Teaching, Learning, and Research as a Spiritual Journey

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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Graduate Program in Education

The Ohio State University

2017

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Abstract

The central purpose of this dissertation study is to gain a deeper understanding of spirituality in education. This study explores how students and teachers spiritually understand themselves and their lives; and how school, teaching, and learning contributes to students and teachers’ spiritual sense and understanding of themselves and their lives. This dissertation is a narrative case study of a public alternative high school in South Korea and the stories of its students and teachers. This study is guided by the epistemological standpoint of the spirituality paradigm in qualitative research and the inquiry strategies of case study and narrative inquiry. The findings of this dissertation study demonstrate how a school can contribute to students’ spiritual growth and in-depth self-understanding, and how students and teachers make sense of and meaning about themselves and their lives at a school where in-depth understanding and connection with themselves and others are valued. The findings of this study contribute to research on embracing spirituality in education and can deepen educators’ understanding of spirituality.
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to my dissertation committee members: Dr. Laurie Katz, Dr. Elaine Richardson, and Dr. Bryan Warnick.

Dr. Laurie Katz has provided me with abundant support. Her support began from my first week in Columbus and continued throughout the years of my Ph.D. studies, which have been quite a journey. Her ongoing and continuous support has meant a lot to me. She also helped me enter the field of teacher education and gave me close guidance. I am genuinely grateful to her.

Dr. Elaine Richardson has gently and powerfully reminded me of the value and meaningfulness of my work whenever I felt very lost throughout this dissertation journey. In addition, the way she is as a woman and a scholar and researcher has always been a wonderful inspiration to me. I appreciate her trust, encouragement, and inspiration.

Dr. Bryan Warnick has provided me with overarching guidance and insightful advice. His guidance and advice helped me to keep in mind the essence of my study and to connect ideas throughout the dissertation more cohesively. I admire and appreciate his depth and clarity of knowledge.

I also want to thank my other great teachers.

Dr. Jan Fish was the first teacher in my life who truly believed that I had intellectual potential. Her eyes were always filled with trust and love when she looked at
me. She truly cared about and never doubted my success. Without her presence, I would have never considered pursuing Ph.D. studies.

Dr. Celia Oyler was a very memorable teacher for me, although my direct contact and relationship with her was relatively short. I remember her compassionate invitation for weekly dialogues when I was going through a chaotic time in New York. She nourished me with great questions, encouraging words, and practical advice.

I also sincerely thank Dr. Cynthia Dillard. She told me that I have something very powerful and special in my thoughts and ideas. This dissertation began from there. She taught me the value and power of the scholarly work that I can do through and after my Ph.D.: that I do not need to sacrifice my soul, but rather I can embrace and enrich it.

I also cannot thank Adam Milligan enough. I am deeply grateful to him for teaching, guiding, and showing me what it really means to live the life I want and how to live my life lovingly with my body. I may not have full knowledge about what he has been giving me, but I will learn it by continuously living this life in a way I’ve learned from him.

Finally, I also want to thank all the participating teachers and students whom I have known through this research project. I have received a great deal of help and support. In particular, this dissertation would not have been possible without the help of three very special girls and two wonderful teachers. I truly appreciate what they have done for me and my dissertation.
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Fields of Study

Major Field: Education
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The central purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of spirituality in education. This study is a narrative case study of the stories of students and teachers at a public alternative high school in South Korea. In particular, this study explores how students and teachers spiritually understand themselves and their lives; and how school, teaching, and learning contributes to students and teachers’ spiritual sense and understanding of themselves and their lives. This dissertation is guided by the epistemological standpoint of the spirituality paradigm in qualitative research and the inquiry strategies of case study and narrative inquiry. In this study, I position teaching, learning, and research as a spiritual journey of gaining increased understanding of who we (teachers, students, and researchers) are.

I look at how students and teachers make sense of and meaning about themselves and their lives at a school where in-depth understanding and connection with themselves and others are valued in order to explore how these students and teachers understand their spirituality from their lived experiences. I examine these areas through analyzing the students and teachers’ stories of their lived experiences (thoughts and feelings about moments, events, relationships, circumstances, etc.) as well as my observations of and participation in their school’s daily contexts.
I chose this school because of its distinctive educational philosophy and curriculum, which has helped students to nurture a deep connection to and understanding of self, life, and others. For this study’s data collection, I utilized multiple data sources: participant observations of the school, semi-structured interviews with teacher and student participants, dialogic meetings with students, and documents (such as school-published documents and students’ writing artifacts). The findings of this study will contribute to research on embracing spirituality in education and could deepen educators’ understanding of spirituality. Furthermore, this study might provide educators with practical guidance in how school can contribute to students’ spiritual growth and in-depth self-understanding.

**Statement of Problem**

“Does learning *really* exist in your school?” This is a phrase that a 16-year-old girl who chose to deschool herself from her high school used at her one-person protest in Korea. Her decision to leave the school was an act of resistance to Korean education and society. She explained,

I couldn’t stay any longer at a place where only competition exists with no learning . . . from morning till night the school only prepares us for the exams, and I don’t know how I can gain authentic learning from such a place . . . I report the school and the country for their contradiction: they make students’ own thinking petrified by rote learning while commenting on the creative people they want to have. (Yoon, 2015)
In Korea, high school students mostly stay at school from 8 a.m. until 10 p.m. for academic learning, preparing for the college entrance exam, under the teachers’ control. During the senior year, which contains the college entrance exam, many schools require their students to stay even longer, such as until 11 p.m., and students have to be at the school even on weekends and holidays, with no summer or winter break. Such a harsh educational climate has long been criticized since the 1990s. Many scholars in education (e.g., H. J. Cho, 1995; Y. H. Cho, 2000) have argued that such a schooling system and culture, with its high emphasis on school and teacher authority, and its required memorization for standardized tests solely for college entrance, is outdated and old from a modernization perspective. H. J. Cho (1995) and Y. H. Cho (2000) have argued that these problems became even worse at the school level following the school system’s adaptation of neoliberalism and globalization’s influential marketing and economic principles.

Following the 1990s, one of the significant responses from teachers and parents to the problems of Korean education and schooling, in order to create a different educational climate and culture for students, was the birth and rapid growth of private alternative schools outside of the public education system. Educational policy makers made some efforts to reform the curriculum and college entrance system. Unfortunately, however, students have continued to suffer in their schooling experiences, just like the 16-year-old girl who held a one-person protest.
While South Korean education has been recognized for students’ outstanding academic performance at international assessments (such as in reading, math, and science) including in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), Korean students’ self-concepts about their interest and confidence in their own learning have remained at low levels (M. K. Lee, 2004; H. J. Park, 2008). That is, Korean students pay a cost for the high level of their academic records during competitive education oriented toward standardized tests and college entrance. Several studies have reported that many South Korean students experience anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts because of the pressures of academic achievement on standardized tests (Hong & Jeong, 1999; D. H. Kim & H. Y. Woo, 2014; J. K. Kim, 2011). Increasing numbers of students have left the Korean public education system as a form of resistance, like the 16-year-old girl discussed above. More importantly, suicide is now a leading cause of death among South Korean youth, which indicates that Korean youths’ existential issues about the meaning of life present a serious risk (Hong & Jeong, 1999; D. H. Kim & Woo, 2014; J. K. Kim, 2011).

Increasing numbers of suicides have brought attention to both the importance of nurturing an understanding of self and life for youth, and to Korean students’ lives and their (un)happiness. The discussion of spirituality that can greatly contribute to students’ understanding of and connection with themselves and others in education in South Korea is still marginal, despite a growing number of studies in this area. Moreover, promoting spiritual understanding and connection has often been omitted from discussions of
Korean education. In such situations, teachers have been given little opportunity to become familiar with the term or notion of spirituality in education, and to expand their understanding of it beyond a narrow view of spirituality (such as limiting spirituality to religiosity).

Studies have suggested spirituality is an important topic to address in education for sociocultural, psychological, ontological, and philosophical reasons. Some researchers’ discussions have mostly concerned theoretical, philosophical, or religious approaches to spirituality in education as a possibility of making that education more authentic and meaningful for individual students (e.g., E. S. Lee, 2014; J. W. Myung, 2014; W. Y. Son, 2003; J. B. You, 2013). Others have discussed transforming teacher education (e.g., Y. K. Jeong, 2006; J. S. Kim, 2005). However, few scholars have explicitly and deeply explored how students’ spirituality can be nurtured by their learning experiences in school or investigated how conceptual and philosophical interpretations are realized in school life through empirical research.

According to E. J. Sim and K. H. Lee (2012), who reviewed trends in research on the topic of spirituality in education in South Korea from 2000 through 2011, the majority of studies (86.92% among those reviewed) appeared to be on theoretical or philosophical conceptualizations of spirituality. Furthermore, many studies (65.40%) spoke to the general population in education without specific participants or target groups (such as children, adolescents, or adults) (Sim & Lee, 2012). About 78% of the studies approached spirituality with religion-based understanding (Sim & Lee, 2012).
There is a lack of empirical studies that explore the spirituality of students and teachers in the contexts of educational settings, although there are a few exceptions. These few empirical studies are still limited to examinations of spirituality and its relation to certain elements (such as pro-social attitude, ecological understanding, job-satisfaction, self-efficacy, etc.) and a program or activity’s effectiveness in developing spirituality by using quantitative research methods. For example, Y. H. Park’s (2013) study reported the contribution of spirituality on adolescent students’ mental health and their strategies for coping with stress. Similarly, N. R. Song’s (2009) study reported students’ increased satisfaction about their school that offered them help with their spirituality through writing in journals and receiving guidance from experienced teachers. Finally, S. Y. You’s (2005) study reported the effectiveness of providing spiritual training as a way of improving adolescents’ inner relationships with themselves and social relationships with others.

Studies on teachers’ spirituality in education have not been very different from those on students’ spirituality. For example, J. Y. Lee (2011, 2014) conducted two quantitative studies of Korean secondary school teachers in order to examine the relations of teachers’ spirituality, capacity for empathy, and social and emotional maturity (J. Y. Lee, 2011), and the relations of spirituality, teacher efficacy, and teacher encouragement (J. Y. Lee, 2014). His findings showed that there were significant correlations of teachers’ spirituality to their efficacy, social and emotional maturity, capacity to feel
empathy, and ability to provide encouragement, all of which have a positive impact on students’ academic and personal development (J. Y. Lee, 2011, 2014).

Within such contexts in educational research, it is still difficult for teachers to know how students and teachers can experience growth of spirituality through teaching and learning, and what and how teachers can nurture spirituality so that their students can deepen self-understanding in school contexts. Thus, there is a need to conduct more in-depth, field-based empirical studies in order to provide educators with an inclusive conceptualization of spirituality in education. Such studies are also necessary in order to provide more field-based practical and pedagogical knowledge with which educators can expand their understanding of what it means to become spiritual, how spirituality can be experienced in educational settings, and how to nurture their students’ spirituality (and their own) in daily learning contexts, if possible.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The goal of this study is to illuminate spirituality in education, which has often been undervalued in the discourse of education. This narrative case study includes the experiences of students and teachers at a public alternative high school in Korea where gaining spiritual understanding of self and life is valued and supported through everyday learning experiences. Previous research on Korean education has not focused much on the spiritual aspects of life and educational experiences from students’ and teachers’ perspectives. Despite a growing interest regarding spirituality in education, few previous studies have presented how spirituality can be actually experienced by students and
teachers in real school settings, especially in Korean school contexts. The aim of this study is to add to the understanding of how and what students learn about themselves and their lives through the schooling experience. Nurturing both teachers and students’ self-understanding is important in transforming the relationships between teachers and students, and transforming the educational experience in schools. The findings of this study will contribute to research on embracing spirituality in education and to developing more concrete ideas of how students’ self-understanding can be better supported.

Research Questions

This dissertation is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is school experienced as a place to nurture students’ spiritual understanding of themselves and their lives?
2. How do students spiritually understand themselves and their lives?
3. How do teachers spiritually understand themselves and their lives?

I am interested in deeply understanding how people make sense of themselves and their lives from their life experiences and everyday lives. Recognizing the importance of gaining spiritual understanding of self and life in education, I raise further questions: if there were a place that explicitly nurtured self-understanding of students and teachers, what would such a place look like? What might happen if students could gain a better understanding about themselves and their lives through rich opportunities for self-exploration and reflection in school? Such educational work has not been recognized as welcome or desirable in Korea’s current mainstream school culture. What might be the
impact on the lives of students and teachers doing such work? My response to these questions is to conduct the present dissertation, a yearlong narrative case study in a high school in South Korea.

Miso High School (the pseudonym of the research site) is a public high school in South Korea. This school has attempted to create an alternative schooling culture (versus mainstream schools’ competitive, bureaucratic culture) for the purpose of supporting students’ authentic learning about themselves and their lives, and promoting a sense of community among students and teachers. To meet this educational goal, Miso High School has developed a unique curriculum that is built upon learning from other successful examples in private alternative schools. For example, two afternoons per week are devoted to students’ explorations of who they want to become and what they want to do in the future both in and out of school. At the end of each semester, students give individual presentations. They talk about themselves, focusing on their own learning experiences through self-exploration, life struggles, growth, relationships, and so forth. That is, these practices that emphasize self-understanding make up the lives of students at Miso High School, and Miso students have various opportunities to explore themselves in everyday contexts at their school. I believe that such educational approach to teaching and learning has the power to impact students’ understanding of themselves by creating their life experiences differently. It might also make impact on teachers’ teaching experiences and their understanding of themselves as educators. This does not mean Miso students are in isolation from the bigger system or culture of Korean
schooling and education. Their multiple identities, as students of Miso and as Korean people, not only make their lived experiences more complex and ambiguous but also make their spiritual understanding of themselves and their lives deeper and more powerful. Thus, this study will provide rich descriptions of what it takes and means to have in-depth self-understanding for both teachers and students.

**Definition of Spirituality**

In this study, I inclusively define *spirituality* as a human’s innate propensity, capacity, and longing for connectedness and meaning (Bone, 2008; Bone, Cullen, & Loveridge, 2007; hooks, 2000, 2003; Hyde, 2008; Mata, 2014; Palmer, 1999; Zhang, 2012; Zurmehly, 2014). Spirituality exists in every person as a potential possibility and is the essence of who we are (Cervantes & Parham, 2005; Dillard & Dixson, 2006; Elkins et al., 1988; Palmer, 1999, Schoonmaker, 2009; Tisdell, 2003). More specifically, spirituality is a way of connecting people to themselves, other people and the world; these connections bring people’s consciousness to finding integrity, or wholeness, and feeling centered, or grounded, in themselves, their lives, and their relationships with others. That is, spirituality leads people to be connected, centered, grounded (with feelings such as love and compassion), and holistically integrated in living with consciousness, meaning, and purpose.

I propose embracing spirituality as a response to the current South Korean problems of education and schooling that cause many students and teachers to experience feelings of being disconnected, distanced, and dissociated from who they are and from
others. Much of the literature in education and other areas has claimed that humans are inherently spiritual: that spirituality is the essence of who we are and is deeply inherent in all persons as a way of being (e.g., Cervantes & Parham, 2005; Dillard & Dixson, 2006; Elkins et al., 1988; Pedraza, 2006; Schoonmaker, 2009; Tisdell, 2003; Zhang, 2012; Zurmehly, 2014). The literature has shown spirituality is deeply related to the quality of individuals’ lives (such as physical health, emotional well-being, quality of relationships, social involvement, etc.)

The concept of connectedness is frequently used to define spirituality in many examples in the literature, both in education and in many other fields, especially in studies whose authors have sought a broad understanding of spirituality as a universal human phenomenon (e.g., Bone, 2008; Dillard, 2006a; de Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012). In order to inclusively understand spirituality, and to propose embracing spirituality as a response to disconnected schooling culture in South Korea, in this study I place connectedness as central to the understanding of spirituality. I utilize how de Jager Meezenbroek et al. (2012) described connectedness in spirituality. I found their description of spirituality and connectedness useful for this study because it helps to illuminate various aspects of connectedness that people might experience through and for spirituality. In their study on reviewing and evaluating measures of spirituality in order to address psychometric items in health research, de Jager Meezenbroek et al. (2012) used a comprehensive definition of spirituality without limitation of any religious orientation. De Jager Meezenbroek et al. (2012) presented the view of spirituality as a
human being’s universal experience and “one’s striving for and experience of connection with oneself, connectedness with others and nature and connectedness with the transcendent” (p. 338). In their definition, de Jager Meezenbroek et al. (2012) acknowledged that connectedness is central to explaining spirituality, and they divided connectedness into three dimensions of spiritual experiences: connectedness with oneself, others and transcendent. Connectedness with oneself is related to “authenticity, inner harmony/inner peace, consciousness, self-knowledge and experiencing and searching for meaning in life,” while connectedness with others is experienced by “compassion, caring, gratitude, and wonder” (de Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012, p. 339). Connectedness with the transcendent (such as the level of the universe and a higher power) is related to an experience of “awe, hope, sacredness, adoration of the transcendent and transcendental experiences” (de Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012, p. 399).

In order to define spirituality more suitably in education, both in school settings and in field-based research, many researchers have recognized the need to broaden the general understanding of spirituality (e.g., Bone, Cullen, & Loveridge, 2007; Dei, 2002b; Hyde, 2008; Mata, 2014; Pedraza, 2006; Zurmehly, 2014). Their definitions often discussed human innateness, experiences in daily life, the conscious awareness of spiritual presence, and distinctions between spirituality and religion. These understandings of spirituality also inform this study. Regarding human innateness of spirituality, for example Mata (2014) broadly conceptualized her definition of spirituality as “an innate, human characteristic that allows us to connect” and “the individual
capacity and the essence of life, providing humans with a greater consciousness and more profound understanding of being” (p. 114). Mata’s (2014) definition built upon her understanding from prior studies, including Bone, Cullen, and Loveridge (2007) and Nye (2013), which understood spirituality as a human capacity for connection, relation, and meaning. The purpose of Mata’s (2014) study was to explore teacher candidates’ comprehension of spirituality as a way of nourishing that spirituality in the classroom setting. Similarly, in her study of teachers’ spirituality and their classrooms, Zurmehly (2014) recognized spirituality’s universal human nature, addressing connections, meaning, and relationships grounded by a humanistic viewpoint. In these studies, using the comprehensive definition of spirituality was an important consideration, and came from the researchers’ purposeful effort to avoid the possibility of excluding any perspective or privileging one single belief system or doctrine. For instance, Zurmehly (2014) stated that to broaden the understanding of spirituality is to remove or blur boundaries (such as particular religions, religious expressions, etc.) so spirituality can be understood with a sense of inclusivity rather than through hierarchy, division, or exclusion. Such effort and sensibility by researchers is critical because spirituality is difficult to define, and different people experience spirituality differently. These researchers’ broad understanding of spirituality as an innate human capacity has enabled their studies to acknowledge the complexities, unique qualities, and differences of people’s spirituality that are formed by many different sources’ various influences, which in turn inspire individual students and develop their individual senses of spirituality.
Cervantes and Parham (2005) studied the spirituality of counseling practices. In their study, spirituality is considered as an “energy and life force” that all human beings have inside themselves: “it [spirituality] is that energy and life force that seeks to experience some level of transcendence (to rise above a situation) and transformation (to change a negative circumstance into a positive one) that characterizes a person’s spirituality” (p. 74). In addition, Shahjahan (2005) understood spirituality as a way of finding a center that will keep people grounded in their life journey in order to realize their existence and to know who they are, where they come from, and where to take their life journey. Particularly, Shahjahan (2005) acknowledged that people may use different terms to refer to spirituality, such as love and truth, so the essence of spirituality might be how people feel about their lives. Dei (2002b) also pointed that there are many educational studies that spirituality and spiritual aspects were discussed from many other entry points (such as the significance of sense of self and community) although they did not directly use the term, spirituality. Hay and Nye (2006) similarly stated that spirituality is related to “love, inspiration, wholeness, depth, mystery and personal devotions” (p. 19). These scholars’ definitions not only state that spirituality is an important aspect of human life, but they also expand our understanding of spirituality in broader, more general terms.

For comprehensively understanding spirituality, everyday life experiences have been considered an important aspect. For example, Bone (2008) proposed an inclusive definition of spirituality as “a source of inspiration in daily life” and “as a means of
connecting people to all things, to nature and the universe” (p. 344). She proposed the concept of *everyday spirituality* in her studies based on the idea that “spirituality permeates everyday life and pedagogical practices” (Bone, 2008, p. 345) and students’ experiences in a school’s daily contexts might be spiritual whether they were conscious of that spirituality or not. Bone, Cullen, and Loveridge (2007) used the concept of hospitality to illuminate spiritual presence in everyday interactions at a school. Bone, Cullen, and Loveridge (2007) found that for students and teachers, ways of greeting each other each day, listening to each other, and offering care to each other can be considered spiritual practices and relational acts that nurture a sense of reciprocity and spiritual connection. By reporting their findings using the perspective of everyday spirituality, Bone, Cullen, and Loveridge (2007) claimed that spirituality can offer the possibility of “another way of looking at the world: another way of connecting” (p. 351), and that spirituality can lead us to construct a spiritual meaning based on our ordinary, everyday lives and relationships. Her understanding of spirituality is useful in education, particularly for this researcher’s study, because it posits that spirituality does not have to be something great, unusual, or extraordinary. Rather, spirituality is present with and within our ordinary, everyday lives as people greet, listen to, and interact with each other. When embraced, spirituality helps people to create and find extraordinary meaning—to reach their deepest feelings and yearnings from the ordinariness of their everyday lives. Moreover, when spirituality is welcomed and encouraged in the school setting, the meaning of learning and education can be transformed. This understanding of spirituality
makes it a more easily accessible concept by which we can live; it also allows researchers conducting field-based studies to see a spiritual aspect in the everyday life contexts of schools and other sites.

