one-year finite nature. In a small school, one can get in touch with every kids and teachers in the school, infinitely, for a long time. ... In a big school, if you finish the year well, it's over. But in a small school, it's kind of continuous relationship. We share a lot of things. More chances and long-enough time of interaction with people in there is possible, frequently and long-termly. (Interview 2- 25<sup>th</sup> of Nov., 2020)

Jang-geum mentioned that she "can't go to a big school from now on", and talked about the 'great sense of belonging' that she felt in her current small school.

Along with the great sense of belonging as a member of the school, she also experienced deep-enough interaction with students and colleagues in her school. As the school was small, people in her school could meet and talk frequently. The small school was the scene where Jang-geum could made huge 'growth' as a teacher, and it was the place she felt comfortable enough.

However, in 2019, the huge wave that was totally shifting social structure has been occurred - the COVID-19.

### **In the COVID-19**

#### *Effort to find ways in confusion*

From the beginning of COVID-19, Jang-geum thought it would not be solved easily. In the meantime, she was worried as she saw many people were also wandering around. Her school was also confused in the process of preparing school reopening, accessing online platform, and producing teaching materials for online teaching.

Jang-geum was worried about the circumstance of online teaching because the preparation for conducting online classes was not ready enough.

I thought the Ministry of Education's announcement or response was too shortsighted. I had to make a quick decision without being confused, but I was sad that I couldn't decide anything. ... (ellipsis) ... The school was also in a confusion. It took me a week to sign up for the online class and get approval. At that time, everything was in a state of chaos, and there was no system. I couldn't even log in to the platform, due to the problem with the platform server. Teachers' access had to be done in advance, as I have to prepare my class, ... but it seemed not done well. Actually, I couldn't even sign up on the platform, myself. I am an old teacher, so... I was nervous because I felt like it is because of me. ... (ellipsis) ... I made the phone calls to book publishers, a lot. "Give me some materials!" But the publishers didn't have any data, either. But I kept asking for it, then what I received was poor data... The publishers weren't prepared either. (Interview 3 - 2<sup>nd</sup> of Dec., 2020)

Jang-geum, herself, was a working hard student in the past time, and a teacher who is preparing lessons to be able to the best assistance for her students' achievement of meaningful knowledge. Therefore, the situation that nothing is prepared ahead was something that makes her to be confused and worried.

Due to the COVID-19, everyone was asked to do something 'new' and 'unfamiliar'. It was too much innovative in terms of school atmosphere and school

culture in Korea, and therefore, it brought difficulties to both teachers and students.

I uploaded the teaching materials, but the children couldn't download the PPTs. The PPT file was not opened on my kids' mobiles. So, what I did was, I made a PPT, converted it into a picture file, then uploaded the picture file with explanations. ... (ellipsis) ... It was really hard. It was hard because it was too new to all. More than that, our school had a big problem with enrolling students in the online classes. We didn't have a way to deliver it to parents. Some teachers drove their children to school, distribute them a tablet PC or a computer, then taught them how to sign up on platforms for online classes. Then, gave them one tablet PC and sent them home. As it was the needed support for the children, we did. Otherwise, the children won't be able to join in the online classes. (Interview 3 - 2<sup>nd</sup> of Dec., 2020)

As she worried, the school, students, and teachers were all struggling in the urgent situation of online teaching and learning. At her school, teachers picked up the students, taught how to use the PC, explained how to access to the platform, then dropped off them to their home. It was possible as her school was very small.

### *The path walk through altogether*

The COVID-19 brought a heavy workload for teachers. It was also the first time of her experiencing that sort of work.

Online school opening was the first time in 25 years of teaching experience. (When I cope with the situation well, I thought that) 'I have no problem to teach till the retirement age. I've even in the situation of online school re-opening, and what would be things that I cannot do!' There will be no worse situation than now. (Interview 4 - 9<sup>th</sup> of Dec., 2020)

As shown above, she struggled a lot with the given situation that was accompanied with unexpected difficulties. However, doing her best to overcome the difficulties that she was facing was still the process of achieving confidence as a teacher. Through the experience, she could gain 'confidence'.