Another important point made in the literature about spirituality is an emphasis of conscious awareness and spiritual meaning-making. According to Dillard (2006a), spirituality is “a conscious choice” of relating and connecting to the self, others, and a higher being (p. 41). That is, spirituality requires an acknowledgement of the realm of the spirit; it involves one’s choice of consciousness with an intention of relating to the spirit, and it is an effort to engage in continuous work reflecting upon and exploring the heart and the mind in order to become fully human (Dillard, 2006a). Similarly, Tisdell (2003) understood spirituality as “how we make meaning in our lives” (p. 31). Tisdell (2003) stated that spiritual meaning-making process is widely used when people make an important decision and determine an overall purpose in life. Some people make meaning of their life experiences; they intentionally choose their work with a sense of vocation or calling from which they commit to the work they do for life. They find their fundamental meaning and purpose of life or being. Thus, from Tisdell’s (2003) perspective, spirituality through the meaning-making process helps people to connect with the inner roots of who they really are. Questions about spirituality can lead people to deeper self-awareness and dialogues that help them find and grow their inner capacity and wisdom to live with ambiguity, uncertainty, and mystery (which is always present in one’s life journey).
The most prevalent effort to broadly understand spirituality in the literature is a clarification of a relation or distinction between spirituality and religion. The overall understanding upon which I draw for this study is that religion might support growing and shaping one’s spirituality and spiritual sense, but it is not necessarily required for possessing spirituality or being spiritual. Palmer (1999) cautioned educators about having the narrow notion that spirituality must have to do with the word God, because spirituality is about human yearning for connectedness in life and life’s meaning and purpose. Religion is one of many ways to nurture spiritual sensitivity and consciousness and to affect a person’s spiritual growth. Religion and spirituality are interrelated for many people, but they are not synonymous. According to Cervantes and Parham (2005), religion, in contrast to spirituality, emphasizes a relation between worshippers and a divine force, and contains a system of certain rituals and practices within the context of a particular theology. In Halford’s (1999) interview, Noddings also offered insight into differentiating religion and spirituality: “Spirituality is an attitude or a way of life that recognizes something we might call spirit. Religion is a specific way of exercising that spirituality and usually requires an institutional affiliation. Spirituality does not require an institutional connection” (p. 29). Similarly, Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) explained that religions are official, organized communities and institutions with power relationships and politics requiring predetermined, correct, and regulatory belief systems and behavioral codes of living in particular ways as a gateway to salvation (Tisdell, 2007; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006). In contrast, spirituality emphasizes an individual’s unique life
journey toward connectedness and wholeness (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006). hooks (2003) also supported distinguishing spirituality from religion by citing the Dalai Lama’s explanation of it:

Religion is concerned with faith in the claims of salvation, an aspect of which is acceptance of some form of metaphysical or supernatural reality. Connected with this are religious teachings or dogma, ritual, prayer and so on. Spirituality is concerned with those qualities of the human spirit—such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony—which bring happiness to both self and others. These qualities involve an implicit concern for others’ well-being and can be developed to a high degree without recourse to any religious or metaphysical belief system. (Dalai Lama, as cited in hooks, 2003, p. 178)

This clarification makes it easier for educators to consider explicitly bringing out and nurturing spirituality in teaching and learning. Scholars in other fields have also advocated the idea of broadening the understanding of spirituality. For example, in the health research field, de Jager Meezenbroek et al. (2012) pointed out that the concept of spirituality is often approached with a narrow view and people use monotheistic terms like God to refer to transcendence or a higher power. De Jager Meezenbroek et al. (2012) criticized this narrow view, stating it might show a lack of awareness that people with no religion or religious affiliation could also have spiritual experiences, especially transcendence, through various sources (such as nature and meditation), and people from
different sociocultural backgrounds might understand or identify a higher power or transcendent experiences differently.

Spirituality is beyond religious doctrines or practices. There is no need of a religious affiliation or commitment to talk about spirituality, or to experience spirituality, because humans are inherently spiritual beings who have spirits as well as bodies and minds. Some people are raised and have lived within a particular religious membership or tradition, but they do not necessarily form strong connections to spirituality in their lives. Others might not have been religiously socialized, but they are deeply concerned about and value spirituality and the spiritual dimension of their lives.

Thus, this study uses and argues for considering *inclusive* spirituality in education from a humanistic perspective. This also means that I reject a narrow definition of spirituality that synonymously understands it as religiosity or a religious concept. From this viewpoint, this study illuminates spiritual dimensions of human life, especially inner aspects of people’s lives and life experiences. I believe that broadening the definition of spirituality is critical in education and that spirituality should be understood inclusively in education without privileging any particular religious view or practice. This does not mean that I ignore or disregard any individual’s personally unique spirituality (including religious influence) or historically, socially, and culturally different understandings of spirituality. Rather, the inclusive definition of spirituality utilized in this study illuminates and embraces spirituality’s uniqueness, differences, and complexity across
people, cultures, and societies while acknowledging that spirituality is potentially within all humans as an innate capacity.

**Organization of Chapters**

The first chapter has discussed the statement of the problem, the purpose and significance of the study, and the research questions; it also has explained how spirituality is defined in this study. The second chapter provides a review of the literature about adolescent students’ education in South Korea and spirituality in education (including spirituality’s importance and possible impacts in education). Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of the study including the researcher’s positionality, epistemological stance, and research methods. Information about the research site, participants, data collection, and data analysis procedures is also provided in the third chapter. Chapter 4 presents the study’s findings and results, and Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the study’s findings, limitations, and implications.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Chapter 2 consists of three sections: (a) a contextualizing overview of the historical understanding of education and schooling in South Korea; (b) a discussion of current education and schooling in South Korea, focusing on students’ experiences; and (c) an examination of spirituality in education. In the first section, I begin with a discussion of how formal education has been used historically in South Korea and then move to a discussion of how South Koreans’ ways of viewing their lives were historically changed. In the second section, I present how current education and schooling in South Korea is discussed in the literature, with a specific focus on students’ perspectives. My purpose in this particular part of the review is to illuminate the issues of disconnections at many levels in adolescent students’ lives that are closely related to their education and schooling. Following that, in the third section, I explain the concept of spirituality in education. In this study, I propose using spirituality as a response to the current issues and problems in South Korean education: I discuss what spirituality can do in education for adolescent students and their teachers based on this review of the literature.

**Historical Understanding of Education and Schooling in South Korea**

In this section, I provide a discussion of South Korean history in order to historically contextualize the current educational system in South Korea. My purpose in
this section is not to give an exhaustive review of Korean history or to evaluate causes and consequences of educational problems in Korea. Instead, in examining various historic contexts prior to discussing students’ experiences of Korean education, my intention is to provide a contextual understanding of how education and school have played a role in Korean society and how Korean people’s (perspectives of) lives have been shaped and changed by those contextual influences.

In addition, this section also serves to provide contextual understanding for South Korean students’ and teachers’ lives. J. H. Kim (2005) argued the following about the dual effects of narrativizing individual life stories by drawing upon Goodson (1995) and Harvey (1989): while such narrativizing can contribute to empowering a group of understudied or marginalized people by bringing forward their voices and stories, it can also disempower them, even with researchers’ intentions to serve them through their studies, because of the possibility of “promoting ‘a tyranny of the local’ and a ‘specificity of the personal’” (p. 37). Thus, J. H. Kim (2005) suggested that researchers make efforts to situate their subjects’ stories in social, cultural, political, and historical contexts and theories, along with presenting those individuals’ personal stories, in order to connect the individuals’ lives to larger phenomena in education, society, and human life. Following J. H. Kim’s (2005) suggestion, I provide this portion of the literature review in an effort to historically and socially contextualize my study so readers can better and more deeply understand the stories presented within it of students and teachers’ lived experiences at one public high school in South Korea. To support this contextualization, first I describe
how formal education in South Korea was historically established and used through Japanese colonization, U.S. military occupation, and Korean authoritative military regimes; second, I discuss how intervention of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and introduction of neoliberalism brought changes into South Koreans’ lives following the late 1990s.

**Historical Use of Education in South Korea Since the Mid-20th Century**

In this section, I discuss how education has been historically used in South Korea since the middle of the 20th century. When World War II ended in 1945, so did 36 years of Japanese colonization; this colonization was immediately followed by the U.S.’s military occupation of Korea from 1945 to 1948. The U.S.’s domination of politics, military, economics, and culture in South Korea was reinforced in 1950 by the Korean War, an ideological war between the U.S. and the communist former Soviet Union. Since then, Korea has continuously experienced national division into South Korea and North Korea. Modernization and colonization are inseparable in Korean education because of Korea’s modern history, with Japan’s colonization and the U.S.’s neo-imperial domination. Historically, formal education in South Korea was established and has been used for political and ideological purposes by different political and military powers, including military regimes from Japan, the U.S., and Korea (Y. C. Kim, 1995; Rhee, 2002). Lee argued that Japanese colonized schooling in Korea was performed in the name of modernized Western education by indoctrinating children in “racial inferiority and slavery consciousness as a colonized people” (as cited in Y. C. Kim, 1995, p. 35).
According to Yi (as cited in S. J. Choi, 2013), Korean education was made public as Japan suppressed all types of private education in traditional Korean society. Under Japanese colonization, the purpose and hidden agenda of education and schooling for Koreans was to permanently consolidate colonization and make Koreans obedient to Japanese domination and control (Y. C. Kim, 1995). Such education enforced and reinforced in students a sense of defeat, conformity, and passivity (S. J. Choi, 2013). With classes in Korean language and literature prohibited, courses taught at Korean primary and secondary schools included Japanese language, culture, and history, and these courses were taught for the purpose of justifying and glorifying the Japanese emperor’s ideologies of domination and control over Korea.

This oppressive education caused by Japan’s colonization ended when Japan lost World War II, Korea was decolonized, and the Cold War began; unfortunately, however, it was immediately replaced by the U.S.’s military power without any work to resolve issues regarding past colonialism (D. C. Kim, 2010; Y. C. Kim, 1995; Rhee, 2002). For example, Koreans who received a more modernized education during Japanese colonization had privileged, prestigious positions under the U.S. military government (S. D. Kang, 2010; D. C. Kim, 2010). According to Rhee (2002), the period of intensive American control in Korea critically impacted Korea’s future because “under the U.S. Army Military Government, the imperial discourse of civilizing missions, westernizing development, and U.S. capitalistic democracy became imbued in Korean social and cultural realms” (p. 32). Particularly in education, changes during this period determined
“the ideological nature of contemporary Korean education” (Rhee, 2002, p. 32). The U.S. reformed Korean education at the levels of practice, organization, ideology, and politics (Y. C. Kim, 1995). For example, the Korean educational system followed the American school system at that time (e.g., six years of elementary education, three years of middle school, three years of high school and four years of higher education at the university level) (Y. C. Kim, 1995). In addition, Koreans adopted educational theories, school curricula, teacher training, and teaching and learning methods from the U.S. According to S. D. Kang (2010), the U.S. also controlled Korean higher education. For example, the U.S. military government re-established a national university in Korea (known today as Seoul National University), and the U.S. military captain became a president of the university. Y. C. Kim (1995) argued that such reform had the military purpose of making it easy to reproduce the U.S.’s positive ideology in Koreans, compared to the Soviet Union’s ideology, and that, in the long run, it made “cultural penetration of the U.S.” easier and Korea “a cultural subject state of the U.S.” (p. 36).

After the Korean War, extreme rightwing and authoritative military dictatorships based upon anti-communism and socialism, and led by the U.S., successively took power (D. C. Kim, 2010). In this context, again, there was no process of resolving historical issues regarding Japan’s or the U.S.’s hegemonic and imperialistic power and control over Korea. The government controlled education and the media, teaching that the nation’s goal is the individual’s goal. Along with the ideological emphasis of anti-communism, Korean military regimes considered education as a foundation and a tool for
national economic development to meet industries’ needs (Y. H. Kim, 2000). For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, the Korean government expanded vocational and technical high schools; it also expanded electronics and technology-related departments in higher education according to industrial demands. The government also emphasized increasing compulsory education and student enrollments. The enrollment of elementary students grew from less than 60% in the 1950s to approximately 100% in the 1970s; middle school student enrollment increased from 21% to 99% between 1953 and 1994. In addition, high school enrollment grew from 12% to nearly 90% during those years. The rapid expansion of the number of schools made the bureaucratic school system emphasize efficiency, with high ratios of students and teachers. In order to encourage the rapid expansion of the schools, the Korean government provided private schools with financial aid and financial benefits, such as tax exemptions (Y. H. Kim, 2000). As a result, the cost of attendance at private schools and public schools became similar. More importantly, both public and private schools were placed under a national education system (including teacher certifications, finance, formal curricula, etc.) (Smith, 1994). As a result, the Korean government constructed a highly centralized and universalized educational system, which easily enabled strong national control in education (Y. H. Kim, 2000).

Although the leadership of the nation has changed over time, according to modern history in South Korea, successive government leaders used schools for political and ideological purposes in the form of modernized education, mainly using the principle of
control in an aim to make people obedient and docile to the nation’s leadership. Government leaders achieved this in the form of modernized schooling in a public educational system: they made education a public and universalized tool for national control, and their ideologies were easily taught as absolute truth or objective knowledge.

**Historical Changes in South Koreans’ Views Since the Late 1990s**

Many scholars, including Joo (2010), and Koo (2007), have considered a financial bailout from the IMF as one of the biggest national tragedies in South Korea: it left collective and individual trauma for the South Korean people and then brought changes in many ways of their being, living, and relating. After the Korean War, the South Korean people collectively made a remarkable economic development, known as Confucian capitalism or Han River’s miracle, led by the Korean government (Cho, 1995). Korea’s rapid, compressed economic development after the Korean War was also possible because of world capital moves and flows from the 1960s through the 1980s. Koreans worked extremely hard and made unreasonable sacrifices of their time, energy, and present pleasure in order to get out of their extreme hunger and poverty after the Korean War. They lived at a time when government leaders obsessed about the numbers, ranks, and statistics that showed Korea’s economic status in the world by following other “developed” societies and rushing “toward colonial modernization” (Cho & Shin, 2000, p. 292). Patience, endurance, and sacrifice had been core principles in Koreans’ everyday lives. Their driving forces behind such endurance and sacrifice were the unstoppable high spirits and confidence they gained from their country’s rapid economic
growth and their belief in (the myth of) success and happiness. In addition, South Koreans considered education as a way to climb the socioeconomic ladder and were highly motivated to achieve upward mobility (H. J. Cho, 1995; H. J. Cho, Yang, & Kim, 2009; Y. C. Kim, 1995). As H. J. Cho (1995) explained,

It is [a] shared belief among most parents that the rank of one’s university determines one’s worth as a social being. Once entering (and graduating, since completion of the degree is virtually automatic) one of the so-called top universities, one can look forward to a secure future—that is, a stable job, good marriage, and respectable social life…. This view is shared by much of the rest of society. In this condition, the values of mainstream culture presuppose that getting on the escalator to academic success should be the top priority in children’s lives. (p. 148)

Working toward the collective aim of their nation’s economic development and receiving education to meet the individual aim of upward mobility became South Koreans’ key living principles. The remarkable economic development of the nation highly motivated interest in individual upward mobility.

In November 1997, however, South Korea faced an economic crisis: the country needed a financial bailout from the IMF. According to Koo (2007), based on South Korean economic and labor records, in 1998 there was a -6.9% growth rate, the GNP per capita fell to $6,800 (from $11,422 in 1996), and 74% of families in South Korea had income reductions. One of the most serious problems was middle-class collapse and
unemployment caused by layoffs and honorary retirements of people from manual workers to white-collar workers in their 40s and 50s. Koo (2007) reported that the unemployment rate in 1998 was 7.9% (compared to 2.6% in 1997), and there were 1.7 million jobless workers in 1998 (tripled from the 658,000 unemployed workers in 1997). Many companies went bankrupt or were restructured. Under their employers’ structural adjustments or honorary retirement plans, many people felt threatened about their employment and became unemployed or underemployed (Giroux, 2005). These circumstances almost prevented South Koreans from having any hope for a better future and generated “a culture of permanent insecurity and fear” about existence and life (Giroux, 2005, p. 10).

Initial reaction to the IMF’s bailout was panic. South Koreans suddenly felt shame and considered the bailout “a national disgrace” (Cho & Shin, 2000, p. 291). As Cho, Yang, and Kim (2009) explained, in the 1980s and 1990s there was a hopeful image in South Korea for a better future life, with freedom and a democratic society, because of the successful experiences of the Korean movement for democracy and Korea’s economic development. However, after the IMF’s bailout in 1997, Koreans had life-threatening experiences. Cho and Shin (2000) explained that by the time of the IMF’s control, people had become spiritually and “culturally destitute” (p. 293), and it was impossible for people to sustain their spiritual and cultural energies without wearing themselves out.
Many people were fired from the places that they believed would provide them with security if they devoted their time and energy. They lost the boundaries that provided security and trust. Within the situation of the IMF bailout, which made many people lose their jobs, people felt threatened and learned that no one, like a nation or a company, would protect them or their future. So, as Giroux (2005) explained, within the system of the free market and neoliberalism, people learned painfully that “all problems are private rather than social,” that “individual misfortunes” or miseries are “personal responsibilities,” and that they would be forced to live with “ruthless competitive individualism” (p. 8).

In addition, the IMF’s control over South Korea also should be understood within the prevailing worldwide systems at that time, which included the domination of transnational financial capital by free market principles and neoliberal ideology. Along with the IMF’s control, neoliberal ideology and free market principles prevailed in South Korean society, including in education and in schools. The terms of neoliberalism, free market, and globalization have obscured how they have seriously affected (and continue to affect) people’s identities, existences, and lives. The IMF bailout and neoliberal principles have greatly changed how people view themselves and their lives in Korea, even though Korea was able to move away from the IMF’s management system within four years. The suicide rate rose sharply in 1998, with a 42.6% increase, compared to 1997, after the IMF bailout occurred in South Korea (J. H. Chon, 2009). Since 2003, Korea has had one of the top suicide rates among the OECD (Organization for Economic
After people learned the lesson that “no one will protect” them from the IMF bailout or under neoliberal principles, individuals’ life burdens and fears dramatically increased. With the lack of possibility of having lifetime jobs, people preferred secured jobs (such as those of public school teachers, public officials, etc.) with stable wage rates and ensured retirement ages (until 60 to 65). In addition, individual fears and insecurities, and the expansion of private education businesses, resulted in parents’ educational fever to make economic investments in their children’s education. The South Korean government also brought economic logic and market principles to education in the name of overcoming the crisis and enhancing the nation’s competitiveness by using the term of globalization. For example, a performance-based pay system was adopted to increase teachers’ productivity. Teachers’ performances were evaluated by students’ academic achievements on tests and by other standardized measures of teaching performance levels. As Gergen and Dixon-Roman (2014) pointed out, this type of policy, based on the neoliberalism mentality, brought many changes in the South Korean school system, such as a competitive climate among teachers and an instrumentalized view of teachers’ work and capacity, as well as their students’ learning. In addition, small schools were merged or closed for efficiency, and the teachers’ retirement age was lowered. Korean students’ pressure and burden on their academic performance were ever increased. To address this pressure and burden, in the following section, I discuss current education in South Korea further, focusing especially on adolescent students’ experiences of learning, education, and schooling in South Korea.
Current Education and Schooling in South Korea

The body of literature addressing schooling and education in South Korea is voluminous; it is outside the scope of my dissertation to address all of the literature fully. Thus, in this chapter, I present what scholars have stated are important considerations about current education and life for adolescents in South Korea, focusing on the price of extreme emphasis on standardized exams for students’ academic advancement through the competitive schooling system and educational culture. Current education results in significant disconnections in adolescents’ lives from themselves, their learning, and their relationships with others, although it might improve their level of academic performance on standardized tests. There is no space or time at school for adolescents to grow their sense and understanding of who they are, despite the importance of this growth for human life development during the adolescent years. Increasing adolescent suicides, suicidal attempts, depression, school bullying, and violence are all evidence of adolescents’ lack of meaningful connections with themselves and others.

Adolescents’ Experiences of Learning, Education, and Schooling in South Korea

Increasing numbers of suicides by South Korean adolescents have brought more attention to the lives of Korean adolescents; consequently, many studies have been conducted on students’ experiences of and perceptions about themselves and their lives in and out of school. Since 2008, suicide has been the number-one cause of adolescent deaths in South Korea (D. H. Kim & Woo, 2014). According to the 2013 report of South Korea’s national statistical office, Korean adolescents answered “academic study” and
“college entrance” most frequently as reasons why they felt suicidal impulses. Many researchers have also recognized that standardized test scores, school rankings, and college entrance exam preparation are the biggest stressors for Korean adolescent students (e.g., Jeon & Jung, 2009).

**Forced learning and test-oriented life.** In some studies, researchers have explored Korean education by looking closely at the students’ perspectives of how they were experiencing their academic learning in relation to the influences of their parents and teachers during their schooling years. Oh et al. (2007) conducted a study on Korean college students’ learning experiences during their schooling years (elementary through high school) using the term *forced learning*. They considered forced learning as a phenomenon generated by the educational fever and extreme emphasis on standardized test scores for college entrance in South Korea (Oh et al., 2007). Oh et al. (2007) defined *forced learning* as learning that is a manifestation of others’ predetermined goals, plans, and agendas without consideration of the learners’ own free will, beliefs, or values. Teachers and parents were the agents of forced learning, and the students were positioned as objects of forced learning.

Oh et al. (2007) explained what made parents contribute to the process of forced learning. According to Oh et al. (2007), parents forced their children to learn because of vicarious satisfaction and the influence of sociocultural conventional beliefs about the strong connections between top-rated college entrance and life success. Korean parents had a tendency to consider their children’s test scores as their own, and they tended to see
the happiness of their children within the context of the college entrance examination.
Furthermore, parents believed that providing support (including control and discipline) at
their best capacity for their children’s academic performance was their responsibility.

As shown in Oh et al.’s (2007) study, both parents and teachers actively
participated in forcing students to improve academic learning performance. H. J. Cho
(1995) also stated that teachers and parents were the ones who were playing active roles
in contributing to the stability of the current Korean education that emphasized college
entrance. Both teachers and parents had a tendency to think of the students’ academic
success as their responsibility. So, in such contexts, forced learning was often justified in
the name of parents’ and teachers’ good intentions to help adolescents in efficiently
improving academic performance for future life success.

In schools, teachers have been forcing students to learn because student
achievement (especially the number of students who enter top-rated colleges in Korea)
has been a measurement of the performance of both teachers and schools. Oh et al.
(2007) also reported that the teachers who provided forced learning to students had a
tendency to use physical punishment more frequently and had an authoritarian attitude in
interacting with their students. They were more interested in playing the role of
controlling or managing the students.

According to Oh et al. (2007), in the process of forced learning, students were
asked to do excessive amounts of assignments and memorize things without meaningful
connections to their learning. In addition, teachers and parents often directed and
determined the students’ lives without much consideration of the students’ opinions, from daily schedules to future life directions (selection of major, college, and profession). For the selection of college and major, parents and teachers’ opinions were mainly derived from rankings, such as top-ranked colleges or highly paid professions. Oh et al. (2007) reported that many students’ desires to apply for a college or major according to their interests were often ignored. Instead, the students were asked to apply to a better-ranked college or major related to more socially preferred professions with job security and high income.

While Oh et al. (2007) focused on how adults performed forced learning, other studies have illuminated how students also contributed to the process of forced learning. For example, S. B. Kim, Oh, and Kim (2011) conducted a qualitative study of high school senior students’ experiences of college entrance exam preparation. S. B. Kim et al. (2011) stated that the students had been unconsciously and consciously taught, as they entered elementary, middle, and high school, that college entrance would be their next step after high school graduation. The senior students in S. B. Kim et al.’s (2011) study held the belief (or myth) that the higher-ranked college they could enter, the higher the chances they could have success in their future. These Korean high school senior students considered aiming to work toward entering a better-ranked college as the only way forward and a prerequisite before they would be able to get a job they wanted or do whatever they wanted to be doing. In addition, S. B. Kim et al. (2011) explained that those students seemed to focus on college entrance exam preparation at the surface level,
but at a deeper level they were experiencing a serious burden about their future. Fear and anxiety based on uncertainty about the future was reinforcing the belief that future success or failure would depend on outer forces, such as test scores or college admission results. Throughout their lives, up to their senior year in high school, these students rarely had an opportunity or an adult’s support to explore how they really wanted to live their lives and what other ways of living life could be possible.

Korean students have been living under a high level of pressure to improve standardized exam scores for their college entrance. S. B. Kim et al. (2011) also discussed the senior students’ pressure and pain caused by the fetters of academic performance rankings. They lived in a severely competitive school culture that was promoting competition among students for better ranking on standardized tests. The students were being ranked by a relative evaluation system for the convenience and accuracy of sorting students for college entrance. The students became extremely sensitive about their grades and exam scores or rankings. For example, when their academic performance grade went down because of one mistake they made on an exam, they would blame themselves as if that score would determine their life success and failure or, at least, would be a hindrance in entering the college they wanted to enter. They had little space for accepting themselves as they were; for growing self-compassion, love, and trust; or for collaborating with others.

S. J. Choi et al. (2012) conducted a study with seven graduates of top-ranked universities in South Korea who were highly successful in the competitive school climate
with its extreme emphasis on academic performance. Their study investigated these students’ habitualized life characteristics that were developed during their secondary education years. S. J. Choi et al. (2012) found that these students disconnected themselves from what they were learning. They controlled themselves, their thinking, and their everyday lives so that they were ready for preparation for the standardized academic exams and, ultimately, for college entrance. And they felt secure in their highly organized lives. Oh et al. (2007) also recognized Korean students’ disconnection from meaningful learning. However, while Oh et al (2007) discussed this disconnection as a result of forced learning imposed by teachers and parents, S. J. Choi et al. (2012) put more emphasis on students’ choices to actively participate in the process of test-oriented learning.

Finally, S. J. Choi et al. (2012) explained how the students in their study consciously and strategically lived their test-oriented lives. Standardized tests have predetermined right and wrong answers, so making their thinking systems similar to examiners’ thinking systems became an important task for the students (S. J. Choi et al., 2012). These students considered interest or joy of learning as a factor that would decrease efficiency of preparation for the standardized tests, because interest in a certain subject or topic would lead them to explore more deeply. S. J. Choi et al. (2012) also stated that the students who were highly successful at standardized tests intentionally avoided questioning themselves about why they were learning what they were learning. By minimizing the connections between themselves and what they were studying, they
strategically made themselves good at taking exams through memorization. In the process of living as exam-oriented persons, they also learned about relational dynamics and their power within highly competitive school culture. They were exempted from the teachers’ punishments, since the teachers considered them good students because of their high level of academic performance on tests. While they reported that they were attracted and motivated to study harder because of the benefits of good test scores in their everyday school lives, they felt fearful and anxious about losing that power due to the decrease of test scores.

**The price of forced learning and test-oriented life.** Although forced learning might create desired results, such as improved academic performance on tests or successful entrance to top-ranked universities, it has had many negative impacts on adolescents and their lives. Oh et al. (2007) noted critically that the teachers and parents who were most emotionally and physically close to students engaged in forced learning as active agents, and these individuals considered controlling students’ learning through the use of strict discipline as their important role. In this process of forced learning, the students’ own perspectives or intentions were rarely heard; instead, teachers and parents did the decision-making. The students were asked to follow the decisions or directions, and teachers and parents used persuasion, placation, threats, or physical punishments in that process. Although the reactions from students to forced learning were various (such as resistance, avoidance, and rejection vs. resignation, conformity, and obedience), it seemed true for all that such a process of forced learning negatively affected the
relationships between students and teachers or parents. In addition, Oh et al. (2007) found that forced learning had the capacity to seriously harm students’ images of self, life, and learning as well as their relationships with others. The students were often positioned as too weak and immature to make decisions and govern their own lives. In fact, they often felt unworthy, powerless, and helpless about themselves because of the lack of emotional support or acknowledgement from their close adults about the uniqueness of who they are.

Other researchers have explored adolescents’ experiences and perceptions about themselves and their lives around academic pressure and competitive school culture in relation to their (un)happiness. For instance, K. S. Jeon and Jung (2009) agreed that an educational climate with an extreme emphasis on academic performance is related to adolescents’ lives and makes adolescents’ happiness difficult. They examined the happiness of 450 Korean high school students through a survey that explored factors in determining the happiness of Korean students. They found that academic performance level was not the most critical factor for happiness and that there were many other important factors, including individual uniqueness, self-discovery, understanding, emotional relaxation, and relationships with friends and family members. According to K. S. Jeon and Jung (2009), many adolescent students find happiness through personality, character, talent, and sensitivity, as well as through close relationships with others. The significance of K. S. Jeon and Jung’s (2009) study is the finding that adolescents are capable of being happy without a high level of academic performance. Rather,
adolescents can find happiness through the process of learning and finding out more about themselves, especially their individual uniqueness, in meaningful relationships with others. K. S. Jeon and Jung (2009) criticized the sociocultural belief (or myth) that adolescents’ happiness depends on a high level of academic performance, especially on standardized tests. A school with an extreme emphasis on academics and college entrance discourages adolescents from finding happiness in their lives by reducing those lives to academics or college entrance. Thus, K. S. Jeon and Jung (2009) claimed there is a need to create a climate both in the school and in the family that encourages adolescents to explore what makes them happy and expand their individually unique potentials and possibilities.

Similarly, Park and Kim (2009) also conducted a study in order to understand South Korean students’ happiness. They agreed that there was a possible correlation between a high level of academic performance and happiness because South Korea placed sociocultural value on academic background and academic performance levels. However, when they looked more deeply into adolescents’ happiness and its factors, they found that emotional support based on close relationships with parents and teachers was more important for adolescents’ happiness (Park & Kim, 2009). Adolescents’ self-trust is developed by receiving emotional support from close relationships, including parents and teachers; in addition, emotional support deeply impacts adolescents’ resilience. It is difficult for students who are not top-ranked on standardized tests to be positively
acknowledged and valued according to individual uniqueness in schools that place an extreme focus on academic performance and testing.

In addition, other scholars have found that Korean education is problematic because it isolates adolescents from their important life tasks of exploring and understanding who they are and what the purpose of their lives might be. For instance, S. B. Kim et al. (2011) conducted a phenomenological study on 18 high school senior students’ experiences of college entrance preparation. They noted critically that the standardized education geared toward the college entrance exam in South Korea made it difficult for adolescents to think deeply about themselves and the meaning of their lives, which is an important task in adolescence for human development. E. Kim (2009) conducted a study, using in-depth interviews, to investigate how Korean adolescents make sense of themselves as “high school students in Korea.” These Korean adolescents seemed to consider themselves as high school students with the singular identity of people preparing to enter university or college. E. Kim (2009) found that Korean adolescents had little opportunity to deeply think about who they really are and that their highly academic school culture seemed to be naturalized in their minds without question.

Many researchers who have studied Korean adolescents’ lives, including Han (2011) and I. Kim (2008), have also argued that adolescents’ increasing dropout or deschooling rates, school bullying, violence, depression, and suicide attempts indicate an imbalance in education that merely emphasizes competition through testing, objective content knowledge, and teacher-centered education. For instance, Han (2011) pointed
out that even extracurricular activities were being highly monitored according to assessment criteria, although these activities were originally designed for the adolescents’ personal growth. I. Kim (2008) found that adolescents’ exploration of their identities (who they are) was considered as a chapter of the textbook or subject knowledge in the Korean high school curriculum. In the classroom, such exploration was taught as objective knowledge and as someone else’s story; there was little space in the current educational system for adolescents to deeply explore who they were. As E. Kim (2009) described in her study, many adolescent students seemed to take for granted such a highly academic and competitive schooling system; they seemed to actively participate in perpetuating such an academic climate without questioning or resistance.

There have been some scholars exploring students who were successful in performing on the standardized academic tests and entered top-ranked universities (S. J. Choi, Han, Lee, Lee, & Jang, 2012; M. K. Lee, 2008). These researchers have been interested in understanding those students’ characteristics and the long-term impacts of their academic-focused and exam-oriented adolescence. According to S. J. Choi et al. (2012), the students who were successful in test-oriented life and entered top-ranked universities reported that they had consciously made the choice to postpone their tasks of adolescence. S. J. Choi et al. (2012) pointed out that these students’ test scores seemed to be internally and externally considered as a way of making them feel guarded and superior, but ironically their test scores seemed to make it difficult for them to more authentically connect to and know their real selves. They were living their adolescent
years with a lack of self-reflection. Until their college entrance, they had rarely thought about what they would want to do after entering college. Many of them were accustomed to relying on others’ perspectives (mainly teachers’ and parents’) and had decided to enter a top-rated college with a major that would have a higher possibility of admittance.

More seriously, as S. J. Choi et al. (2012) also found, the students’ test-oriented life habits continuously impacted their lives even after they graduated from high school. They continuously postponed self-reflection or self-exploration. They focused on the secure career path that could be achieved by test scores. By focusing on that path, they reinforced their exam-oriented life, and they continuously isolated themselves from meaningful self-exploration and authentic learning experiences driven by inner joy through the learning process. Similarly, in her study, M. K. Lee (2008) demonstrated that many students who successfully entered those top-rated colleges, but without undergoing in-depth consideration about who they wanted to become, later went through the process of modifying their life direction (such as taking a leave of absence or discontinuing college). M. K. Lee’s (2008) study thus shows the negative long-term consequences of forced learning and passive decision-making even when it is accompanied by short-term success, such as high academic achievement on tests and successful entrance to top-rated colleges. H. J. Cho (1995) also investigated how students became unhappy because they were not satisfied with their colleges or majors, which were chosen by others or selected simply through their exam scores, even though they succeeded in entering top universities. H. J. Cho (1995) described her teaching experiences with university
students, especially those who had successfully followed external forms of discipline and controls for forced learning, and who had become the so-called winners of top-rated college entrance. By the time they entered college, these students had internalized a great skill of self-discipline and a high level of endurance in order to succeed under excessive pressure. However, many years of preparing for college entrance under heavy pressure made “the winners extremely passive,” and they had a difficult time adjusting to a new life with uncontrolled free time (H. J. Cho, 1995, p. 155).

In summary, South Korean adolescents’ lives have been primarily directed towards college exam preparation; other parts of life and other ways of being have hardly been encouraged or accepted, regardless of voluntary or forced choices. Many Korean students have experienced learning from external forces that place extreme emphasis on competition, academic performance, and college entrance. Members of South Korean society have commonly believed that students have an obligation to focus on their academic performance. Many parents have had a tendency to find their satisfaction in their children’s academic success, and teachers’ performance has been evaluated by their students’ academic performance. These climates have put heavy pressure on the students, no matter how good they are at academic performance. It has been extremely difficult for the students to find their existential value beyond their academic test scores. The students who have not been at the top of the rankings have received a lack of acknowledgement in school; they have often felt powerless and helpless. Moreover, as the previous studies revealed, even those students who were academically successful also
felt insecure about and fearful of losing others’ trust in them when their test scores went down. In addition, important developmental tasks during adolescence (such as exploring selfhood) have been neglected in such contexts. These scholars found that there were negative short-term and long-term effects on the students and their lives. Students became disconnected from themselves, authentic learning, and other people around them. Adolescents’ individual value was determined not by their individual uniqueness, but through standardized measurement with numbers and rankings. Students today experience profound thirst for in-depth and meaningful connections to themselves, their lives, and others around them. Nurturing an inner strength in order to sustain a balance between the inner and the outer parts of life, using spiritual awareness, seems to be an urgent educational need for students in South Korea. Thus, throughout this study, I propose spirituality as a response to those problems and issues in Korean education and schooling. I explore the possibility of creating a school or classroom as a place where spirit, heart, and soul are welcomed and that enables both teachers and students to be fully present with who they really are. In the following section, I examine the literature on spirituality in education.

**Spirituality in Education**

**Spirituality: A New Way of Knowing and Relating in Education**

In the previous section, I discussed education and schooling in South Korea. The degrees and ranges of South Korean educational problems and issues might be quite different from those of other countries because of social, cultural, and political
uniqueness and differences. However, through reviewing the literature regarding education, schooling, and spirituality across countries, including Australia, Canada, Ghana, New Zealand, the UK, and the U.S., I have found educational problems similar to those in South Korean education (e.g., de Souza, 2009; Dei, 2002b; Kessler, 2000; Lewis, 2000; Palmer, 1993, 1999; Sunley, 2009; Zurmehly, 2014). Those problems include increasing emphases on accountability and effectiveness, applications of economic market principles in education, disconnected learning and teaching experiences for both students and teachers, and so forth. For example, Sunley (2009) found that schooling in the UK emphasizes measurable and standardized performance outcomes using the idea of effectiveness. This education failed to guide students to nurture holistic growth with mind, body, and spirit or to develop critical self-awareness; instead, the students were taught according to “conformity and compliance” during everyday school days (Sunley, 2009, p. 793).

Scholars have identified objectivism and modern ways of schooling as the roots of those problems (de Souza, 2009; Dei, 2002a, 2002b; Lewis, 2000; Palmer, 1993, 1999). For instance, Palmer (1993), a great contributor in explicitly embracing spirituality in education, identified that the core problem of current education is “the pain of disconnection” (p. v) because of the objectivism of modern knowledge. In particular, objectivism has generated polarity between spiritual knowing and positivistic scientific knowing, as well as an “adversary relationship” between the knower and the known (objects) (Palmer, 1993, p. 23). Similarly, modern knowledge has failed to help students
and teachers know, cultivate, and use their inner sources (such as love, passion, and compassion) that can inform their ways of being, relating, connecting, and knowing. Rather, as Palmer stated (1993), modern knowledge has made people become greatly distant from themselves and others, and especially from their hearts, spirits, and emotions, which are great sources of love, compassion, and the “inner sense of truth” (p. 29). The hope in his claim is that embracing spirituality in education can revitalize students’ and teachers’ capacity to recognize, connect with, and reach to those inner sources (Palmer, 1993).

Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, and Zine (2000) also found that spirituality can create new knowledge and various ways of knowing for students that are different from externalized and objectified knowledge, cognitive reasoning, and so forth. They acknowledged that a certain knowledge and way of understanding are more privileged, are introduced as “objective, true, and scientific” in schools, and guide what to contain in curricula and what type of teachers to hire (Dei et al., 2000, p. 83). Dei et al. (2000) stated that when spirituality and spiritual aspects of lives are nurtured in school, students’ self-reflexivity can be grown by bringing more attention to the inner aspects of self and life, which encourages them to use intuition, wisdom, emotional feelings, and imagination. Nurturing spirituality in school can make the students more critically and reflectively examine socially, culturally, and politically constructed understanding and knowledge, especially what is privileged and marginalized. In addition, the students can develop a better understanding of how they view themselves,
society, and the world, and why they understand a certain way. The students learn that their lives and who they are cannot be understood when disconnected from their community, their society, and the world. They can gain a more connected, holistic understanding of who they are, as Dei et al. (2000) argued.

In his study on nurturing spiritual sensibilities in education, Lewis (2000) argued that spirituality is “a characteristic of all phenomena” (p. 270) and that it cannot exist exclusively as a separate area alienated from other dimensions of one’s life experiences or educational practices, including intellectual, physical, and emotional dimensions. Lewis (2000) sought to offer insights into the interconnections of spirituality and different areas of human life, including morality and intellectuality. For example, according to Lewis (2000), cultivation of spiritual sensibilities in educational practices can support students’ morality in a different sense. That is, Lewis (2000) used Steiner’s (1995) concept of “the good,” which is “not what we ought to do, but what we want to do when we express our full, true human nature” (p. 270, original emphasis). From this understanding, Lewis (2000) stated that because spirituality in education aims to help students fully develop their innate human nature, it can powerfully lead students to moral living from within that is derived from the inner want to positively contribute to others, not from moral obligations or external moral preaching. In addition, according to Lewis (2000), spirituality in education means nurturing students’ hearts and minds together. From this understanding, Lewis (2000) clarified that nurturing spirituality in education does not mean ignoring intellectual, logical, rational, or scientific learning. Rather,
spirituality seeks to educate students to be more holistic as humans with their full potential. Spirituality can help students to go beyond the rational or scientific dimensions of their learning experiences and that all of the students’ learning experiences have the possibility to contribute to developing the students’ spiritual sensibilities (Lewis, 2000).

Lewis’s (2000) claim is similar to Palmer’s (1998) argument: in order to more fully and deeply explore the inner landscape of learning and teaching, Palmer (1998) emphasized the importance of taking three significant paths: intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. Palmer (1998) explained these paths as follows:

By intellectual I mean the way we think about teaching and learning—the form and content of our concepts of how people know and learn, of the nature of our students and our subjects. By emotional I mean the way we and our students feel as we teach and learn—feelings that can either enlarge or diminish the exchange between us. By spiritual I mean the diverse ways we answer the heart’s longing to be connected with the largeness of life—a longing that animates love and work. (p. 5, original emphasis)

According to Palmer (1998), intellect, emotion, and spirit are interconnected for wholeness in education as well as in human selfhood. As Palmer (1998) further explained, “Reduce teaching to intellect, and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions, and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual, and it loses its anchor to the world” (p. 5). By pointing out that nurturing students’ spirituality has often been undervalued, neglected, and separated from education, Palmer (1993) proposed a
recovery of the spiritual ground of knowing, teaching, and learning. Palmer (1993) claimed that spirituality is “a new way of knowing” (p. xxiv). Thus, turning to spirituality in education can be transformative in terms of bringing students and teachers to a new knowledge in which they are learning and teaching through “a holistic way of knowing” (Palmer, 1993, p. xxv).

What happens, then, when spirituality becomes the foundation for knowledge, knowing, teaching, and learning in education? Palmer (1993) distinguished the particular type of spirituality he discussed by clarifying that his claim of spirituality is not end-results from a particular type of education via a manual but “a spirituality of sources in education” (p. xi, emphasis in original). Palmer (1993) explained what “such a spirituality” can do in education:

Such a spirituality does not dictate where we must go, but trusts that any path walked with integrity will take us to a place of knowledge. Such a spirituality encourages us to welcome diversity and conflict, to tolerate ambiguity, and to embrace paradox. By this understanding, the spirituality of education is not about dictating ends. It is about examining and clarifying the inner sources of teaching and learning. (p. xi)

Spirituality allows students and teachers to recognize and address fears and disconnections that are deeply seated in learning and teaching. Learning and teaching can be fortified with inner strength and confidence through students’ and teachers’ inner quests for integrity, connectedness with themselves and others, and rich self-knowledge.
Elsewhere, Palmer (1999) also stated that when education is approached with spirituality, education is no longer about getting information or jobs but can become about “healing, wholeness, liberation, and empowerment, transcendence, and reclaiming the vitality of life” (p. 3). The act of knowing becomes an act of embracing and nurturing love and compassion, rather than gaining power and control, and opens up “sources of healing, hope, and wholeness” (Palmer, 1993, p. 10). Palmer (1993) explained that objectivism and modern knowledge have a type of hidden curriculum that leads to relational cycles of either dominating or being dominated through the quest for power, control, competition, and manipulation. In contrast, spirituality informs a new logic of love and compassion in education that people can use to acknowledge and require personal relationships that include a sense of interdependence, interrelatedness, and interconnectedness between the knower and the known: relationships that allow both the knower and the known to have “their own integrity and otherness” and in-depth implications for each other (Palmer, 1993, p. 32). Such a logic of love and compassion can lead students and teachers to end the cycles of dominating and being dominated, and to move forward toward searching for truth, being, and (inter)relating for unity, harmony, and connection. Moreover, both students’ and teachers’ inner realities, including hearts and emotions, no longer need to be sacrificed for externally given reality or objective knowledge. Instead, by using love and compassion through the spirituality of education, students and teachers can experience the growth of self-knowledge and find a deeper
acceptance of themselves and others that will liberate them and move them toward living with even larger love (Palmer, 1993).

In some studies, researchers have sought to offer insights about what spirituality can do in particular curricular areas and how spirituality can be nurtured in classroom learning by specifically investigating a particular area of learning or curriculum (such as art, history, and literature). In these studies, researchers have demonstrated, exemplified, and extended the understanding of spirituality’s universal existence as a possibility in every aspect of school experiences (Bone, 2008; Cottingham, 2005; Hay, 2000). For example, in his case study of his own classroom teaching, Cottingham (2005) showed how a history class with a use of literature can contribute to students’ spirituality by exploring deeply the core meaning and issues of humanity and human lives. Specifically, he claimed that he combined history and literature (such as novels, narrative literary texts, etc.) because the use of literature in history class “creates a cognitive climate in which spirituality can flourish” (Cottingham, 2005, p. 49). Cottingham (2005) also argued that history classes can benefit students from using novels or literary texts that have indeterminacy (preferably narrative works, since they provide psychological insights into the past), because doing so can nurture students’ reflexive empathy, which he defined as “the capacity to reflect on one’s own life in the light of understanding the lives of others” (p. 45). The combination of history and literature helps students make cognitive connections and see conflicts between their viewpoints and viewpoints from a historical time and context. It makes history class go beyond simply learning the facts at
the surface level and beyond the simple moral judgment of good and evil from a
of spirituality “as struggle,” and spirituality can be grown from discomfort and suffering.
Based on this understanding, Cottingham (2005) argued that such history classes position
students to cognitively, mentally, and emotionally experience various struggles and
conflicts of the past in historical time by using their imagination when reading texts.
Such class makes the students to go beyond their everyday contexts and grow their
appreciation of “the complexity and diversity of people’s lives” (Cottingham, 2005, p. 49). Cottingham (2005) pointed out that contributing to spirituality is a central activity of
history class. Such class requires students’ active engagement with their imaginings of
the past, and literary texts or novels can guide them. Through students’ participation in
the active and dynamic process of reflecting, listening, speaking, and responding with
their interpretations and thoughts, learning history becomes subjective meaning-making
for them: they think, create, strengthen, and challenge these meanings. Subjective
knowledge can be valued and appreciated but also challenged and reshaped, especially
stereotyped ideas, through classroom dialogues. The students can not only grow their
sense and knowledge of who they are, how they understand themselves and others, and
why, but they can also foster their ability to deepen their own spiritual and emotional
knowledge.

Finally, in some studies researchers argued that teachers’ roles are more crucial
than anything else in cultivating students’ spirituality in education beyond the teachers’
specific subject areas. For example, Sunley (2009) positioned teachers as “gatekeepers to the spiritual dimension in the classroom” (p. 794) who can lead their students to holistically engage in their learning with mind, body, and spirit. As Sunley (2009) pointed out, teachers cannot help students to increase their spiritual growth and understanding without their own understanding and awareness of the spiritual dimensions in their lives. Schools need teachers who can grow and have an ability to deeply and spiritually understand themselves and their own lives through self-reflection, because doing so enables those teachers to have “genuine teaching presence” and “practical wisdom” based on a deep and critical self-awareness and integrity (Sunley, 2009, p. 794). Then, teachers can spiritually relate with their students through their teaching and nurture the students’ spiritual self-awareness of themselves and their lives. Sunley (2009) noted that an educational climate that emphasizes effectiveness and efficiency, and which makes education “a statistical exercise” (p. 794), also seriously affects teachers. It discourages the teachers from having self-worth and awareness, bringing their personal qualities from within along with a vision of their teaching and self-authority, or relating deeply with their students.

According to Palmer (1998), there are three important sources of teaching: subjects, students, and teachers’ selfhood. He claimed that teachers’ inwardness and selfhood is most fundamental because knowing and understanding students and subjects is clearly related to how much teachers know themselves. A lack of self-awareness and knowledge makes it difficult for teachers to reach the deepest levels of personal meaning
in teaching and learning. It sometimes sounds even more relevant to have good strategies or techniques, especially for someone who simply needs to survive everyday teaching life. Good techniques might help teachers, but there has been too much emphasis on acquiring a new or good curriculum or skills in current education, compared to paying attention to the inner sources of teachers. Relying merely on outward sources can potentially harm teachers’ inner capacity for instructing or the integrity and dignity of their human inwardness, which are fundamental qualities of inner sources for good teaching. This becomes even more obvious when teachers believe that the purpose of education is “to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world” and that “the more familiar [they] are with [their] inner terrain, the more surefooted [their] teaching—and living—becomes” (Palmer, 1998, p. 6).