The situation was stabilised rather quickly, and the 'driving force' behind the rapid normalisation of classes was the 'teachers'. Jang-geum was saying that she could be also confident as she was not alone.

I couldn't do it if I was alone. There were colleagues in my school, and there were also many teachers in other schools... I realised that we were walking the path altogether. By looking at SNS and teachers' online community, I felt very

reassured. We[teachers] cares about each other. I feel confident as there are teachers who are more immersed into the situation and looking for ways to make the situation get better. There was also a belief that someone would go through this path in advance and present the way out for other teachers. It's complicated and a bit difficult right now, not vague and hard. Teachers did their best in their positions. (Interview 4 - 9<sup>th</sup> of Dec., 2020)

Though there was not enough support from the government, local authorities, and schools, there were fellow teachers. They were sharing cooperatively their teaching materials via teachers' online community, and it was the needed assistance for teachers in COVID-19. Jang-geum expressed huge appreciation to them. There were also her colleagues who holds trustful relationship in her school who she could discuss things and cooperate with. The teachers were doing their best in their position to find ways to make the situation better.

## **DISCUSSION: RETELLING THE STORY**

When Jang-geum was young, she was a book lover and has influenced warm personality from her grandmother. As there were not many books in her house, she was reading textbooks a lot, and that may influence her to be a good student. According to her father's suggestion, she became a teacher in elementary school level. At the beginning of her teaching at school, she could not understand students who were not good at their study. As she put efforts in teaching, and as herself was a good student, to her, it was the thing hard to understand. At that time, her teacher belief was close to the traditional belief that applied high emphasis on discipline. However, through her day-to-day life as a teacher, she was unconsciously formulating belief and value. Moreover, she could recognise the values of interaction with students through her daily life as a teacher. The happiness she was feeling was from the interaction with students not from the high score achievement of them. Unwittingly, her teacher belief was changed from the traditional belief to the constructivist belief. She could be the teacher who can actively interact with students with open-minded rather than simply transferring knowledge. She was very happy to be the member of a small rural school as she could interact with everybody in her school. She was evaluated as a caring teacher from her students and their parents. Jang-geum's teacher identity and belief in teaching were formed and constructed via those experienced in her past teaching journey. Then in 2019, the COVID-19 has occurred.

Jang-geum, a Korean science-teacher who holds 25 years of teaching, already experienced various kinds of events in Korean schools, and therefore, she was somewhat confident in terms of negotiating in the situation. However, the situation was too new to all.



When COVID-19 was outbreaking, everybody was panic, and she was also struggling in the situation. This was the same in teachers in other countries. According to Teng and Wu's study, due to the need to use "unfamiliar technologies" (2021, p. 1) for online teaching, the participant of the study struggled a lot. Xun et al.'s study also reported that there were four types of challenges; "personal, professional, institutional, and community", that the participants faced in the COVID-19 situation (2021, p. 3). Situation itself was unstable, and the suitable resources for teaching was not supplied. In the situation, teachers were coping with each other by sharing teaching materials. Their cooperation was the force to lead the situation of schools' stabilisation.

In the situation, Jang-geum's past experience automatically lead her to do what she could do. She tried to find ways to help students by finding what she could do for them as a teacher. Her practical knowledge (Elbaz, 1981), teacher belief and value also shone at the time of the COVID-19. Jang-geum was doing her best to keep students motivated (Couch & Towne, 2018). No matter the given situation is once-off event or not, Jang-geum was thinking about the students. To her, teaching was the calling. It was her identity and her belief as well. No matter what crisis comes, a teacher is a teacher. Though the event was huge, and she experienced difficulties, she coped with the situation, well, silently. Pajares (1992) stated that teachers' belief is shaped by the process of cultural transfer. Though COVID-19 is severe situation, her educational belief has not changed. She had to cope with the situation where there are no sufficient materials to use for online teaching, and herself was not familiar with the online teaching. This was, to some extent, the request of new competence for teachers, technology availability. This also may reconstruct the relationship among teachers; as for some who are familiar with the technologies were rather easy to conduct online classes, but for others it was extremely hard (Lee & Kim, 2021). Surprisingly, rather than categorising themselves as groups, teachers were cooperating. They recognised the facing problem, then establishing strategies actively to resolve the situation. In the procedure of this, teacher agency could be strengthened (Lee&Kim, 2021). The way of cope with the given situation was also the journey of achieving her teacher agency. Jang-geum did not try to rely on the way she had have done that she used to and familiar with. Rather than that, she was actively confronted the situation, then seeking for ways to assist her students. Though her personal competence in terms of using technologies was not sufficient, based on the perception on her as a teacher, she acted by following her belief and value.