**Spirituality for Adolescents**

Although in describing the notion of spirituality in this study I do not assume that there is a linear path for maturity or development of spirituality by a certain age, I acknowledge that adolescence is a time in the human life journey when people often ask ontological and existential questions about the meaning and purpose of their lives in forming their sense of who they are (Erikson, 1968; Perkins, 2009; Tan, 2009). Thus, it is important to look at how the literature discusses adolescents in relation to their spiritual sense, sensitivity, and growth in order to better understand what spirituality in education can do for adolescents.
Many researchers have recognized that spirituality can promote personal growth through deeper self-understanding for adolescents. Tan (2009), for example, argued that self-understanding is one of the great benefits that spirituality can give adolescents. She considered reflection as a great vehicle with which to grow the sense of spirituality, especially during adolescence, when people undergo a great deal of ambiguous and uncertain feelings in the process of developing a critical awareness about themselves from multiple lenses and examining and shaping their own beliefs and worldviews. Through reflection, adolescents’ sense of connectedness to themselves and others can be increased (Tan, 2009). Adolescents’ growth of their spiritual sense and critical awareness of themselves and their lives through deliberate reflective efforts can prevent them from passively leaning on external authorities or taking the absolute type of knowledge or value as their own without self-examination. More importantly, according to Tan (2009), spiritual reflection about who they are and what purpose their lives have can guide adolescents to find their commitments, personally important values, and a sense of destiny or calling about their life and future while considering social justice, equity, and co-existence with others. This spiritual reflection includes pondering, questioning, and meaning-making of lived experiences, which can be delightful and joyful as well as troubled, conflicted, hopeless, and despairing.

Tan (2009) also stated that adolescents’ spirituality can be nurtured in their schools through curriculum and cultural atmosphere when the schools aim to support the adolescents’ exploration of themselves and their lives through reflection. For specific
ideas of classroom activities, she suggested watching films, discussing socially critical
issues and events, performing artistic activities, reading and writing poetry, and
journaling. According to Tan (2009), to create an appropriate atmosphere for growing
adolescents’ spiritual sense, teachers’ acceptance, allowance, and nurturance of students’
awakening of personal feelings through activities were emphasized in promoting spiritual
reflection in school settings.

In some studies, researchers made claims about the positive influence of
spirituality on adolescents’ well-being in terms of resilience and capacity for coping with
life’s difficulties. For example, Pandya (2015) argued that spirituality can be an
important source of adolescents’ well-being. In her study, Pandya (2015) examined an
international spiritual program for adolescents including South Africa, India, Canada, and
the UK. Her findings showed that growth of spirituality promoted adolescents’ positive
feelings and attitudes about themselves and their lives with satisfaction, happiness,
respect, and hope. Pandya (2015) also stated that such growth and positive feelings could
contribute to adolescents’ capacity for coping when they confront difficulties in their
lives. Similarly, based on in-depth reviews of theoretical and empirical studies, Kim and
Esquivel (2011) argued from a psychological perspective that adolescents’ resilience and
coping capacity can be expanded through their spirituality. More specifically, common
outcomes of adolescents’ spirituality were gaining personal growth, closer relationships,
and relational and social supports, as well as increasing prosocial behaviors and adaptive
coping skills. Thus, Kim and Esquivel (2011) considered spirituality a good source for developing adolescents’ resilience.

Finally, Perkins (2009) discussed the importance of spirituality for adolescents from a clinical perspective. According to Perkins (2009), there are five dimensions of the self: the social self (a way of connecting with others in the world), the thinking self (mind), the material self (body), the feeling self (heart), and the spiritual self (soul, inner world) (pp. 389-392). Perkins (2009) explained that the spiritual self is perhaps “the glue that holds all the dimensions together” as a source of “calmness, safety, comfort, and even guidance” (p. 392) through an awareness of interconnectedness with others beyond the self. For adolescents, awakening their spirituality opens a door to the journey of getting to know themselves more deeply, and it can bring them deeper levels of self-acceptance. Perkins (2009) suggested that encouraging adolescents and having dialogues with them can guide them to move toward self-discovery and increase their spiritual understanding of themselves and their lives in educational settings. In addition, like many other scholars, Perkins (2009) recognized that it is important for adolescents to have quiet and deep reflection about themselves and their lives to foster their spiritual discovery.

**Spirituality for Teachers**

Researchers also addressed how spirituality can have a positive impact on teachers and their teaching at various levels, including teachers’ integrity and wholeness at the personal level, their connections to students in teaching and learning at the
relational level, and their social transformation at the social level. And these three impacts are closely interrelated. Spirituality in education can help teachers to look deep inside their hearts and reconcile with their divided selves in order to live fully from within by being undivided and whole. Spirituality encourages connections between teachers’ inner and outer knowledge. I believe this personal level of change is most critical to induce more benefits and changes to come along in teaching. Spirituality will also encourage teachers to talk not only about what (content, subject, and curriculum), why (rational), and how (techniques), but also to ask the who question: “who is the self that teaches?” (Palmer, 1998, p. 8). Palmer (1998) argued that this who question will lead us “toward the recovery of the inner resources that good teaching always requires” (p. 8).

In order to explore the spiritual lives of teachers, Palmer (1999) conducted the Teacher Formation Program for two years. He found several positive outcomes from teacher participants through this program. The teachers had a richer sense of their identity both in and out of school, and they also felt that they were better able to deal with challenges and conflicts and to advocate for changes as citizens at their work (Palmer, 1999). Palmer (1998) emphasized the importance for the teachers to have conversations together not about teaching techniques or curricula but about the spiritual questions of their teaching lives: “By addressing [these questions] openly and honestly, alone and together, [teachers] can serve [their] students more faithfully, enhance [their] own well-being, make common cause with colleagues, and help education bring more light and life
to the world” (p. 8). When teachers’ hearts and spirits are undivided in the classroom, students will know the teachers’ commitment to teaching and for their learning whatever subject or grade is taught (Hansen, 1995), and they may engage in their own learning more vigorously and happily in response to their teachers’ spirit-present instruction (Noddings, 1984). Palmer (1999) stated that “to teach as a whole person to the whole person is not to lose one’s professionalism as a teacher but to take it to a deeper level” (p. 10).

Miller (1996) identified presence and caring as core benefits that spiritually sensitive teachers can bring to the classroom. In his own teaching, as a teacher educator, he encouraged teachers to be mindful and aware of their moment-to-moment experience through meditative and journaling practices. Those teachers reported that they rarely experienced the feelings of rushing through their daily events or being burned out or energy-drained from their work. Instead, their teaching became a life-giving experience; their daily lives with students became more joyful as they became more sensitive and responsive to student feelings, needs, and interests; and they personally became happier and more present in their lives.

Hansen (1995) has not explicitly used the term or concept of spirituality or directly advocated for it in education, but his scholarship has been devoted to discussions of moral purpose and ethical meaning in education. To me, his works seem to resonate with Palmer’s (1999) in terms of the belief about the importance of inner forces in teachers’ lives. Similar to Palmer (1999), Hansen (1995) fundamentally acknowledged
teachers as humans with emotions and recognized teaching from within as essential in explaining his concept of vocation and calling to be a teacher. He explained, “No teacher can reach inside students’ heads and implant knowledge or values. Teaching remains a challenge and its outcomes remain uncertain regardless of where it occurs” (Hansen, 1995, p. 95). Therefore, a teacher’s inner power is to bring individuality and being to teaching despite “anxiety and uncertainty about one’s ability and about whether teaching is the right thing to be doing” (Hansen, 1995, p. 155). Thinking of teaching as a calling can help teachers to overcome their fear and bring who they are to their teaching with courage, by considering such doubts or fears as seeds for deeper inner growth and transformation. In particular, in his book The Call to Teach, Hansen (1995) claimed to use the terms vocation and calling instead of occupation or job to refer to teaching because the former concepts can call attention to teachers’ lives at a deeper level that is highly personal and spiritual. As Hansen (1995) explained,

The idea of vocation underscores just how central the person is who occupies the position of teacher. It highlights the fact that the role or occupation itself does not teach students. It is the person within the role and who shapes it who teaches students, and who has an impact on them for better or for worse. (p. 17, original emphasis)

More specifically, spiritual understanding of teaching makes it possible to explore what teachers do, why they do it, and what sustains them in teaching, in spite of challenging circumstances and the “unavoidable uncertainties of teaching” (Hansen, 1995, p. 63) that
often cause fears, frustrations, and doubts. Hansen’s (1995) work has shown how the
concept of vocation and calling to teach can illuminate teachers’ highly personal and
spiritual qualities, including perseverance, courage, and imagination.

Schoonmaker (2009) claimed that “education in the deepest, most inclusive sense
is a spiritual endeavor. . . . Classrooms are spiritual spaces whether or not we intend
them to be or recognize that they are” (p. 2,714). By embracing the concept of
spirituality in education, educators can offer space and time for students to value and
examine ways in which the sacredness of their own lives and the meanings of their
selfhood have been contaminated by historical, social, political, and cultural issues. In
order to do so, educators will need to explore the ways their own spirits have been
affected by issues in their lives so that, as Whitfield and Klug (2004) suggested, they
might accept their role as healers in order to work toward educational and social
transformation. Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) argued

when we “remember” who we are as individuals and in collaboration with others,
as well as “re-member” fragmented aspects of ourselves that are often devalued,
disregarded, or dismissed, we can be more successful in our academic,
professional, personal, and collective endeavors. (p. 41)

Only with intimate connectedness to each other from whole hearts and beings as humans
can people work toward living with justice and equity in a society with dynamics of
injustice and inequity. That is what spirituality can do in education.
[Educational practice informed by spirituality] involves authenticity, openness, acceptance, and honoring of the various dimensions of how people learn and construct knowledge by incorporating activities that include attention to the affective, somatic, imaginative, symbolic, cultural, and communal, as well as the rational. (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006, p. 40)

I believe that the most fundamental role of spirituality in education is social transformation toward social justice and equity through spiritual passion in teachers. Approaching teaching and learning at the personal level is key to my claim of encouraging spirituality in education in order to put humans (vs. the school system, the job market, the nation’s economy, etc.) at the center of minds and hearts in education because, as Chickering (2006) stated, “all the structural changes, all the creative, adventurous innovations, will only scratch the surface unless each of us can be authentic ourselves” (p. 11). Furthermore, I believe that schools are great spaces in which to begin our dialogue. Palmer (1998) asserted that

if we were to turn some of the externalized reformist energies toward exorcising the inner demons of fear, we would take a vital step toward the renewal of teaching and learning. We would no longer need to put our lives on hold while waiting for structural change. By understanding our fear, we could overcome the structures of disconnection with the power of self-knowledge. (p. 37)

This is the power of listening to the inner self and expressing inner need. As hooks (2000) claimed, “identifying liberation from any domination and oppression as [an]
essentially spiritual quest returns us to a spirituality which unites spiritual practice with our struggles for justice and liberation” (p. 109).
Chapter 3: Methodology

Epistemological and Methodological Grounds of the Study

Decolonizing and Humanizing Methodology for Colonized Body, Mind, and Spirit

In this current study, I understand that research is not innocent, objective, or value-free work, but is rather socially and culturally constructed, and not free from the hegemonic domination or ideological process that is deeply embedded in a researcher’s body, mind, and spirit, as many researchers of qualitative and feminist study have claimed (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Dillard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Lather, 2007; Rhee, 2009; Smith, 1999; Villenas, 1992). Building upon this logic of research, researchers bring their own life stories, histories, and identities to authenticating their research through particular questions, topics, ideas, and contexts (Rhee, 2009), doing so as “a form of theorizing” that requires self-consciousness and critical examination with determination (Dillard, 2000, p. 671). Researchers’ personal identities and positionalities direct their systems of selecting topics, asking questions, discoursing on ideas and issues, collecting data, interacting with and relating to participants, and understanding worlds and phenomena; these ideas are ontologically, epistemologically and methodologically important topics of discussions in research.
It may sound simple, but it gets much more complex, *messier* (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000) and *dirtier* (Smith, 2012), especially when there is no fitted set of paradigms or epistemological frameworks in the legitimate realms of academic discourses, because such sets function as “guiding principles and beliefs about what research is and what it is not” (Dillard, 2006b, p. 61) and “what is important, legitimate and reasonable” (Patton, as cited in Dillard, 2006b, p. 61). It often happens to researchers of color and women, including myself, whose lives, identities, and positionalities are distinct from and often in conflict with the dominant White male, Eurocentric, and Euro-American cultural logic, paradigm, and regime of truth (Dillard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Rhee, 2009). Thus, Ladson-Billings (2000) argued that “the concept of epistemology is more than a way of knowing. An epistemology is a system of knowing that has both an internal logic and external validity… [T]he claim of an epistemological ground is a crucial legitimating force” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, pp. 257-258). Her argument indicates that it is not just a matter of preference or proliferating because the dominant paradigms as the hegemony “claim to be the only legitimate way to view the world” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 258) for the truth and the reality. Therefore, Ladson-Billings further argued that deliberate and active intellectual works must be done to develop an epistemology (a system of knowing) on the knower’s part that is different from the dominant epistemology. Ladson-Billings (2000) emphasized that there are such well-developed epistemologies and epistemological frames, including critical race theory and the critical and indigenous epistemologies of Black/Brown/Red (e.g., Cannella & Manuelito, 2008; Dillard, 2008;
Ladson-Billings & Donner, 2008; Meyer, 2008), that describe the systems of experience and the knowledge of people outside of the dominant paradigmatic frame (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2000). These works created by scholars of color and women “serve as both counternknowledge and liberating tools for people who have suffered (and continue to suffer) from the Euro-American epistemological tradition” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 257).

Korean indigenous qualitative researchers have also established the need of working against taking dominant epistemology as the truth (Y. C. Kim & Cho, 2005). Y. C. Kim and Cho (2005) claimed that there is a need to develop Korean cultural knowledge about qualitative research methods. Y. C. Kim and Cho (2005) noted that Korean knowledge has been produced dominantly by the Euro-American and Western research frameworks, and sought validity from them without a critical examination of their relevancy in Korean cultural context or knowledge. Furthermore, Y. C. Kim and Cho (2005) suggested that Korean researchers should more actively uncover and legitimate culturally specific and relevant epistemologies and methodologies, and articulate Korean indigenous ways of being, knowing, and relating. It is not only for better understanding Korea, Koreans, and Korean education, but also for pointing out “the danger of totally relying on their knowledge, which may be partially correct in certain circumstances” and witnessing “other cultural knowledge out there” (p. 370) for Western scholars. Understanding and valuing cultural knowledge that is deeply embedded in human actions and interactions is significant for meaningful and successful
human interactions, relations, and communications in the research process, from gaining entry and collecting data to analyzing and conducting research. When research is done from the value and understanding of cultural knowledge, research and research process can become *decolonizing* (Smith, 1999). Y. C. Kim and Cho (2005) criticized the influence of Western and American research agendas, theories, and contexts on Korean educational research over 50 years; these agendas, theories, and contexts have colonized Korean researchers’ consciousness about the way of framing research contexts and problems, collecting data, analyzing data, and writing text(s). Situated research topics and questions need to be investigated in order to more deeply understand Korean schooling and education, which is culturally, socially, and politically different from schooling and education in the West. Directly applying Western contextual understanding and frames to understanding Korean contexts is a “colonized culture of education research” (Y. C. Kim & Cho, 2005, p. 371) that perpetuates Western imperialistic epistemology with Euro-American cultural and intellectual supremacy. Thus, Kim and Cho (2005) emphasized a need or a desire to “establish a new culture of resistance and postcolonial mind” (p. 371) by decolonizing research topics and questions.

These Korean qualitative researchers’ claims resonate with qualitative researchers in the logics of transnational and indigenous research. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) and Dillard (2008) suggested that research methods and texts simultaneously create and enact meaning that is moral, “personal, political, local, global, historical, and cultural” (Dillard, 2008, p. 278); furthermore, “the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European
imperialism and colonialism” (Smith, 2012, p. 1). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) wrote that “sadly, qualitative research in many, if not all, of its forms (observation, participation, interview, or ethnography) serves as a metaphor for colonial knowledge, for power, and for truth” (p. 4). Under colonialism, there was an extreme division between the West (here and us) and the rest of the world (there and them):

“they” were supposed to be “there” and “we” were supposed to be “here” except when “we” showed up “there” as development experts, colonizers, missionaries, tourists, ethnographers. The West “we” used the “homogeneity within” and “difference between” to drastically separate “us” from “them” to justify the superiority of the West, and to perpetuate this hierarchy. (Rhee, 2003, p. 45)

Colonization produced particular cultural discourses about the so-called Third world: It was represented as dictated by colonial regimes of power and as an objective other that was obscuring complexities, ambiguities, and diversities of people’s lives in relation to other cultures (Mohanty, 1991; Rhee, 2003; Smith, 2012). In the current postcolonial world, however, those others migrate and/or travel to the West here, and I am one of those others. By traveling (and/or migrating) to the West, we as others are situated within positions of multiplicity, complexity, and conflicts in power and structure. Our existences and experiences here (attempt to) disrupt, question, and struggle with taken-for-granted fixed notions, such as subjectivity, agency, identity, gender, race, culture, nationality, and territory deeply embedded in Western discourse (Lather, 2008; Ong, 1999; Rhee, 2003). As Mohanty (1991), Chow (1993), and Rhee (2009) argued, Third
World women’s voices, texts, and works in the West do not mean that the women have decentered hegemonic histories; instead, what is significant about having these works is that

in the orbit of U.S. research discourse, attending to our concerns, issues, and differences, rather than reading our “differences” in contrast to Western “sameness,” will disrupt the Western imperialistic epistemology which sees the rest of the West as the Other. (Rhee, 2009, p. 162)

My Positionality as a Traveling Woman Across Korea and the U.S.

I delineate who I am as a researcher who has been conducting a study of spirituality of students and teachers in a Korean alternative high school where students and teachers grew a sense of connectedness, groundedness, and integrity as well as self-understanding. I would like to begin this section by explaining what has led me, as a researcher, to ask a particular question, and how this question connects with who I am, by remembering my life. This is critical work in making a connection between me (as a researcher) and my research as “part of the lived reality of the researcher” and as an “integrated whole,” not as “dichotomized and fractured” (Collins, 1992, p. 182) by articulating that I have a feeling for a certain group of people and particular issues (Collins, 1992; Hampton, 1995; Palmer, 1998). My way of being, seeing, and knowing is deeply rooted in the everyday experiences of my life, composed of many different identities from my distinctive locations, origins, cultures, and social institutions (Dillard, 2000).
As I become a researcher, I had a series of questions to answer in order to allow myself to begin a deliberate journey to be a researcher: Who do I think I am as a researcher? Who do I want to become as a researcher? Why do I do research? What does it mean to me to have this new researcher identity? My inner fear and doubt constantly created questions, and asked myself the questions in terms of being a researcher without knowing what those feelings were about or where those feelings were coming from. 

Collins (1992) noted that little is known or has been deeply discussed about the connection between the researcher and research, the researcher’s bias and abilities, and frames of reference in writing and teaching about research. She compared researchers and research to musicians and music: “Musicians who fail to connect with their music or instruments may at best reach a certain type of technical accomplishment but will never be true artists” (Collins, 1992, p. 182). She argued that “research and researcher are no longer dichotomized and fractured but serve as an integrated whole” (Collins, 1992, p. 182) with seamless connection. Collins (1992) also raised some important questions that I found resonated with, and expanded on my questions: “Who is the researcher? What leads the researcher to ask particular types of questions? Why does the researcher use certain types of metaphors? How does the research connect with the researcher? What values guide one’s research?” (p. 182). Therefore, my own questions and Collins’s (1992) questions became a useful guide for me in continuously seeking my own answers, which eventually helped me to reveal and unpack my ways of being, seeing, thinking, understanding, and knowing.
Frequent encounters with the White male, Eurocentric, and Euro-American logic and paradigm dominantly at the center of the current academy seemed to threaten my view of world and self. And, even at the so-called margin, there were predominantly Blacks. I felt intimacy, (inter)connectedness, and intersectionality with them as an ideologically racialized and a colored being (Ladson-Billings, 1998; 2000), and I am grateful for the inspirations, liberation and healing that I experienced through their voices and works of critical theory and feminist theory. However, I also recognized my alien-ness as a traveling Korean woman to become a researcher in the U.S. That was because to me, at least they were existing—even if they were not at the center, they were alive—while my kind of color seemed to be nowhere. I was “other than being the Other” (Rhee, 2009, p. 152) and “alien woman of color” (Rhee, 2009, p. 154) with an entire absence of being. I often found myself unsafe in us-and-them and here-and-there discourse. My use of us and them seemed to bring a confusion and tension: Are you us? Aren’t you them? Who are you here? Where are you? Here or there?

For the last 10 years, I have been living as a traveling Korean woman between Korea and the U.S. My positionality as a traveling woman with an ambivalent aspect of transnationality seemed to evoke needs of my body and spirit for feeling grounded and connected. On the other hand, and on a deeper level, I often felt that I had nowhere to belong or settle down on the ground with my up-in-the-air traveling-woman identity, because of the temporal and ephemeral aspect of the traveling-woman identity. My traveling-woman identity, with its mobility and temporality, seemed to be very troubling.
Ironically and paradoxically, in the U.S. I was perceived as a marginalized Asian, Third World woman of color who hardly existed, while in Korea I was perceived as an Americanized, privileged woman (so-called *woman-drunken-U.S.-water* or 미국물 먹은 여자) (Rhee, 2009). In both places, I was frequently perceived as an exotic, impermanent, and transient being with a certain distance and detachment. Thus, I longed for connectedness because I was considered as the other in both places. It also necessitated my deep search for feeling more grounded. I longed to stand up with my own feet deeply and firmly grounded, but it seemed that I was always floating around up in the air, somewhere in-between. I went deeper for my spiritual grounding.

There was a deep-seated *shame* growing within me which made me feel less about myself and my ways of being, seeing, thinking, and knowing. In addition, I felt disempowered by an implicit message that I needed to be dependent and lean on the works of *others* to earn relevancy, legitimacy, validity, and adequacy for my ways of being, seeing, thinking, and knowing. Such shame and powerlessness seem to have “[prevented me] from taking needed steps to restore [my] integrity of being and personal agency” (hooks, 2003, p. 101), through a feeling of unworthiness or inadequateness; hooks (2003) named this “a true crisis of spirit” (p. 102) that destroys wholeness and leads to a divided life, unless there is self-awareness. It is not so surprising, then, that there were deep fears of being not accepted, not welcomed and not recognized upon seeing those who had already been welcomed, accepted, and recognized, with their ways of being, thinking, seeing, and knowing, in the Western mainstream dominant academy.
I had pressure to engage in a practice of *learning to forget* (Dillard, 2012) and the temptation of effacing, hiding, and evading my true self (if possible), conforming to *their* ways, and mimicking those dominant discourses and theories in the Western academy, in the very good name of socialization and objectivism as a student becoming a researcher (Rhee, 2009; Villenas, 1996). But, at the same time, I also felt resistance, anger, and fatigue in the practice of conformity. I longed to be connected with my own knowledge, legacies, heritage, and spirits and specialized bodies as a Korean woman. If I were to efface the Korean-ness that is a part of me, then I would not be *me* anymore. I could not just take a part of myself away from my wholeness. I found that I consciously and unconsciously developed my deep longing and desire for belonging, connectedness, and having *somewhere* that I could fit in; I was looking everywhere from left to right, from top to bottom, and from center and to margin, and I found that my being did not seem to fit *anywhere*. Finally, I learned that what I, my spirit, longed for was *home*; a spiritual, “ontological[,] and epistemological home” (Lather, 2006, p. 40) where my body, mind, and spirit feel comfortable (Dillard, 2006a, 2006b). Thus, my urgent need became clear: I had a need of humanizing myself as a Korean descendent and a transnational Third World woman. I needed to learn and remember complexly intertwined histories from colonialism and its impact, and also learn loveable-ness, creativeness, and richness of being and living with my particular identities/positionalities (Asher, 2001; Rhee, 2009; Villennas, 1996).
To clarify, I do not intend to shape “a pathetic state of marginalization and exclusion” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 260) or a “melancholy subject position” (Lather, 2008, p. 223) here. Nor is my intention to claim that “the greater the multiplicity of oppressions, the purer the vision of group members on marginalization or subjugation” (Dillard, 2000, p. 673). Rather than stating my unconsciousness, unwillingness, or conformity, what I really intend to delve into here is how complicated social, cultural, and political issues shape one’s particular perceptions about the world, society, life, and self (Dillard, 2000). The position of powerlessness, or of the oppressed/colonized, can offer people “an epistemological privilege” (Lightfoot, as cited in Dillard, 2000, p. 664) as a legacy, along with recognition of shifting and dynamic identities (race, ethnicity, gender, class, etc.) that establish an epistemological basis of their own. By living with the complexity and multiplicity of representations, people’s ability to know, construct, negotiate, and transform among multiple realities and relations will continuously unfold (Dillard, 2000). These multiple layers, series of encounters, and very human spiritual realizations and acceptance brought me into a deeper examination of where my fear and shame came from, in different ways, in order to see beyond the idea of considering them from the position of personal desire and human fear. Beyond my fears, I wanted to find my voice and speak what I was hearing with my ears and what I was seeing with my eyes through my own life.

I am not naïve about the fact that bringing out my voice as a transnational Korean woman is inevitably an act of disrupting dominant discourse or Western imperialistic
epistemology in research. However, my original intention is not to challenge the existing structure or dominant discourses to bring shifts or change but to listen to my inner voice from my deepest heart and soul, and obey that (Palmer, 1998). This, I believe, is a witness of the beauty of letting the inner self out to speak so that “we would no longer need to put our lives on hold while waiting for structural change. By understanding our fear, we could overcome the structures of disconnection with the power of self-knowledge” (Palmer, 1998, p. 37).

My Positionality as a Former Korean High School Student in the Late 1990s

I remember my years of being a Korean high school student and an adolescent girl in the late 1990s. I hated being in school, and I felt extremely exhausted trying to fit myself into the schooling system. My school, a typical high school in the Korean public education system, required the students to arrive at 8:00 a.m. and stay until evening (9:00 p.m. or 10:00 p.m.) in the name of self-study, with a few exceptions. During school hours, I often used the nurse’s room as a place of refuge. I just needed a space and time to be alone when school (and home) was all about hurrying and competing for advancement. My high school years were when the phenomena of school and classroom collapse emerged in South Korea and when the Korean alternative education movement arose as a response to the increasing suicidal rate of adolescents in response to dehumanized Korean culture for adolescent students with hyper emphasis on academics for college entrance. At that time, I did not know at all what Korean educators were discussing about schools, but I felt and knew that my schooling experience was killing
my spirit. Finding refuge in the nurse’s room and freeing myself from the nightly self-study using all possible excuses were my surviving strategies, although I was not fully aware of the entire situation at that time.

One day, I was on the way to school, and I suddenly looked back. The numbers of students of my school were behind me, silently climbing their way to the school. I wondered where my life was going. It seemed obvious that everybody, including me, was supposed to study hard to go to college, but I still wondered why: Why do I study? Why am I here every day at the school versus other places? Why does getting admitted to a good college become everybody’s life aim up to the high school years, without even a question? The more I asked myself these questions, the more I felt helpless and powerless, and the more my life became pointless and meaningless. I tried to reach out for help and shared my inner struggles with one teacher. He was the youngest teacher and had a few years of teaching experience, so I thought he would understand how I felt better than the other teachers. However, when I shared my questions with him, he angrily said, “I thought you had a real question. Do you think you have time to waste with such stupid questions? There is no time for such things. Never ask such questions again of me or of anybody! Go back to your classroom, and study!” I was scared by his face and voice, and disappointed by what he said.

I remember this as an educator and researcher through a lens of spirituality. My questions came from an inner need to search for the meaning of life. I approached him with vulnerability and fears from an inner need for a meaningful connection to my true
As an adolescent girl, I struggled with uncertainty and ambiguity about my future, and there was an anxiety in me about taking the next step in my life.

Perhaps I could have considered leaving the high school or not going to college, but they were not options in my mind. I had an inner fear of failing (or falling), being rejected, and being left out by others. I was too afraid of becoming a different person. I thought I was too young to live with such an identity or the label of dropout. What I experienced at that time was an encounter between my deepest fear and my will to search for the meaning of my life in my heart and spirit. However, unfortunately, I could not proceed on the journey of going deeper into the quest of myself and my life at that time. Instead, I learned to forget questions that had been emerging from my heart for a long time.

My teacher, however, was right. There was no time for asking such questions in the school and society in which he and I lived. We lived in a world with, as Palmer (2007) described it, a “culture of fear” and a “politics of fear” (p. 39). To me, as a student, the Korean educational system was all about competition and achievement based on grades and test scores. Teachers also were not free from that system and culture. It has gotten even worse nowadays. Years ago, three elementary school students attempted suicide together in Korea because of the pressure from assignments. There are increasing numbers of students who have committed suicide during exam periods. The increasing bullying, exclusion, and suicide attempts among Korean students seemed be to trying to teach me something with urgency. As a person who also had suffered through the

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dehumanizing schooling culture, and who had felt alone with life-threatening questions (which certainly could be life-enriching questions if an adequate support were to be provided), I felt deeply connected to these issues and began to envision this research project.

**Embracing the Spiritual and Emotional Nature of Research**

hooks (2010) wrote that “I had been trained to believe that anyone who relied on a personal story as evidence upholding or affirming an idea could never really be a scholar and/or an intellectual, according to dominator thinking via schools of higher learning” (p. 49). As a becoming-researcher and woman of color, I have been blessed to encounter many real scholars and intellectuals, including Dillard (2006a, 2012), hooks (2010), Rhee (2002, 2008, 2009), Ladson-Billings (2000), and Richardson (2009, 2013a, 2013b), who have stood up against predominant frameworks by sharing their lived experiences of hurts, conflicts, uncertainties, fears, and doubts, and, most importantly, their wisdom through their scholarly work. My fundamental lesson from them and their works, spirits, and logic is that we research who we are. Because of this lesson I claim and use a new metaphor of “research as a spiritual journey” in this study; this metaphor guides my research processes, including my methodology.

**A new metaphor of “research as a spiritual journey”: We research who we are.** According to Packwood and Sikes (1996), the most pervasive metaphor in the production of research is “still that of research as a recipe” (p. 336, emphasis in original), even with scholars making increasing efforts in the narrative and reflective accounts of
educational research. By deleting the researcher’s voice from the text, the illusion or myth that the research process is about following a recipe is perpetuated as the truth (Packwood & Sikes, 1996). Then, what does the research look like when we see it through the metaphor of a recipe? Dillard (2000) has explained that there is a detachment in the relationships between the researcher/the knower and the researched/the known. The researcher is separated from the subject (the recipe) with no emotion in order to have objective knowledge (the final product) (Dillard, 2000, p. 663).

After critical examination of the recipe metaphor and its influence on relationships among research, researchers, and knowledge, both Packwood and Sikes (1996) and Dillard (2000) have further suggested that there is an urgent need for a change and transformation of this recipe metaphor into a new metaphor and framework in educational research. This change has to be made at an epistemological level by moving “away from detachment with participants and contexts and their use as ‘ingredients’ in our research recipes” (Dillard, 2000, p. 663), having the courage to be vulnerable, and surrendering a positive presentation of the self as a proper scientific researcher. Thus, the new metaphor of research that I claim in this study is “research as a spiritual journey” based on the belief that “we [researchers] research who we are.” Under this new metaphor, the guiding principles for methodologies become love, reciprocity, and sacredness; and they are enacted through dialoging and listening (Dillard, 2000, 2006a, 2008; hooks, 2000; Palmer, 1998). It is my intention for responsibility as in Dillard’s (2000) term as a researcher and woman of color, to humanize and decolonize the research
process. By using this new metaphor, and by explicitly enacting humanistic and spiritual values (such as love, reciprocity, and sacredness) as guiding principles in relating to and connecting with the research participants, throughout this study I make “concrete efforts both to produce different knowledge and to produce knowledge differently” (Lather, 2001, p. 200). I build upon and am inspired by the works of many indigenous, transnational, and feminist scholars; theoretically, I mainly lean on Dillard’s (2000, 2006a, 2006b, 2008) spirituality paradigm of qualitative research, which is also referred to as “endarkened feminist epistemology.”

Dillard (2000) has recognized that research is not only an intellectual pursuit (knowledge production) but also a spiritual pursuit with a purpose. That is, from this standpoint, “uncovering and constructing truth as the fabric of everyday life” (Dillard, 2000, p. 674) as part of a spiritual pursuit becomes an important concern for researchers. The researchers are to “recognize the deeply spiritual nature of [their] work, the ways in which considerations of the process of work (methodology) can open the way for profound relationships with spirit” (Dillard, 2006a, p. 77).

In this spiritual paradigm, Dillard (2000) has positioned “research as a responsibility” as an alternative to the dominant research models and frames: “to know something is to have a living relationship with it, influencing and being influenced by it, responding to and being responsible for it” (p. 673). In Dillard’s (2000, 2006a, 2006b, 2008) research framework, the researchers’ own definitions, through critical and reflective examination of their historically, socially, politically, and culturally embodied
positionalities, become critical works. This becomes a critical work because it enables researchers to have clarity and sensibility about their own beliefs, stances, relations, values, intentions, and so on, which shape the methods of the researchers’ engagements in the group or community. Most importantly, it also enables researchers to have a sense of connection and responsibility to the members of community and their well-being. It emphasizes that there is an interconnection between how researchers explicitly sense who they are as researchers and how they commit to their research with explicit purposes.

Dillard (2000) has also pointed out that when spirituality is embraced in research, individuals’ emotions and expressions (such as poetry and other artistic efforts) are welcomed and even considered necessary because they are intrinsic to human life (Dillard, 2000). From there, reciprocity, love, compassion, empathy, and gratitude become important considerations for researchers in their relationships with the people with whom they engage through their research (Dillard, 2000, 2006a, 2006b, 2008).

Similarly, other scholars, including Collins (1990), Hampton (1995), and Palmer (1998), have also recognized the importance of emotions in knowing, knowledge, and research, and the connection of emotions to how people do research. As Hampton (1995) argued,

Feeling is connected to our intellect and we ignore, hide from, disguise, and suppress that feeling at our peril and at the peril of those around us. Emotionless, passionless, abstract, intellectual, academic research is a goddamn lie, it does not exist. It is a lie to ourselves and a lie to other people. *Humans*—feeling, living, breathing, thinking humans—*do research*. When we try to cut ourselves off at
the neck and pretend an objectivity that does not exist in the human world, we become dangerous, to ourselves first, and then to people around us. (p. 52, emphasis in original)

Acknowledging emotions in research can come from the honest acceptance with respect and humility that we, researchers, are humans with feelings. Researchers’ specialized bodies of knowledge can be found within and based upon their memories with feelings from which researchers find why they do research more clearly with commitment and responsibility. Hampton (1995) has also argued that “research may improve if researchers remember their motives” (p. 46). Remembering why researchers emotionally and spiritually come to be interested in particular things and people, and where these researchers find their responsibility and commitment for those things, can make them feel more alive in and give more meaning to their work and research relationships. Research is a relational and spiritual act in our lives (Dillard, 2006a). It has the potential of redemptive, healing, and liberating power that will help a researcher to become a whole being within “a context of non-domination, of reciprocity, of mutuality” that will enable “sustained love . . . to nurture one another, to grow fully and freely” (hooks, 1989, p. 131).

I contend that research can be an act of humanization for those who are involved in a study, including researchers and research participants, when embracing their spiritual nature in research and their relationships through research. I believe that embracing the spiritual and emotional nature of research empowers researchers to faithfully endure
uncertainty, self-doubt, and discomfort throughout the research journey as humans more connected to mind, body, and spirit. For us as researchers, to research is to uncover our heartfelt eyes and ears, our inner capacity to love, and our compassion for healing, freedom, and hope, all of which will enable us to do our work with commitment and responsibility to the people to whom we relate in and through research.

**Dialoguing and listening as methods of enacting love, compassion, sacredness, and reciprocity.** In the spirituality paradigm, dialoguing is crucial in doing research. Dillard (2006a) has emphasized the power of telling stories and listening through dialogue in research:

> stories of the myriad of our experiences—of people, identities, places, and experiences—when carefully crafted by the teller and carefully heard by the listener, can open… the inner landscape of an academic life. They can reveal meaning in our lives that unfold only in the sharing. They can provide us fruitful spaces of contemplation and reflection. And they can provide wisdom and knowledge, evidence and examples of another way of being engaged in the life and work of teaching, research, and service. (p. xiii)

Through dialogue, the research participants become meaning-makers and storytellers as subjects. Ladson-Billings (2009) has shared the idea, based on her dialoguing experiences with teacher participants through her research that “dialogue led to knowledge. The dialogue was both explanatory and liberating. It allowed the teachers to
view themselves in a variety of positions—as teacher, critic, expert, student, friend” (p. 190).

Dillard (2006a, 2008) and hooks (2000) have recognized that love and compassion have been missing or undervalued in research and that there is a need to consciously and intentionally choose love and compassion. Love and compassion position researchers and research inquiries differently. With love and compassion, as Dillard (2008) has explained, the researchers begin to engage in their research with people by and for “looking and listening deeply” at an intimate level, “not just for often self-gratifying rewards of the research project” (p. 287). By conducting research with love and compassion, researchers can contribute “to relieve communities of their suffering” from experiences of healing because love and compassion give the researchers deep concern about and “desire to bring joy to those in community through the work” (Dillard, 2008, p. 288). In addition, as Dillard (2008) has explained, love and compassion can ethically guide researchers to be clear about what they do and what they do not do, based on in-depth and empathetic understanding, in order to truly serve the people who are involved in their research projects.

According to Dillard (2006a), reciprocity is the intention and capacity to see human beings as equal, shedding all discrimination and prejudice and removing the boundaries between ourselves and others. As long as we continue to see ourselves as the “researcher” and the other as the “researched” or as long as we continue to value our agendas for research as
more important than the needs and desires of the community, we cannot be in
loving, reciprocal relationships with them. (p. 85)

Reciprocity necessitates researchers’ humility as listeners and learners in relationships
with research participants, and it enables researchers and research participants to engage
deeply and authentically in dialogues. Within such contexts, both researchers and
research participants share power and knowledge, and they learn from each other, which
helps them embrace a sense of togetherness and collaboration, ensuring every voice is
spoken and really heard and affirmed (hooks, 2010, p. 45).

Regarding sacredness, Palmer (1998) has defined it as “worthy of respect” (p. 114), and it is opposed to banality. Banality makes things (even a new idea or thing) flat
and tedious with disrespect by making people look down and trivialize things in the
absence of surprise, wonder, mystery, or amazement (Palmer, 1998). On the contrary,
the sacredness brings surprise, wonder, mystery and amazement into our lives. By the
principle of sacredness, research becomes a way of finding worthy respect for our own
beings and lives through honoring one another’s ways of being and living.

In summary, when embracing the spiritual and emotional nature of research,
dialogue containing both telling and listening becomes critical in doing research; and
love, compassion, reciprocity, and sacredness become important guiding principles
throughout the research process (Dillard, 2000, 2008; Freire, 2000; hooks, 2000; Palmer,
1998; Womack, 2013). Particularly, in this study, these principles inform how I view,
relate, and connect with the participants, engage in dialogues with them, and present their
stories. That is, I understand dialoguing and listening as acts of love, compassion, reciprocity, and sacredness in this study. Dialoguing and listening enable my relationships with the participants to be nonhierarchical, reciprocal, and collaborative; they open up the possibility of the research process being liberating and redemptive; and they also position the participants as subjects, not objects (Dillard, 2000, 2006a, 2008; hooks, 1989). In addition, dialogue empowers both researchers and research participants to ground themselves in connectedness through their feelings and struggles as human beings who share trusting relationships with one another: relationships that are without condemnation or shame but contain mutual respect and compassion about their members’ uniquely different ways of being and living (Dillard, 2000, 2006a, 2008; hooks, 2003).

**Design of the Study**

This study is a narrative case study of a Korean public alternative high school and the stories of its teachers and students. My central purpose in this study is to gain a deeper understanding of spirituality in education: how teachers and students understand themselves and their lives, and how a school can contribute to their sense and understanding of themselves and their lives through teaching and learning. More specifically, in this study I seek to examine (a) a public alternative high school in South Korea as a place for growing understanding of self and life, (b) students’ stories about their understanding of themselves and their lives, and (c) teachers’ stories about their lived experiences as teachers in this particular school context.

I have used the following questions to guide this inquiry:
1. How is school experienced as a place to nurture students’ spiritual sense of themselves and their lives?

2. How do students spiritually understand themselves and their lives?

3. How do teachers spiritually understand themselves and their lives?

I have used the following epistemological standpoints as guidance for this dissertation: decolonizing/humanizing methodology and the spirituality paradigm of qualitative research, and the inquiry strategies of case study and narrative inquiry. In this study, I position teaching, learning, and research as a spiritual journey of gaining deeper and better understandings of who we (teachers, students, and researchers) are. I look at how students and teachers spiritually make sense of themselves and their lives through their experiences in this particular school. I explore how they understand, create, and find spiritual meanings and connections through their lived experiences by examining the narratives or stories of those lived experiences (thoughts and feelings about moments, events, relationships, circumstances, etc.).

Inquiry Strategies

Case study. In the field of education, case studies have been widely used in empirical inquiries. A case study is particularly suitable when a researcher has a clearly identifiable case and seeks to deeply understand the case and the contexts that are pertinent to the phenomenon of the study. It is also desirable when a researcher explores a single or multiple particular institutions, programs, activities, situations, processes, or

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1 In this study, I use narrative and story interchangeably.
sets of events, as well as individuals within a bounded system or time (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1991; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). Yin (1994) explained case studies: “[C]ase studies are the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (p. 1). The concentration of a case study is on “experiential knowledge of the case and close attention to the influence of its social, political, and other contexts” (Stake, 2005, p. 444). Thus, the case study research strategy was particularly useful for this study in exploring a school whose history, educational approach and philosophy, and sociocultural contexts are complex and unique, and where ways of nurturing self-understanding are deeply situated in the everyday lives of its teachers and students.

A case study necessitates an integrated and holistic approach to the case that has ambiguous and complex contexts and situations (Stake, 2005). The researcher is positioned as the primary instrument of collecting and analyzing data (Merriam, 1991). Case study assumes a researcher’s ability to sensitively and flexibly respond to a given real-life situation with ambiguity and uncertainty in collecting and producing meaningful information. To do so, Stake (2005) claimed, a “qualitative case study is characterized by researchers spending extended time on site, personally in contact with activities and operations of the case, reflecting, and revising descriptions and meanings of what is going on” (p. 450). Also, the researcher’s reflexivity, understanding of local and
foreshadowed meanings, and relating them to the case’s contexts and experiences are important (Stake, 2005).

A major strength of case study data collection is a wide variety of data sources and different research strategies. Depending on their aims and purposes for their research, many researchers have combined a case study with other research strategies or methods, such as phenomenology (e.g., Zurmehly, 2014) and narrative inquiry (e.g., Johnson, 2001; Krivenkov, 2013; Rose, 1997; Temple, 2007; Thornton, 2013; Torrez, 2008). In particular, the people’s narrative is widely used in the case study approach because it allows researchers to provide thick descriptions by capturing and collecting in-depth, rich data from within the stories (Merriam, 2009). Thus, in this study, I draw upon the case study approach and the narrative inquiry’s understanding of narratives and stories. By utilizing these two approaches together, in this study I concentrate on each student’s and teacher’s uniqueness and the complexity of their issues, situations, experiences, intentions, meanings, perceptions, and interpretations through “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) rather than fragmented or comparative description (Stake, 2005).

A case study uses many pieces of mixed evidence, and researchers are expected to use pluralistic research strategies depending on given situations (Yin, 1994). The use of multiple data sources of evidence with modification (if needed) is suggested for a triangulation purpose in order to gain credibility because each source has its benefits. Yin (1994) stated there are six major sources of evidence: documents, archival records,
interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts. Yin (1994) also pointed out that the list of sources can be extensive, including ethnographical records, life histories, photographs, videotaped records, and so forth. In this dissertation study, I collected data from multiple sources, including participant observations in the everyday school context for six months, dialogic meetings with the students on a regular basis (weekly or monthly) for one year, semi-structured interviews of the teachers and students, documents, writing artifacts, and my research field notes.

**Narrative in research.** Bone (2009) discussed the relation of narrative and spirituality in writing about research for understanding participants’ stories of spirituality and spiritual experiences. In her study, Bone (2009) proposed spirituality to be an inclusive concept with “no definitive revelation, no absolute truth and no end to the exploration” (p. 144). For conducting research and writing about research on spirituality, Bone (2009) “privileged narrative as a means of understanding spiritual experience” (p. 144) by pointing out that people’s spirituality is often told in the stories people share. Following Bone’s (2009) line of thinking about the relation of narrative and spirituality in research, in this study I have utilized narrative as a tool for understanding people’s spirituality.

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) defined narrative inquiry as “the study of how humans make meanings of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future” (p. 21). Chase (2008) explained that “narrative is a way of understanding one’s own and others’ actions,
of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (p. 64). These definitions position people’s stories of their lived experiences “as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 42) of unique human experiences.

Narrative researchers’ understandings of narratives are inclusive and flexible. For this study, I have drawn upon Chase’s (2008) frames of narratives. According to her, narratives can be viewed as (a) a way of describing what happened; (b) a way of making meaning about experiences; (c) a way of expressing emotional feelings, thoughts, perspectives, and understandings from the narrator’s point of view, which is an important aspect of knowledge in narrative inquiry; (d) a way of acting and doing, as “narrators explain, entertain, inform, defend, complain, and confirm or challenge the status quo” through telling, and they also “shape, construct, and perform the self, experience, and reality”; and (e) a socially situated interactive performance within a particular setting with a particular listener and purpose (Chase, 2008, pp. 64-66).