In McQuirter (2020)'s study, a case where an institution applying effort to support teachers for online teaching was introduced. The University was offering many chances; i.e., "introduced Microsoft Teams as one of two platforms for videoconferencing", and there was

"trusted technology staff, a Help desk for individual support, and tutorials" (McQuirter, 2020, p. 49). The individual questions were also encouraged, and they were surrounded by supports. In that sense, they became a learning community (McQuirter, 2020). This was what needed for teachers in South Korea, and what had to be done in national, local, and school level. There was a possibility of the lack of support cause the limitation of the Korean teachers' teacher agency achievement (Lee & Kim, 2021). However, though the support was rather weak, at the individual level of teachers, Korean teachers were establishing strategies cooperatively. In Jang-geum's case, there was a support from other colleagues, and it was the force that led her to be able to cope with the situation. Later, she mentions that she could achieved confidence via the experience. She reacted and responded toward the contemporary world's requests and duties, keeping distance, avoiding direct interaction, etc. These were the things she never imagined that she will be implementing in her class. That was something clashing with her value on interaction, but she did what she had to do. To some extent, teachers' agency in Korea was achieved via the interaction and confrontation at the individual teachers' level - through their cooperation.

## CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has recently driven the world into pandemics. This brought all society to be frozen. In many countries, students' school attendance was postponed, and classes had to be shifted to be conducted in on-line. The story of a Korean elementary school teacher who hold a 25 years of teaching experience in COVID-19 at a small rural school in Korea shows her belief and value robustly constructed.

The research questions of this study were about Jang-geum's teacher belief before the COVID-19 and in the COVID-19. We explored her narratives to study any changes in her teacher belief caused by the situation. Nonetheless of the COVID-19, Jang-geum's teacher belief and identity has not been change. Her belief was changed in the past from the traditional to constructivist, but it was originated from the changes of her belief and value. This change influenced to her perception of role of teachers not knowledge transmitter. Her perception on teachers, her teacher identity was then constructed as an open-minded person actively interacting with students. Also, it was the journey of her achieving teacher agency as a confident teacher. No matter what crisis is coming, she now believes herself as a teacher who can confront the situation well and find the resolutions actively. Teachers' educational beliefs are not easily changed (Pajares, 1992). Jang-geum, the participant of this study, confirmed that she is firmly perceiving her role as a teacher. Their achieved self-efficacy influence on their teacher belief, and this becomes the underlying value (Ehren et al, 2021). Through new experience, by combining already existing

belief and value, their teacher identity could be reconstructed, then their teacher agency could be achieved.

Human being is a social animal. People adapt to the situation through social interaction. Adapting to life involves living according to one's beliefs to society. People's beliefs are often shaken and changed when they are in an unexperienced situation. For teachers, the educational situation in the COVID-19 would have been unexpected and it was the unpredictable happening. COVID-19 has drastically shifted the form of teaching at school sites from existing face-to-face education to online education (Mulenga & Marbán, 2020; Sintema, 2020). Also, the lack of teaching, learning and technical preparations for online education has left the school scene in disarray (Mäkelä et al., 2020). Though there were significant difficulties, Jang-geum, and teachers were coping well with situation they had never experienced. Due to the situation that nothing has been prepared and experienced, teachers were struggling. However, they did their best to make the systems and materials works appropriately, as they needed to assist and teach their students. The situation itself was enough to shake teachers' educational beliefs and values, but Jang-geum and other teachers were playing a simple but clear role based on their belief and values they possess in their mind as teachers. Each teachers' personal competence in technology may different, but by establishing strategy of cooperation in 'action', they were achieving and developing their teacher agency.

Further studies in relation to the teacher beliefs and teacher agency, a comparative study of pre-service, new teachers and experienced teachers' experience of COVID-19 would be valuable to be studied.

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