I have leaned on these narrative inquirers’ understandings of people’s narratives or stories in this study in order to explore how students and teachers understand spirituality based on their lived experiences. More specifically, for the purpose of this dissertation study, I not only want to understand the ways in which a school is experienced within daily life contexts by students and teachers, but I also want to understand the ways students and teachers understand themselves and their lives from the perspective of spirituality. These interests involve the researcher (myself) listening to
and bringing out people’s stories about themselves and their lives as the central element of this study in order to deeply understand spirituality and, in particular, to answer my second and third research questions (how students and teachers spiritually understand themselves and their lives). Narrative inquirers’ theoretical and methodological understandings of research are not only useful to but also in harmony with my epistemological standpoint based on the spirituality paradigm (including an emphasis on the sacredness of human life experience and a reciprocity in research relationships through rich dialogues).

Data Collection

In this section, I describe (a) how I selected the research site and gained access, (b) how I selected the focal participants, (c) how long the data collection process took, and (d) how I utilized each method (including dialogic meetings and participant observations) during the period of data collection.

Selection of research site and gaining access. I selected Miso High School as the research site of this study because this school values students’ growth through exploration about who they are, who they want to become, and how they want to live their lives. I initially learned about this school in December of 2012 when I watched a Korean television documentary program about the unique educational approach and curriculum of Miso High School. I searched for more information and read some news articles about this school. The self-learning project seemed to be known as one of its
distinctive features of this school for the purpose of providing an opportunity for students to grow understanding about themselves.

My first contact with this school was via phone with a lead teacher (Teacher Doh, pseudonym) of Miso High School’s self-learning project/program in March 2013. Later in June, I met the school principal and briefly explained to him my study; the research topic, data collection periods, and data collection methods. He showed his understanding about what I might need the most by mentioning his own Ph.D. work, which had required long-term engagement in an everyday school setting. The principal not only allowed me to conduct the study in this school, but he also considered possible ways for me to be more involved in the school’s community. He suggested two things. First, he suggested I attend student presentation days and/or school-wide community meetings as a visitor in order to become familiar with the school members and school climate rather than just waiting until the time that I would officially begin my participant observations in September 2013. Second, he suggested I submit an application for a semester-long position available in this school: The position was to assist one teacher who managed the school information database. I took his suggestions. So, from June through July 2013 once a week, as a visitor I was able to obtain some preliminary understandings about this school. And, on one of the community meeting days the principal introduced me to the members of this school’s community. He introduced me as a person who had an expertise in education and children, had lived in the U.S. for several years for graduate school, and would join as a member in the fall semester to do research by being with the
students and teachers in the school every day. I said that I was willing to take a role as a mentor and get connected to any student who thought they could receive help from me. Some students came to me after the meeting and showed interest in getting connected. In addition, Teacher Doh introduced me to some students who were involved in a local children’s learning center—the school’s place of internship for students with an interest in becoming teachers—and I saw these students’ presentations of their self-learning projects about their learning experiences.

**Selection of focal participants.** I selected three students as focal student participants for this study: Yuna, Jaemin, and Woohee (pseudonyms). The criteria for these student participants were the following: (a) to have had a voluntary and purposeful entrance to Miso High School, (b) to have an interest in and see the personal value of gaining deeper understanding about themselves, (c) to have an interest of becoming teachers and to explore their interest of teaching through the self-learning projects, and (d) to have a willingness to participate in this study (having dialogic meetings on a regular basis).

I selected Mr. Park and Mr. Jang (pseudonyms) as focal teacher participants. My criteria for these two teacher participants included the following: (a) in-depth understanding about this school, (b) consistency between what they described about their beliefs and thoughts about teaching and learning and my observation of what they were doing in practice or how they were doing it, (c) interconnection between the school philosophy and their educational approach or philosophy, based on my observation and
my conversations with Miso students and teachers, (d) their comfort level of having interviews with me, and (e) their interest in and sensitivity about spirituality in teaching and learning.

These teachers were frequently mentioned in my dialogues with several students and many other teachers at Miso when they spoke about their experiences in this school. Mr. Jang was mentioned mostly in reference to his teaching. The students often said that they had learning experiences in his class in the way they had hoped and expected to have at Miso High School. Mr. Park was often mentioned in reference to his accessibility for students to easily talk about themselves and their concerns. Also, many teachers strongly recommended to me that I interview Mr. Jang and Mr. Park if I wanted to hear teachers’ voices with in-depth understanding about Miso High School, its teachers, and its students from the perspectives of alternative education in Korea and Miso’s school philosophy.

Other participants. Many other participants, including seven students and five teachers, played the roles of informants of this study. Through individual interviews and informal dialogues, they shared with me their lived stories and knowledge about the school, themselves, and their lives. In particular, their participation in this study helped me to more deeply understand the contexts, culture, and lives of teachers and students in Miso in various ways. These participants offered both similar and different stories to those of the focal participants, both students and teachers. Although my purpose in selecting focal participants and presenting their stories was not to have students or teachers who could represent the whole group of students or teachers, it was still
important for me, as a researcher, to have an in-depth understanding of what was going on in this school and in the lives of the students and the teachers. Thus, by having these informants as participants in this study and listening to their stories, I could gather richer data and have a better understanding of whether my focal participants’ experienced stories were common, and had occurred widely among Miso students and teachers, or were unique to those individuals.

**Data collection period.** From September 2013 through January 2014, I observed students and teachers in the school every day. From February 2014 through August 2014, I went to the school twice a week, although my everyday observations had ended and I did not observe full days. From September 2013 through August 2014, I had dialogic meetings with the students.

Between November 2014 and February 2015, I had follow-ups with the participants. Depending on accessibility and availability, I conducted the follow-ups through face-to-face meetings and via phone calls, text messages, and emails. I was able to gather unshared parts of the participants’ stories, different layers of stories or meaning and reflection, and more articulated descriptions about the stories that they had previously told.

**Data collection methods.**

*Participant observation and observational/reflective research notes.* I observed the everyday contexts of Miso High School from September 2013 through January 2014. I went to the school at 8:30 a.m. every day, stayed until 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. from Monday
through Thursday, and left the school at 3:00 p.m. on Friday. I usually stayed until 9:00 p.m. because the school’s rules required all students to reside in the school dormitory, so I left the school when most students entered the dormitory (the dormitory door opened at 6:00 p.m. and closed at 9:30 p.m.). I did so to learn what was really going on at the school through thick description with continuum, complexity, and multiple layers of the participants’ lives for triangulation of the data and trustworthiness of the study (Flick, 1992; Geertz, 1973; Glesne, 2006; Ponterotto, 2006).

I had my own desk in one of the three teachers’ rooms (I shared with three homeroom teachers of senior-year students, including Mr. Jang). In the teachers’ room, I was able to closely observe how teachers worked, interacted, and related with the students and other teachers. I also observed weekly teacher meetings five times. In addition, during my data collection period, I observed featured curricular activities and programs, including self-learning projects, self-learning project presentations, graduation thesis project hours, graduation thesis presentations, community meetings, student-interest group hours, week-opening meetings, the annual discussion meeting, student-led school festivals, and so on. For example, during the self-learning project hours, I had regular meetings with a group of students (including Yuna, Woohee, and Jaemin) who explored their interest in becoming teachers by volunteering at local children centers or preschools, or by taking self-reflection time.

I had opportunities to observe classroom learning about eight times and with five teachers, including Mr. Jang and Mr. Park, during the fall semester (September 2013.
through January 2014). In particular, I observed Mr. Jang’s literacy class, his Life and Philosophy class (taught with Mr. Park), and his homeroom teacher meeting with his students. I did not limit my observations to in-class teaching and learning in more traditional classroom settings. I often stayed outside the classrooms (such as in the teachers’ rooms, the hallways, Miso Hall, the multipurpose room, and the playground) during in-class learning hours. I frequently found several students in those places, and sometimes I had opportunities to have conversations with students who were outside the classrooms during class hours. I also observed in the student dormitory three times in order to have an idea about what the students’ dormitory lives looked like.

While I observed everyday lives in Miso, I recorded memos and notes in my research notes. My research notes had two major purposes: observation and reflexivity. I began with broad and general questions: “What is going on here?,” “What are the students and the teachers doing with, for, and/or to each other?,” and “How do the students and the teachers make sense of what goes on here?” Then, I began having more sophisticated, focused, and concise ideas about my observations. I also recorded my hunches, insights, questions, feelings, and ideas in my notes. I frequently shared these notes with students and teachers; later, my conversations with the students and the teachers were also reflected in my research notes. I also used my research notes for my own reflection as a researcher as I was engaging with the students and the teachers inside and outside the school, collecting and managing the data, and analyzing the data.
**Dialogic meetings and interviews with the students.** The dialogic meetings with the focal participants were an important part and method of this study with spirituality paradigm. I wondered, “What is it like to be an adolescent girl at a public alternative high school in Korea and have a dream of becoming a teacher?” I had assumptions underlying this question: the student’s experience might be different from the principal’s or teachers’ experiences; her experience might be different from those of other students, who still seek to know what they want to be, or who want to be musicians, engineers, or social activists; and her experience might be different from those of students in other alternative schools or her friends in the regular high schools of local Korean communities. In addition, I thought that a school in which a person who takes a break and refuge from struggles at home cannot be the same thing to a person who has had a fantasy of an alternative school but found that there is no such thing in the realities of the school. How would the school experience of a person who dropped out of middle school because of health conditions and was homeschooled differ from the experiences of other students? Could it be the same as, or even similar to, the experience of a person who had felt exhausted by the hypercompetitive culture at her previous school?

I met Yuna, Jaemin, and Woohee individually for dialogic meetings at locations outside the school, including my apartment, my car, Soha Beach (pseudonym) near the school, local restaurants, coffee places, and so forth. After having a few instances of both group and individual dialogues with the students, I learned that individual dialogues would be more beneficial, especially with Yuna, who preferred to be an active listener in
a group setting. Also, when I individually asked these students if they had a preference, for the most part they preferred to have time more intimately and privately with me one-to-one because they rarely had such time available, although listening to others’ stories was also interesting for them.

I had these dialogic meetings once a week for the first semester (with some exceptions depending on our schedules). During the following (spring) semester, I had dialogic meetings with Yuna once a month, and I continued weekly dialogic meetings with Jaemin and Woohee. During this time period, sometimes I met Jaemin and Woohee together, but more frequently we met individually, depending on their preferences or situations. I rarely took notes during the meetings in order to be fully present in the dialogues in a more natural way. Instead, I audio recorded the meetings, with some exceptional cases. For those exceptional cases without audio recording, I took notes right after the meetings. I did not set the agenda for each meeting, but I clearly set out that the purpose of the meetings was to learn about their lived experiences and understanding of them. Our dialogues began from how their everyday lives had been since the previous meeting, and I would ask them if there was anything particular that they wanted to concentrate on for the current meeting.

I also had two interviews with each student using semi-structured questionnaires grounded in my observations of Miso and our dialogues. Each interview took about two to three hours. The interviews were audio-recorded.
**Interviews with teachers.** I conducted in-depth interviews with the focal teacher participants, Mr. Jang and Mr. Park. I had two interviews with each teacher: Each interview took approximately two to three hours. The interviews were audio-recorded. With these teachers, I observed them in many different contexts (such as, in-class teachings, school-wide meetings, teachers’ meetings, conversations with teachers and students, in-service teacher education presentations, etc.) and had many opportunities to interact with them throughout this study’s year of data collection. My interview questions were grounded in my observations of and dialogues with Mr. Jang and Mr. Park.

**Documents.** I also collected various documents for this study, including the following: student participants’ writings (from their classes and from their writing collection books), student participants’ personal diaries, student participants’ reflective journals, teacher participants’ writings on school books, teacher participants’ presentation materials, news articles about the school, and books published by this school.

**Data Analysis**

**The first cycle of analysis.** I transcribed the audio-recorded files in Korean without translating them to English. After transcribing all the audio-recorded files and organizing them with the other collected data sources (by participant and by type of data, such as meetings, interviews, presentations, field notes, etc.), I read and reread all of the data in order to immerse myself in its details, become intimate and familiar with it, and gain a sense of it as a whole (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2006).
As Creswell (2013), Glesne (2006), and Kvale (1996) have pointed out, analyzing (including transcribing, organizing, coding, theming, etc.) is a time-consuming intellectual and analytic work that takes patience and learning by actually doing; I felt overwhelmed and intimidated at first by the voluminous data that I had in my hands. So, it was important that I kept in mind the focus of the study. However, I also tried to hear what my data was saying to me by keeping my mind open to the possibilities of new, surprising discoveries, as Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), Creswell (2013), and Glesne (2006) suggested.

As I read and reread through the data, I tried to identify what seemed significant and put names and/or codes to it. I underlined, highlighted, and wrote memos in the margins of the printed transcripts of the data, which means that my analysis process was initiated although preliminary. Given the understanding that “coding is [an] evolving process” (Glesne, 2006, p. 154), for my first reading, I only used pencil and took minimal notes; later, I used various colored pens and highlighters to mark words, phrases, and sentences with possible codes and categories. In addition, I had a notebook in which I wrote down hunches, intuitions, thoughts, perspectives, impressions, and insights (such as what struck me, what stood out to me, what patterns or possible themes I noticed, what links I saw across the data, what I was unclear about, and what data remained unmerged or seemed disrupted or contradictory) (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2006). Along with this process, I had follow-up contact with the participants to clarify or better understand the data.
For the coding process, I utilized Saldana’s (2016) coding manual: Using multiple methods of coding is considered a way to deepen understanding of the data. So, I utilized elemental methods (such as descriptive coding and In-Vivo coding) and affective methods (such as emotion coding, values coding, evaluation coding, and versus coding) (Saldana, 2016). Elemental methods used in the first analytic cycle helped me to build a foundation for coding. Then, affective methods allowed me to identify how each person reacted differently about their experiences by coding each person’s emotions (such as confusion, fear, doubt, and joy) or values, beliefs, and perspectives (such as, “College is not an option,” pursuit of dreams, etc.). After completing the coding process on the printed transcripts, I organized the codes in two Microsoft Word files: One file has codes with the data, and the other file only has a list of the codes. Some examples of identified codes and corresponding participant comments (in the original Korean and the English translation) are the following:

[DREAM][BURDEN][PRESSURE]

그 선생님들은 그냥 제가 행복하고 그냥 즐겁게 살기를 바랄건데...저는

만약에 그런 꿈을 꾸는 것 자체가 행복하면 좋겠지만, 막 계속 압박되는

기분이 드는것 같기도 해가지고.

Those teachers maybe just want me to be happy and live joyfully . . . I wish I [could] just feel happy about just dreaming such dreams, but I seem to feel pressured.
I coded and recoded all data sources using the methods mentioned above; I also generated initial lists of codes and combined similar codes so that the codes became more condensed, appropriate, and manageable.

**The second cycle of analysis.** From here, I separate the explanation of the remaining analysis processes by research question, because when conducting my analysis from this point, I evaluated the data specifically against each research question.

*Research question 1: How is school experienced as a place to nurture students’ spiritual understanding of themselves and their lives?* After the first cycle of analysis (coding), I developed the codes into broader units with similar meanings (Saldana, 2016) and reduced them to appropriate thematic categories that connected to the purpose of the study and each research question. Data analysis revealed five themes of the students’ experiences of this school from which the students understood that they had grown and deepened their spiritual understanding: (a) physical space, (b) time, (c) relationship, (d) learning, and (e) Miso’s dual positions.

*Research questions 2 and 3: How do students and teachers spiritually understand themselves and their lives?* For the second cycle of analysis, I used Riessman’s (2008) method of “thematic narrative analysis,” which is one of the most widely used forms of narrative analysis. I kept individuals’ stories intact and interpreted them “as a whole” (Riessman, 2008, p. 57) rather than fracturing them into thematic categories across the participants in order to honor and highlight the individuals’ varying and uniquely different experiences and explanations. I sought to describe the contours of
each individual’s lived experiences with significant events, changes, and growth toward connectedness, integrity, and centeredness that happened with various sources (such as conflicts, encounters, awareness, etc.). The five focal participants (Yuna, Woohee, Jaemin, Mr. Jang, and Mr. Park) uncovered and unfolded their lived stories of spirituality, which often came from struggles, conflicts, and disconnections, and reached toward meaning-making, learning, change, and growth over the course of my data collection period.

To identify the stories of spirituality in the participants’ narratives, I used the definition of spirituality as a framework presented in Chapter 1. That is, I examined whether the participants’ narratives described the following: (a) connectedness (to themselves, including their past, present, and future; to the inner/authentic self; and to others); (b) centeredness and groundedness (such as inner values and beliefs); (c) integrity and wholeness; (d) the opposite elements of (a), (b), and (c) (such as disconnections, disassociations, conflicts, dilemmas, etc.); and (e) emotions (such as fear, anxiety, anger, joy, love, compassion, trust, etc.). Struggles with conflicts, dilemmas, or disconnections were both explicitly and implicitly recognized as important sources of the participants’ spiritual understanding of themselves and their lives. Thus, I paid particular attention to what happened to the participants around disconnections, disassociations, conflicts, and dilemmas; how each person made meanings of these struggles; and how these struggles were transformed into connectedness, centeredness, and integrity. Having this frame was helpful for paying attention to seemingly mundane, insignificant,
unmerging, or conflicting narratives, and considering these narratives as important aspects of the participants’ stories in terms of spirituality.

After selecting stories that met these criteria, I grouped the stories and constructed their contours. Although it was clear that each of the students had distinctive features of their lived stories, as I constructed the contours, I began noticing some shared experiences among the students, especially certain phases and some key themes of their lived stories. Themes and key experiences were visible in two teachers’ stories: for example, their previous experiences affected how they understood themselves and their lives at Miso. They were also true in three students’ stories. In addition, these focal participants had unique, different experiences after they entered Miso, but the data analysis revealed that the beginning of their lives at Miso had significant meaning for all of them in terms of understanding themselves, their lives, and their growth and change. Moreover, particularly for the students, what they wanted to do after graduating from Miso High School was a common and important theme.

Thus, I grouped the plots of the students’ stories as follows: (a) who each student was before attending Miso, (b) how each student’s initial experiences at Miso were, (c) what the students dreamt about their future, and (d) what it meant to the students to gain a spiritual understanding of themselves and their lives. The teachers’ stories include the following plot groupings: (a) who these teachers were in their previous schools; (b) the beginnings of their changing journeys at Miso; (c) their values, beliefs, and views; and
(d) their personal changes and discoveries, and the meaning of those changes and discoveries.

To clarify, during the dialogic meetings and interviews, I acknowledged the crucial reciprocal, relational, and interactional natures of these dialogues. In addition, I paid attention not only to what was said but also to what was not said (such as what a silent moment might mean, what happened before and after); when necessary, I recalled and revisited those moments with the participants later on. However, when conducting analytic procedures, I emphasized “the told” (Riessman, 2008, p. 58) for analytic purposes in the thematic narrative analysis. The analytic interest of thematic narrative analysis is “thematic meanings and points” (Riessman, 2008, p. 62) that are contained in the narratives, not the researcher’s presence in the context of narratives, nor the forms and styles used when the narratives were generated. Thus, when I translated the narratives’ original quotations from Korean to English, I basically decided to “clean [them] up” (Riessman, 2008, p. 61) in order to present easily readable stories. However, I noted the atmosphere surrounding specific dialogues and the participants’ tones and emotions at the end of the translated narratives, if the foregoing was notable or critical to understanding the narratives. To enhance the clarity of the stories, I followed up and checked with the participants about the language or phrasing they used and the ambiguous parts of their narratives. These follow-ups were reflected in the English-translated stories.
Validity, Trustworthiness, and Ethical Considerations

For the validity and trustworthiness of this study, I had a prolonged and persistent engagement in the research site and with the research participants; I spent one year collecting data. First, I spent one semester on participant observation: each day, I stayed with participants the whole day from morning to evening. During the school days, I continuously observed a variety of aspects of and activities in the participants’ everyday school lives. This participant observation enabled me to understand what it means to be students and teachers at Miso. Second, I had interviews and dialogic meetings with the focal student participants for two consecutive semesters. These dialogic meetings enabled me to establish, maintain, and deepen my relationships with my student participants. And, based on these relationships, I could understand them and their lives more deeply.

To triangulate, I used multiple data sources and methods (including participant observations, interviews with teachers and students, dialogic meetings with students, my field notes, school documents, students’ artifacts, etc.) that were complementary (Y. C. Kim, 1995; Lather, 1986). For example, participant observation enhanced the depth and quality of the interviews. I noticed that the teachers sometimes explained themselves too broadly or conceptually, especially when they talked about a value or belief, which can be considered as a weakness of interview data. My interviews were more successful in terms of listening to their perspectives, values, and beliefs in connection with their actual practice because I was able to bring them questions grounded by my participant
observation of what they did in their everyday lives or on special occasions. When they made only conceptual or abstract statements about their teaching, for example, I was able to provide them with some examples of what they did, which helped the teachers to elaborate on their stories more deeply and specifically. In addition, the interviews and dialogic meetings were supplementary to participant observation. Interviews and dialogic meetings were good opportunities to gather rich and in-depth data because there were many things that were hardly possible for me to have access to observe (such as participants’ past experiences, inner stories, motives of what they did, detailed feelings, multiple layers of meaning-making out of what happened, etc.).

I also had follow-up contact with the research participants, including two focal teacher participants and three focal student participants, via member checks (also known as *face validity*) about their individual stories through face-to-face meetings, phone calls, and emails. The purpose of the member checks was not only to enhance the clarity, validity, and trustworthiness of the data but also to minimize the risk of misunderstanding of their stories, which was an ethical consideration. In addition, I made particular member checks corresponding to my first research question (about the students’ school experiences) with four students (Lather, 1986). Two of these students were my focal participants, while the other two were not focal participants but rather informants of this study during the participant observation period. With one student, I verbally shared the contents of my observations of the school, while I did member checks with the others via email (the written text was approximately seven pages total). I explained the purpose of
my study and the member checks, and I asked whether my observations and analysis seemed right or not based on their experiences and knowledge. The respondents’ comments include the following: “This is very insightful and critical observation”; “I agree with this”; “They are so true”; “I like how you framed these issues together”; “I’ve never thought [about this] this way, but this totally makes sense”; “This explains a lot of my unresolvable impressions”; “Yes, you should talk about these complex contradictions of our experiences, because they affect our daily lives. Without saying them, it would not just be a partial [report] but rather a distortion of our real lives”; and “You captured our lives really well.” These responses were helpful for checking validity and trustworthiness.

Finally, the degree to which the research participants gained self-understanding and life enrichment through their yearlong participation in this study matters not only for catalytic validity (Lather, 1986) but also for my epistemological, methodological, and ethical standpoints as a researcher using the spirituality paradigm (Dillard, 2000, 2006b, 2008). Thus, I have made rigorous efforts throughout the research process to help and benefit the participants, especially the three focal student participants. Furthermore, these students have explicitly acknowledged the positive impact of their participation in this study to their lives.

**Introduction of Research Site**

Miso High School, a public alternative high school in Korea, was established in 2010. The educational goal of this school was to educate students to live with a pursuit
of happiness and in-depth understanding about themselves (who they were and who they wanted to become) in relation with others by learning from one another and living together within this school’s learning community. This was a small school with about 140 students (nine classes) and 23 teachers, located within the Miso village (pseudonym) in a suburban area of the southern part of South Korea, founded for the purpose of promoting close and communal relationships among students and teachers. As Miso was an alternative high school, 43% of the total units in this school’s curriculum consisted of experience-oriented activities that were connected to the school’s educational goals and philosophy. This school’s featured curricular activities included the self-learning project, the graduation thesis project, Life and Philosophy (a class), school-wide weekly community meetings, week-opening meetings, mobile learning trips (to Nepal, Jeju Island and Ji-ri Mountain), and so forth. As Miso was a public high school, 57% of the total units consisted of traditional subject learning (such as Korean, English, mathematics, science, history, etc.) that were mandated by the Korean public education system and curriculum.

**History of Miso High School.** In 2007, there was the first direct election by the citizens for a superintendent in the educational history of South Korea. The newly elected superintendent of education announced progressive commitments, and building a public alternative school was one of them. However, although the superintendent had a strong intention to build a public alternative school, it took about three years for this

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2 Information in this section was drawn from teacher interviews and school information materials that were published by Miso as well as newspaper articles.
school’s budget proposal to be passed after many rejections. There had been a stereotyped image of the alternative school in Korea that an alternative school was a place for at-risk students, troublemakers, or misfits. So, there were many opposing voices stating that building a public alternative school was a waste of the province budget, while there were also many advocates. Even some of the advocates had the stereotyped image of alternative education and claimed that a public alternative school needed to be a place for so-called troublemaker children and misfits.

Meanwhile, more than 30 people working in education (such as private alternative school principals, vice principals, and teachers, and public school teachers who had strong interests in alternative education and/or an alternative school in this province) gathered as a task force team for preparation of this school in order to develop a public alternative school model, which is a unique case in Korean public school history. There was a strong debate about who should be in this school and for what purpose: a new school with hope and vision (problematizing the current education and making a claim for humanizing schooling) versus a school for problem children (framing the students as a problem with the idea of segregation and control).

Having a principal and teachers with a good understanding about alternative schools and education was both critical and challenging because this school was a new type of school in this province’s public education system. A public recruitment process selected a principal and gave him a four-year term. He was a member of this school’s task force team who had strongly claimed that this school needed to be a place for new
hope and vision in public education in Korea. At that time, he was a vice principal of a government-certified private alternative school in this province. This was an exceptional case of selecting a private school vice principal for a public school principal in Korea.

Although recruiting a teacher with in-depth understanding and commitment for a Korean alternative school and education is critical, it was a challenge for this school. This was because only public school teachers were (and still are) eligible for full-time teaching positions. This school was the first public alternative high school in this province, which means that there was no public school teacher with working experience at an alternative school. Moreover, there were many doubtful voices, which might have made it difficult for teachers to consider applying for the teacher recruitment of this school. For example, the first public alternative school in another province of Korea was known as not successful. That first public alternative high school was built in 2002, in this other province of Korea, but it did not spread out. It was viewed as a failed experiment, and in the reality of Korea a public alternative school could not be an alternative model to the current education in Korea. From the beginning, this school had to hear cynical opinions from people saying, “Miso won’t be successful.” Therefore, within such circumstances, Miso High School experienced a challenge of hiring teachers through voluntary applications or invitations. So, the office of education in this province appointed many teachers.

What type of students should be in the school had always been one of the most central issues of Miso High School. Framing this school as a place to educate problem
children was a constant request from the provincial educational office from the beginning. However, because he was a member of the task force team for Miso, the first principal of this school strongly criticized that having such a framework, with an idea of segregation, would be dangerous. Also, he claimed that no problem child or misfit really existed and that the real problem was the current educational system that ranked the students by test scores and judged them as good or bad, with a winner-take-all principle. He also claimed that having students from diverse abilities, rather than according to academic test scores, was key for successful education and this school needed to have a different frame from that of mainstream public education in understanding education, school, and students in order to give the students a hope and vision. So, Miso prioritized serving the students who had greater challenges making themselves fit into the mainstream school culture, but Miso admitted the students with diverse backgrounds through a rigorous admission process (self-introduction application forms, recommendation letters from previous teachers, group interviews of students and parents, etc.).
Members of Miso High School.

Teachers. There were 23 teachers (10 female and 13 male), one principal, one vice principal, and 16 staff members at Miso High School.\(^3\) The teachers’ ages and careers varied: Their ages were from the late 20s to the late 50s, and their years of teaching were from four to over 30 years. Their reasons for coming to this school were also various: planning to work in an alternative school, having a different working experience, being appointed, being invited by the principal, and so on.

Students. There were approximately 140 students enrolled at Miso High School, as seen in Table 1. Each class consisted of about 15 students. About 70% of students were those who had been identified as “the marginalized” (e.g., low economic status, dropping out of middle school or high school, placement in the lowest 30% of their school’s academic ranking, and/or experience violating a school’s discipline policy, etc.). As a result of fighting against the request of the provincial educational office, about 30% of students were those who had a strong resistance to the Korean schooling culture and system (the hyper-focus on college entrance exams and competitive school culture) and chose an alternative school education in order to learn things that would be more meaningful and directly related to what they wanted to do for their lives, and who they wanted to become.

\(^3\) The teachers’ term was four years, but they had an option of extending for one more term; thus, the teachers could be at this school for a maximum of eight years.
<table>
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<td>45</td>
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Table 1. Enrolled Students at Miso

Note. This information was retrieved from the school website in 2015.

Admission procedures of the school. Because this school was a public school, applications were accepted only from residents of the school’s province. This school received a number of applications every year, and the competition rate was an average 2.5:1 each year, which is very high. The admission procedures, as shown in Table 2, included a paper application (the first selection) and a face-to-face interview (the final selection).
Before the interview, all applicants submitted their official student records, self-introductions, and recommendation letters. The self-introduction took 70% (out of 100%) in the first selection. Both students and parents were asked to write, although parent answers did not overturn the admission results and were only used as references. The questions used were the following:

1. <Student> How have you lived your life? Related to this, what made you decide to apply to this school?

   <Parent> What was the biggest challenge to you as your child’s parent? And what kind of efforts have you made to overcome it?

2. <Student> What kind of dream do you have for your future? How have you prepared for that dream?
<Parent> How much do you know about your child’s dream? What kind of support have you provided?

3. <Student> Please write examples of your experiences volunteering or serving others in your life so far, in detail. If you do not have any, please write examples of your experiences of being helped and express your gratitude.

<Parent> How do you usually fulfill community service or volunteering? Please write about your ideas of communal living.

4. <Student> Please write in detail about how you will live your life in self-directed ways within an autonomous and permissive atmosphere. Will you be able to live in a dormitory for three years? Also, how will you overcome situations when there is a challenge or difficulty in community life?

<Parent> Do you think your child will do well in a dormitory? What do you expect your child’s life to be like ten years from now?

Once the students entered the school, there were no minimum grade requirements for moving up to the next grade levels in the Korean public education system. However, this school required students to write a graduation thesis for their graduation. All students conducted a graduation thesis based on their three years of their life-learning experiences, including individualized internships, interest-based activities, projects, and so forth. Two weeks prior to their graduation, the students presented their theses for about an hour in front of family, friends, and teachers as a celebration of the meaning of their experiences during three years at Miso High School.
Important issues at Miso High School. There were several important issues to note for a deeper understanding about Miso High School and the experiences of its students and teachers, which I will describe using data sources in Chapter 4. The issues, which were particularly associated with Miso’s simultaneous dual positions as an alternative high school and a public high school, included the following: (a) the teacher hiring policy, (b) the student evaluation system, (c) the educational and political stance on college admission, (d) students’ attendance records and absenteeism, and (e) the images of the school community and students. To enable a deeper understanding about the issues closely related to both students’ and teachers’ experiences at Miso, I will not only provide factual information for each issue but also explain what occurred in the daily lives of students and teachers at Miso in relation to each issue.

Important issue 1: Teacher hiring policy. Miso High School’s teacher hiring policy was regulated by the provincial educational office and the South Korean public educational system. As a public high school, this school had the limitation to hire teachers who not only held a national teaching certificate, granted through pre-service teacher programs at universities, but who had also passed the nation’s public school teacher recruitment examination and registered as public school teachers. When Miso High School opened in 2010, alternative schools only existed as private schools in Korea, with one exceptional case in another province. Miso was a new type of school that would utilize alternative educational approaches in a public school. So, hiring public school teachers who had philosophical or practical understanding about alternative education...
was not possible. None of the teachers who arrived at Miso had prior teaching experiences at alternative schools. While less than half of the teachers had a passion for and personal yearning to work in the alternative school setting, and voluntarily applied to come to this school, the rest of the teachers reported that their transfer to this school was not based on their voluntary decision, and that they were asked to move to this school by the provincial educational office.

Despite the fact that philosophical understanding of the school’s educational aims and offering a new, different education from mainstream public education were critical for teachers to teach their students successfully, not all teachers were open or ready to accept or make a change in their teaching. Also, adequate training support for teachers was not offered by the provincial educational office or by the school. When they arrived at Miso High School, teachers were not ready to teach differently or alternatively, regardless of individual teachers’ personal interests, passions, or willingness to make a change to their teaching (including changes to content, approaches, methods, and styles). The teachers’ preparatory training was at a minimal level, with a few days of introductory training about alternative education and tours to exemplary private alternative schools facilitated by the principal, who had prior working experience in a private alternative school as a vice principal. Given only this minimal introductory training, teachers were then situated to teach their new students, who entered with the hope of new, different learning and schooling experiences in this school. These teachers began their teaching at Miso with a lack of understanding of and training in alternative education, although some
teachers had been exposed to alternative education and schools through their personal desire for and interest in a new type of education. Once they moved to this school, the teachers—especially those who came in with a passion for alternative education—were surprised, disappointed, and confused by a lack of agreement or shared understanding among the other teachers about teaching directions or educational aims. The teachers’ changes or adjustments in teaching appropriately to this school’s educational direction and students’ expectations were not ensured after the teachers’ arrival. Their changes only depended on teachers’ personal endeavors or commitments. Also, even if teachers had a commitment to making an adequate change, it took time. A change in teaching is a holistic process and cannot be made in one day or through one small strategy.

Miso’s teacher hiring policy also affected students’ experiences at Miso. Many students entered with high expectations and idealized images about alternative education and schooling based on how Miso High School was promoted regarding its educational aims and philosophies, their impressions of students’ lives through public media and the school’s informational sessions, and what they heard about alternative schools in general. For example, the messages that students received included indication that they would be able to do what they really wanted to do; individual students’ different needs and talents would be welcomed and valued; their learning would be different in this school, without anyone being isolated or forced; and teachers would have a high level of understanding, empathy, and love for their students, instead of displaying authoritarian attitudes to students through control and punishment. After entering Miso, however, many students
experienced a huge gap between what they expected from teachers at Miso and what they encountered in their realities. When students encountered many different teachers in the classroom, they often felt shocked and disappointed. Even for the students who did not have an idealized image about this school, when they confronted their teachers in their everyday lives, they felt challenged. While teachers’ perspectives about traditional subject teaching and learning were highly focused on students’ lack of motivation or interest in academic learning, students’ perspectives showed their dissatisfaction in and disappointment about their teachers’ lack of adequate understanding or changes in teaching. Many students reported that their learning expectations were only met by a few classes or teachers. They often had unsatisfactory experiences with their traditional subject learning.

Students’ disappointment was twofold, caused by teachers’ authoritarian attitudes during their classroom teaching, and contents or styles in traditional subject classes. Students were surprised by the fact that some teachers’ authoritarian attitudes were not very different from those of their teachers in previous schools (such as a lack of student involvement or engagement). In addition, according to students, some teachers simply lowered the level of content or offered fun activities instead of adequately and alternatively changing their teaching. When classroom learning was especially about fun activities, it was obvious that they had fun, but they sometimes doubted what they really learned in such activities. Students often experienced boredom and disconnection in the classes in which teachers had simply lowered the level or depth of the content. In this
case, students questioned how those teachers perceived their intellectual capacity or potential.

**Important issue 2: The student evaluation system.** In accordance with the public education measurement system of student academic performance, Miso High School students were required to take exams and tests regularly, although the frequency of these exams and tests was much less than that of other typical high schools. The students’ academic performances on their tests were measured and ranked according to test scores. Compared to other regular public high schools, this school had a relatively smaller number of students per grade (45 compared to typically more than 300), and this smaller number enabled students to have closer relationships with their peers. However, because of the relative evaluation ranking system, students’ emotional burdens and tensions were inevitable, especially for students who were concerned about maintaining a good academic record for their future direction of attending college.

Such a student evaluation system, that of a public high school, created an ironic contrast with Miso’s cultural emphasis on collaboration as an alternative school. In order to create an alternative school culture, this school emphasized the value of collaboration against competition. That is, while this school philosophically, pedagogically, and culturally emphasized and promoted collaboration, ironically Miso students were ranked through comparison of their academic test scores with their peers’. Students’ academic rankings were key criteria for the college admission process in Korea. In particular, when students intended to enter college, their academic ranking became an important
issue for them for their future life directions. Their academic ranking often made students feel inner conflicts among different values and ideas that included individual advancement, individual actualization, and collaboration. Students felt guilty and morally judged themselves when they were situated to compete with each other, and they felt competitiveness with others as they sought the same goals: successful entrance to the colleges and majors of their choice.

**Important issue 3: The educational and political stance on college admission.**

As an alternative high school in Korea, Miso High School took a strong political stance on education in relation to college preparation: The school actively rejected the idea of teaching students to prepare for their college admission. Alternative school and the alternative educational movement in South Korea were initiated by a strong desire and urgency for a different place and new education. As described previously, in the early 1990s there was a growing distrust about the existing school system. Also, an increasing number of adolescent students were committing suicide, dropping out, and deschooling themselves because of their academic pressure and oppressed school lives caused by entry to highly ranked universities. Due to such historical background, working against the dominant school education, with its aim of preparation for college entrance exams, was an important political stance among Korean alternative schools. So, Miso High School, as an alternative school, also took a strong position about education for college preparation and declared that this school rejected teaching classes to prepare students for
the national college entrance exams. Taking such a position was important for this school in order to be perceived as an alternative school.

In spite of the school’s position, a career-counseling teacher was placed, and his major task was to provide guidance and advice about college admission for the students. The career counselor’s room was filled with information about college admission. Also, although the school’s collective position was clear, teachers had various opinions about college entrance exam preparation. In addition, even though Miso, like many other alternative schools in Korea, claimed its purpose of education was not college entrance, each year approximately 90% of its students chose to pursue higher education in college as their next step after graduation, according to the Miso High School official record.4

College entrance was a somewhat expected path for most Miso students. Many Miso students thought that they would eventually apply to and enter college or university after graduating from Miso, even if many of them were not fully determined about it until their senior year.

Miso High School students who were especially determined to pursue their college entrance often confronted this school’s strict political stance against college preparation and teachers’ discomfort to provide academic support for students’ preparation for college entrance until they reached the point of college application in their senior year. The students’ difficulty was twofold: on the one hand, they cared about their college entrance as their future direction; on the other hand, they still liked and cared

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4 According to S. E. Chon (2014), more than 80% of Korean high school graduates enter college or university.
about what this school was trying to offer, especially in terms of exploring what they really wanted to do in the future through featured curricular activities, including the self-learning projects, in accordance with the school philosophy and aims. Because of this school’s strong position and negative view about preparation for college entrance, students were conflicted, uncomfortable, and even guilty about caring both about their college entrance and this school’s educational direction.

Some students were hesitant to reach out to teachers to discuss their concerns about college entrance and gain concrete information about college admission. When it came to the issue of college entrance, especially when they needed concrete information or advice, students often approached teachers such as the career-counseling teacher or their homeroom teachers. This often became an issue because these teachers’ guidance was in conflict with what this school tried to offer and value. In particular, the career-counseling teacher (based on his background of years of working in regular high schools) emphasized that students should concentrate on gaining better ranking in academic performance, while the school put emphasis on exploring and gaining in-depth understanding of the self. While students wanted to have concrete and specific information or guidance for clarity, instead they often ended up with confusion because of inconsistent guidance.

Even when they encountered teachers who were consistent with their school philosophies, students felt frustrated because teachers did not offer concrete guidance. Instead, these teachers talked with the students about thinking more alternatively about
their future and life direction. Whether those teachers intended to or not, students felt that those teachers played a gatekeeper’s role. Students felt judged about their ideals, wants, or desires about their future, and they sometimes even felt misunderstood as unconscious or greedy people. They also felt forced and emotionally pressured to only think about an alternative way of living their lives in accordance with the directions of the school and teachers, in the absence of concrete examples. Students sometimes sensed those teachers’ irony: They emphasized an alternative way of living lives to their students while they belonged to the mainstream public school system, with the stability and security of their jobs, which was an opposite direction from the one they suggested their students follow. Also, their teachers did not seem to have specific information to share about alternative approaches. Thus, with either type of teachers, the students ended up feeling confusion, uncertainty, and ambiguity, and they felt even more pressured about the future, rather than finding the balance that they had originally hoped to obtain.

Students’ frequent strategy was to meet with both types of teachers so that they could find their own balance after meetings.

**Important issue 4: Students’ attendance records and absenteeism.** Students’ absenteeism was also an important and frequently addressed issue at Miso, especially by the teachers. According to my observations and the students involved in this study, attendance rates for traditional subject learning hours averaged seven to 11 out of 15 students in each class, although they all emphasized that those rates were extremely varied. Students’ absenteeism was not an issue unique to Miso but a common issue that
many alternative schools experienced. Students’ absenteeism became more a serious issue at Miso because Miso, as a public high school, followed the same time frame for traditional subject learning hours (such as 50 minutes of class and 10 minutes of break) as the mainstream public high schools, while other alternative schools could have flexible time frames for students’ learning based on individual needs. Also, students’ attendance records were a key determinant of student graduation in public schools. Teachers were in charge of keeping students’ official administrative records, including their attendance. Because of this, teachers felt emotionally and morally conflicted about whether they needed to be strict about keeping attendance records and emphasize accuracy and fairness among students, or whether they should give their consent for students’ absences by putting more value on individual students’ situations.

Furthermore, students’ absenteeism was an important issue at Miso because students and teachers perceived this issue differently. Basically, teachers viewed classroom attendance as students’ important and basic responsibility. Teachers considered students’ absenteeism as problematic and irresponsible behavior that trivialized the students’ attitudes toward learning and their teachers’ instruction. Teachers perceived students’ absenteeism in relation to the students’ lack of interest, motivation, and readiness for learning, especially for traditional subject learning and intellectual and academic learning. Teachers tended to view absenteeism as an unhealthy culture among the students who misinterpreted or over-interpreted the autonomy that Miso tried to promote for students as an alternative value. Students, however, had
different perspectives about their absenteeism. Students agreed that they sometimes chose to be absent without much thinking, as indicated in teachers’ understanding of students’ absenteeism. They just wanted to have fun and follow other peers, and so they left the school during class hours. While they felt guilty to some extent, they also felt liberated by being outside the classroom during school hours. More importantly, students often explained their absenteeism as an important strategy with a positive function for creating privacy and solitude during school days. Ironically, students learned to value solitude for reflection because of other parts of their learning experiences at Miso as an alternative school.

**Important issue 5: The images of the school community and students.** In an effort to create an alternative schooling culture that was against competition, Miso aimed to promote a sense of collaboration and community. In particular, the first principal of Miso High School used a symbolic phrase, “Let us walk together,” by drawing upon the fable of “The Rabbit and Turtle's Race.” This phrase framed what it meant to be a Miso student (especially with the image of the turtle) and collaborate with one another within the same learning community. A core message was that the turtle needed to help the rabbit by waking up, waiting, and walking together, rather than continuing to race and passing by the rabbit to become a winner. Under that frame and image, students were perceived either as turtles or rabbits. Being a turtle or a rabbit was not an identity that students created or perceived themselves. It was, rather, an identity *perceived* by others, especially teachers. That was not a static or *explicitly* told identity. It seemed to be
determined by teachers based on students’ levels of participation in everyday school activities. Typically, at the surface level, students who had a good attendance record and actively participated in school activities were perceived as turtles, while students who hardly showed up to classes or school-wide meetings were perceived as rabbits. The problem was that a group of students who were often perceived as turtles felt that they hardly received adequate attention and support from teachers. Instead, they were often situated to take responsibility for helping their peers who were rabbits, based on teachers’ interpretations of the image of the rabbit and the turtle.

According to turtle-students’ perspectives, the turtles’ ongoing efforts seemed taken for granted without acknowledgement, while the rabbits’ remarkable changes, or even small changes, were highly recognized and celebrated. One example might be that teachers often selected rabbit-students who made remarkable changes (including increasing attendance rates, finding their interests, and initiating projects) as exemplar cases of the self-learning projects for the purpose of inspiring the other rabbit-students who still struggled. The turtle-students who continuously worked and progressed on their self-learning projects were hardly ever selected to present their work as exemplar cases to the whole community. The turtle-students felt burdened in that they were supposed to always be good and have no problems, while the teachers put their energy, love, and compassion toward those rabbit students. The turtle students claimed that they were sometimes unfairly treated by being marginalized or situated in a blind spot. Although some teachers recognized these cases, they still considered them inevitable choices.
because of their limited energy and time, although they felt sorry for those students being marginalized and separated from the teachers’ attention and close care. The turtle students criticized that some teachers’ treatment and attitudes misled and distorted what it meant to walk and live together as collaborative community members. They felt a moral burden by being asked to sacrifice for and be patient with others.

Physical environment of Miso High School. Miso High School, a public alternative boarding high school in Korea, was established in 2010. The site of Miso High School originally belonged to Miso Elementary School until 1995. After Miso Elementary School closed, for about 10 years after 1998, there was the Na-dl Lifelong Learning School (pseudonym), one kind of alternative school where students could receive high school degrees from the government. Because of financial difficulties, the Na-dl School closed in 2008. Miso High School found its place there. Miso became a small school with about 140 students (9 classes) and 23 teachers located within the Miso village (pseudonym) in a suburban area of the southern part of South Korea. The school was surrounded by mountains, but the university area and downtown were only about 10 minutes away by car. In addition, there were direct bus lines that the students could take when they went downtown. This school (total 10,000.00 m²) consisted of a main building (1,867.08 m²), a dormitory (2,183.47 m²) with a cafeteria (on the first floor of the dormitory), a gymnasium (890.95 m²), a playground (5,058.50 m²), a carpentry place, a backyard (for gardening), a vinyl greenhouse, and a parking lot.
Main building. The main building was three stories with four entrances, two sets of stairs, and one elevator. A school building janitor opened this building at about 6:00 a.m. and closed it at 10:00 p.m. Two entrances were connected from the playground, and the other two entrances were on the back and accessible from the parking lot. Beside the entrances from the playground there were wooden shoe shelves. Entrance spaces were used for shoe changes between outside shoes and inside shoes. Each unit had a name sticker for teachers and students. And there were extra shoes for visitors.

The first floor of the main school building held the administration room, the principal’s room, the gathering room, the health-service room, the audiovisual room, the art room, two women’s and two men’s restrooms, and three 10th-grade classrooms. In the hallway of the first floor, there were a big mirror and white board listing community-meeting topics and summaries of the discussions and decisions, as well as announcements; on the wall, there were boards for the description of the school philosophy and its featured curriculum, as well as for the students’ use (such as advertising for their clubs or local events). There were a water fountain and two women’s and two men’s restrooms on each floor. On the stairway of each floor, there were poetry panels that represented the school philosophy, and students’ artwork was occasionally displayed. In the administration room, there were five administrative staff members. Students would get mail and packages from this room. So, in front of the administration room, there was a stack of packages that had been sent by family and friends, website purchases, and so forth.
Inside, the principal’s room and the gathering room were connected. The school principal had wanted to make his room welcoming, unlocked, and easily accessible for use by any members of this school community during the open hours of the building, so half of the room was used as a gathering space called Sa-rang-bang. The principal’s room contained the principal’s desk, a big conference table and chairs, and bookshelves. In Sa-rang-bang there was a big low wooden table and sitting cushions so that people could sit on the floor without a chair. Also, there was a stack of teapots and cups that the principal frequently used to serve tea to himself, teachers, students, and visitors. Sa-rang-bang was used for receptions for visitors, as a meeting place with teachers, a gathering place for students to hang out, and so forth.

The health service room was also located on the first floor of this building. There was a nurse-teacher in this room and four small beds that had heating functions. The audiovisual room was across from the health service room. This room was the second biggest room in this building. Before Miso Hall was ready on the third floor in the main building, this room was used for school-wide meetings. One of the walls was filled with mirrors, and there was one piano in this room. A microphone system, a white screen, a projector, and a speaker were prepared for presentations or broadcasting purposes in this room. There were folding chairs and padded mats but no desks. The official uses of this room were for the theater group’s everyday practices, individual or group dance practices, meditation classes, and grade-wide presentations, discussions, or meetings. I often found students hanging out, napping, or playing the piano in this room.
There were three classrooms for 10th graders on the first floor of this main building. Each class consisted of approximately 15 students. In each classroom, there were a teacher’s desk, a television, and a chalkboard in front of the classroom, and individual lockers and a big bulletin board at the back of the classroom, as well as about 15 individual student desks and chairs. Desks were arranged by groups (such as groups of four) facing each other, rather than standing in lines all facing the front board or the teacher’s desk, for the purpose of encouraging students’ interactive discussions and dialogues during classroom learning.

On the second floor, there were a computer room, a career counseling room (mainly for college admission advice), a language study room, a broadcasting room, three rooms for teachers, three classrooms for 11th graders, and the science room, as well as two women’s restrooms (one for the female teachers) and two men’s restrooms (one for the male teachers). The computer room had about 20 computers and two printers available for the students. This room remained unlocked during the building’s open hours. Students were free to use both the computers and the printers, but they needed to bring a mouse with them. For the purpose of the classes, each teacher would bring a mouse for each student, but students were responsible for bringing their own for individual use. There was a career counseling room next to the computer room. There were a counselor teacher’s desk, bookshelves, a computer, one conference table, and some chairs in this room. On the bulletin board on the wall, there were college names and majors to which the school’s graduates had been admitted and entered.
There was a language study room designated for English classes. There were about 10 long tables and 25 chairs, one mounted television, one computer, one small sink, one small refrigerator, a white board on the wall at the front side of the room, and a big bulletin board on the wall at the back of the room. This room was called a language study room, and designated for English classes, but this room was used for many other purposes, perhaps because of the location and easy-to-arrange tables. This room was located in the middle of the second floor, right across from the biggest teachers’ room and next to the second largest teachers’ room. On Mondays and/or Tuesdays, lifelong education classes for parents (such as introductory counseling and mind studying) were offered in this room. On Friday afternoons, it was used for teachers’ weekly meetings. Many seemed to find this room a good place to have private conversations (either among teachers or between teachers and students). Some students used this room when they needed to do individual or group work.

There were three teachers’ rooms on the second floor of the main building. In the biggest teachers’ room, there were the vice principal, the chief teacher of school affairs, the head teachers of each department (e.g., counseling, welfare, and evaluation) and other teachers. In the second biggest teachers’ room, there were the homeroom teachers of the 10th and 11th graders, as well as a few other teachers. And, in the smallest teachers’ room, there were the homeroom teachers of the 12th grade.

On the third floor, there were three classrooms for 12th graders, a music room, an intensive reading room, a cooking room (for classes), a sewing room (for classes), Miso
Hall (including the library, the counseling room, and Miso Café), and women’s and men’s restrooms. The intensive reading room had about 18 sets of desks and chairs. This room was typically kept with the ceiling lights off. Each desk had a partition with a shelf over the head and an individual light. This room was built for private, individual study and quiet reading. However, many students also used this room when they wanted to be alone or nap. Miso Hall took up half the third floor and had two entrances. In front of the doors to Miso Hall, there were shoe shelves. When entering this hall, people were required to take their shoes off (and wear socks or go barefoot). There were a projector, a screen, computers, and broadcasting devices available in this hall. About 70% of the space in this room was empty, with no furniture, and was used as a sitting area. This space had various uses, including for school-wide weekly community meetings, week-opening hours, student presentations, lectures by guest speakers, grade-wide meetings, and so forth. Sometimes this hall was used for classes (such as art or Life and Philosophy). Also, students used this space for listening to music, napping, or just hanging out with friends. The rest of the space of Miso Hall consisted of the counseling room (called Wee class), library books on wooden shelves, the librarian’s room (called Goo-suk-bang), and Miso Café.

**Student dormitory.** The student dormitory was located right across from the main building. The dormitory building consisted of four stories and a basement. There were approximately 36 rooms, four shower rooms (one per floor), four bathrooms, two laundry rooms, three study rooms, one karaoke singing room, one exercise room, two club rooms,
four teachers’ rooms, and two housemaster teachers’ rooms. Between the stairways, there were bookshelves. The male students occupied the first and second floors, along with one male housemaster teacher, and female students occupied the third and fourth floors, along with one female housemaster teacher. Four students each shared one room. There were two bunks, four small desks, four chairs, and one storage closet in each room. The dormitory closed from Friday afternoons through Sunday afternoons and opened at about 4:00 p.m. on Sundays. After Friday classes ended at about 3:00 p.m., students went home for the weekend, and they needed to check back in to the dormitory by 9:00 p.m. on Sunday. However, the students who had parental permission and whose parents communicated with the teachers were allowed to check in later than 9:00 p.m. on Sunday or on Monday morning. Every morning began with wake-up music at 6:50 a.m., and there were 10 minutes of morning exercise outside on the playground at 7:00 a.m. on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. Breakfast was served from 7:40 a.m. to 8:10 a.m. in the school cafeteria. School began at 8:20 a.m., followed by everyday morning reading for 10 minutes (starting at 8:30 a.m.), with the attendance of the homeroom teachers. Morning check-in meetings with homeroom teachers and cleaning followed after the reading time until 9 a.m., when the first class started. Meanwhile, in the dormitory, housemaster teachers checked every room to see if there was anyone left and locked the door. At about 6 p.m., one of the teachers, who was in charge for that day, opened the dormitory door. At 9:30 p.m., the housemaster teacher (assigned by gender) checked if everyone was in the dormitory. There was a monthly dormitory meeting with
all the students and housemasters to share and discuss their concerns or suggestions about their dormitory lives. Sometimes, unresolvable issues at the level of the dormitory meetings were brought to the school-wide community meetings.

**School cafeteria.** There was a school cafeteria located on the first floor of the dormitory building. In the school cafeteria, because students lived in the dormitory, students had three meals per day from Monday through Thursday and two meals on Friday. There was one professional nutritionist and four cooks. The nutritionist planned the menu and uploaded the menu on the school website as public information. In front of the school cafeteria, there was a water tank where people could wash their hands. One of the walls had one entrance door, and one exit door was entirely glass. On the food-serving station, there were stacks of stainless steel food trays, spoons, and chopsticks in holders. Foods including rice or noodles, soup, main dishes, side dishes (such as kimchi, vegetables, etc.), sauce, and dessert (fruits, cake, rice cakes, etc.) were prepared in huge pots and trays, and students and teachers took their food in a self-serving style. School cafeteria staff members stood behind the food-serving area and often helped with serving, especially when there was a long line. There were about 15 long tables and 90 chairs. When it was nice weather, some students would take their trays outside to eat their lunch or dinner. The fourth period before lunch ended at 12:50 p.m. The teachers’ lunchtime was before the students’ lunchtime. The teachers’ lunch began at 12:30 p.m., while the students’ lunch was served at 12:50 p.m. Even if a class ended early and students arrived
before 12:50 p.m., they needed to wait by getting in a line in front of the cafeteria entrance door.

**Other places at Miso High School.** There was a building used as both a gymnasium and an auditorium next to the school cafeteria. This place was equipped with a Ping-Pong table, a basketball stand, and various pieces of fitness equipment, as well as a broadcasting facility. There was also a playground with soccer goal nets on two sides. The playground was used for physical education classes. Also, in the morning, students did exercises there as a whole group. During lunch break and after school, male students and teachers often hung out together playing soccer. Sometimes I found a few students walking around the playground during class hours. When students were found smoking by the teachers, they had to run around the playground as a penalty, a policy that came from the results of the school-wide community meetings. There were flowers, trees, benches, and stands around the playground where people could walk, talk, eat, and nap. Students painted the stands during their art classes as a grade-wide project. There was a national flagpole next to the stands, and this area was often used for taking rests, reading, listening to music, playing guitars, or just sitting. There was a yard beyond the parking lot. The yard was used for gardening classes and the students’ gardening club. Students grew cabbage, radish, herbs, and more. There was a rabbit hutch in the back of the main building between the carpentry and parking lot. This space was for students who had an interest in breeding rabbits. There was also a big round grilling can in front of the
greenhouse. Students hung out there and made grilled sweet potatoes using the grilling can.

**Introduction of Focal Participants**

There were three focal student participants, all female, in this study. Yuna, Jaemin, and Woohee were all students who had an interest in the teaching profession. They were enthusiastic to learn about themselves and believed that their self-understanding would contribute to them becoming the teachers they wanted to be. Yuna was a 16-year-old girl in ninth grade when I first met her in 2013. She had three years of out-of-schooling experience during her middle school years. After she passed the middle school qualification exam, she entered Miso High School. She had a dream of becoming a teacher because of her life-changing experience with teachers at a night learning center in her home area, where she received emotional and academic support in preparing for the qualification exam. She hoped to become just like those teachers who had passion and compassion for marginalized children. Woohee was a 17-year-old girl in tenth grade. Although her decision to become a Miso High School student was voluntary, it was her father who originally suggested that idea with the hope of his daughter living her adolescent years with less academic pressure and more freedom. Woohee had a special love for young children and dreamed of working for and with them in her future. Jaemin was the same age as Woohee. Her previous schooling memories were full of joy and having fun, especially with one teacher during middle school. After she learned that Miso’s curriculum was similar to what alternative schools offered, Jaemin decided to
continue her high school education in an alternative school and became a Miso High School student. She was unclear about what she exactly wanted to do for her life when she entered Miso, but education was one of the topics in which she had always been interested.

The two focal teacher participants, both male, were Mr. Jang and Mr. Park. Both Mr. Jang and Mr. Park had approximately 10 years of teaching experience in Korean public schools before they moved to Miso High School. Mr. Jang was a teacher of Korean literature, reading, writing, and so forth in his late thirties. After receiving his undergraduate degree and teaching certificate in Korean education, he taught for over 10 years at Korean public middle and high schools and then came to Miso in 2011. He had been distressed at his previous schools, especially by the highly competitive and regulatory school culture, with its lack of curricular flexibility for the teachers. He had felt that he was a prison keeper censoring his students from the morning until the night, and he had yearned for a new and different type of teaching and education. He mainly taught Korean, including writing, reading, literature, and so forth. At Miso High School, he also taught Life and Philosophy (a class for senior students). In this school, he was also a head teacher of the self-learning project program and a homeroom teacher for one of three seniors’ classes.

Mr. Park, a mathematics teacher, was in his middle forties. He came to Miso High School in 2010, the school’s year of establishment. After receiving a teaching certificate and undergraduate degree in math education, he had begun his teaching career
in private institutional settings. Then, he had received his master’s degree in education and decided to become a public school teacher. When he had begun his new teaching career at the Korean public schools, he had roughly thought of an idea of working at an alternative school after having about 10 years of teaching experience at the public schools. He had performed various administrative work in his previous schools. This had made him better understand how the public school operated as a bureaucratic system, how the system made teachers function in certain ways, and how the dynamics of hierarchical relations among teachers and administrators (such as the principal) was created, played out, and manifested. At this school, he took the role of head teacher of school affairs, and taught Life and Philosophy.
Chapter 4: Findings and Results

I conducted a yearlong qualitative study utilizing a spirituality paradigm, case study, and narrative-inquiry approach to investigate the experiences of students and teachers at an alternative public high school in South Korea where gaining self-understanding and deeper connections with others is valued and nurtured.

In this chapter, I use the findings to address the three guiding research questions of this dissertation:

1. How is school experienced as a place to nurture students’ spiritual understanding of themselves and their lives?
2. How do students spiritually understand themselves and their lives?
3. How do teachers spiritually understand themselves and their lives?

The presentation of findings is organized sequentially. First, I discuss the findings related to the students’ experiences at Miso High School. Then, I present stories that describe three students’ spirituality. Finally, I present two teachers’ spiritual journeys at this school in the form of stories.
Research Question 1: How Is School Experienced as a Place to Nurture Students’ Spiritual Understanding of Themselves and Their Lives?

To answer the first research question, I employed a holistic approach and carefully reviewed and analyzed the entire data set. Spirituality did not exist as a part of the Miso curriculum in a separate manner, nor as the sum of parts. It permeated every part of the school, including history, philosophy, curriculum, activities, events, environment, atmosphere, and culture, as well as people’s relationships, interactions, and attitudes. It became important to know how people actually spiritually experienced and learned from themselves and their lives through their lived experiences in the contexts of their everyday lives at this school. My daily presence at Miso and prolonged engagement with the study participants enabled me to have close access to both teachers’ and students’ lives: I was able to hear multiple voices, which enriched my understanding of Miso and its members. To enhance the credibility of the data and analysis, I checked closely with students and teachers about my understanding and questions based on my everyday participant observation in terms of the school and its cultural phenomena (including its environment, atmosphere, curriculum, routine, events, incidents, etc.) that shaped people’s everyday life experiences at Miso. The information that I gathered from them was reflected in my research notes. In addition, I grounded the interview questions for the students and the teachers in my research notes about my daily observations of Miso. Thus, both my research notes and interview transcripts were particularly important data sources from which to answer the first research question. Along with interview
transcripts and research notes, I also included school documents and transcripts of teachers and students’ presentations as data sources.

Through this analysis, I found five themes of the Miso students’ experiences that were linked to students’ spirituality and that led them to reflect upon and learn deeply about themselves and their lives: (a) physical space, (b) time, (c) relationships (student-student and student-teacher relationships), (d) learning, and (e) Miso’s dual positions. The first four themes (physical space, time, relationships, and learning) were associated with what this school tried to create and offer as an alternative school working against the mainstream schooling culture and climate. I mainly analyzed these themes based on stories that students shared about their experiences at Miso, especially as they compared their current experiences to their previous school experiences. The fifth theme concerned students’ experiences with Miso’s unique dual positions as an alternative high school and, simultaneously, a public high school. My analysis revealed that the students’ experiences associated with Miso’s dual positions had an impact on their increasing understanding about themselves and their lives in relation with others. Despite the conflicts and confusions, the complicated realities in which students were situated at Miso were important sources for students to reflect upon and to become more critically aware of themselves in navigating their lives.

**Theme 1: Students’ Experiences of Physical Space at Miso**

Students involved in this study recognized that Miso’s physical space impacted their understanding of themselves and their relationships with others. In particular,
students experienced Miso’s physical space through three key aspects: (a) easy and independent access, (b) frequent and casual entries, and (c) creative use.

**Aspect 1: Students’ *easy and independent access.*** Having easy and independent access was an important aspect of students’ experiences of physical space at Miso. For students, the Miso High School environment was not only a learning place but also a daily living place because they were required to reside in the school dormitory. Since the students lived on the school premises, the administration extended the opening hours of the school buildings until 10 p.m. in accordance with the students’ dormitory daily check-in hours, which were between 9:30 and 10 p.m. Moreover, many spaces remained open and easily accessible when the school building was opened for the students.

As a public school, Miso was funded and built by the provincial educational office, so its physical structure was similar to that of an ordinary public school in Korea, with many boundaries and divisions by purpose (such as a science room where science was taught, a music room where music was taught, and a library). In the mainstream Korean schools, teachers mostly control these specified rooms and their accessibility to students. The teachers have keys and keep these rooms closed and locked, especially the rooms that have equipment or devices that are used during school opening hours. The students are not allowed to have independent access to many rooms, except for the homeroom classrooms and restrooms, unless the teachers invite them into one of the rooms for the purpose of a class. However, at Miso, the students had access to various
spaces, including the computer room, the language room, the library, Miso Hall, the auditorium, and so forth during the opening hours of the school buildings, so the spaces became more connective and open. Miso students felt free to be in any space of the school. With most teachers, the students found that their reasons and needs for using particular rooms were validated and legitimated by having access; even when the students couldn’t have immediate access, they could communicate and negotiate with the teachers.

Students recognized their increased access to spaces in the school as acknowledgement of their presence and existence, which nurtured their sense of self. Having such access was different for students compared to their previous experiences, when teachers had all the access to locked spaces and controlled the students’ access with strict policies. Woohee described how she felt about Miso’s space:

I feel comfortable being here and being myself. I guess I have a belief that I won’t be rejected at any place in this school. And this school is small. This school makes me feel that I have become bigger? If I compare it my middle school, I went to school every day, but there were many places I had never been to. And I had an impression that there were so many places that I was not allowed to enter, so I sometimes felt intimidated. I didn’t even question “Why not?” because things were too strong, and rigid, and naturalized. (8155-FW)

She elaborated on what she meant by “I became bigger”:

I can actually feel myself here within the school space. I can feel my presence and existence here, which I didn’t feel in my previous schools. This feeling
differently guides me in how I act in this school space, which is more confidently.

(8155-FW)

As Woohee explained, her presence and existence were acknowledged by the open accessibility of the school spaces. It made her feel comfortable and free to be herself. This type of experience is subtle but powerful. By experiencing the spaces as more open, flexible, and easily accessible, the students also experienced the school administrators’ and teachers’ respect for and trust in them. This does not mean that there was no problem or issue regarding an allowance of students’ accessibility. Sometimes, teachers and students complained about some students who had ignored a room policy (such as cleaning up desks after use) and, at the teachers’ meetings or school-wide community meetings, argued to strengthen the rule. However, more people voiced more strongly that increasing the restriction or rule could not be the solution, although it could be an easy solution by using the teachers’ or the school’s authority.

In addition, easy and independent access to many spaces for individual purposes allowed students to develop personal meaning about the physical spaces in the school. By developing their personal meaning and emotional attachment, students developed a sense of belonging and ownership about the school. Woohee explained that the fact that I could easily find a space that I wanted to be and have an access enabled me to feel more comfortable to be in and around the school. It’s not home, but [it] seems to give me a home-like feeling. (08086-FW)
Woohee’s favorite spaces were the principal’s room, the music room, the librarian’s room, and the counseling room. When she wanted to be alone and reflect, the music room and the librarian’s room were her favorite spaces. The counseling room and the principal’s room were more about hanging out with friends. To Jaemin, the reading room and the librarian’s room were special spaces. In the reading room, she found a secure feeling when she wanted to have privacy and solitude inside the school. The librarian’s room made her feel cozy and relaxed, either when she wanted to have intimate dialogues with her friends or when she just wanted to have leisure time.

Miso Hall was a space that showed well the connectedness and openness of Miso High School’s physical environment. Miso Hall seemed to be a space where the students could feel cozy, relaxed, and easily connected with others. About 70% of the space in this room was empty, with no furniture. The space without any furniture served various purposes, including school-wide weekly community meetings, week-opening meetings, student presentations, lectures by guest speakers, grade-wide meetings, and so forth. This hall was also used for the classes (such as art or Life and Philosophy). Students frequently used Miso Hall for reading books, playing smartphone games, listening to music, taking naps, chatting, or just hanging out with friends throughout the day. Students made themselves comfortable for reading or playing with their cellphones by grabbing cushions and lying down on their stomachs on the floor. The rest of the space of Miso Hall consisted of the counseling room, library books on wooden shelves, the librarian’s room, and Miso Café. At one of the corners in Miso Hall was the librarian’s
room, which had a low table with some sitting cushions in the middle of it. The librarian’s desk, computer, and bookshelf were at the end of the room, and the school playground could be seen from the window. Many students and teachers found this room cozy and comfortable, like a room at home, and it was many students’ favorite place to hang out or to have a private conversation with friends or teachers. Students often used this room when reading, napping, having group or private conversations with their friends or teachers, or just being alone. At another corner of Miso Hall, next to the librarian’s room, was Miso Café. This café sold hot and cold coffee, hot chocolate and cold chocolate milk, red bean ice flakes, toasted bread, and so on during lunch and dinner hours. Students always occupied the sitting area in front of the Miso Café counter. That area was not only used for having tea or coffee purchased from Miso Café but also for just hanging out and taking breaks with friends.

By making use of the physical space more open and easily accessible for students, the administrators of Miso High School conveyed a strong message that the school was fundamentally for students, their learning, and their growth. The school provided students a possibility to grow a sense of self and belonging. Creating a comfortable living and learning atmosphere for the students reflected Miso High School’s educational philosophy that such an atmosphere would be evident in how the school spaces were used by the students and the teachers.
Aspect 2: Students’ frequent and casual entries to school spaces. The second aspect of Miso’s physical space was that students had frequent and casual entries: In particular, the teachers’ and the principal’s rooms were main spaces that students frequently and casually entered and used. Miso’s administrators made various efforts to nurture closer and deeper connections between students and teachers and among students. Those efforts were evident of how the students used certain spaces, such as the teachers’ rooms and the principal’s room. Students’ frequent and casual entries enabled students and teachers to have conversations more easily beyond the classroom learning hours. It contributed to students feeling closer to their teachers and building close, connective relationships with their teachers.

Typically, in Korean schools, a teachers’ room was represented with an image of being filled with authority. To Korean students, entering a teachers’ room meant that they had done something wrong or gotten into some trouble. Miso students involved in this study noted that they had rarely entered their principals’ or teachers’ spaces in their previous schools, unless they had been called for an official reason. The teacher’s rooms in Miso can be considered an example of creating a different school atmosphere and culture. In a 2014 graduation magazine, which was created and published by Miso’s 2014 graduates, these students stated that

We will remember teachers’ rooms as spaces that were filled with warmth rather than cold air. If there is a place that tore down walls [between the teachers and the students] in this school, it must be this place [the teachers’ room]. We will
remember this where there were the closest people for us, where we hung out with teachers who taught us to stand up courageously.

As this comment in the graduation magazine showed, the teachers’ rooms were special spaces for Miso students where they could meet and relate with teachers who were warm to, loved, and cared for them.

One student said, “I don’t know how I learned this, but I observed [that] others freely entered and hung out in the teachers’ rooms, and teachers were okay with that, so that’s how I learned to feel okay and free to enter the teachers’ rooms” (09284-RN). As this student’s comment demonstrated, Miso students seemed to feel free to be in the teachers’ rooms and to perceive the teachers’ rooms as extended spaces of their own.

Students frequently stopped by the teachers’ rooms during the 10-minute recesses, lunchtimes, and after-school hours. Some students had something to turn in or to discuss with a particular teacher, while many others stopped by to have a chat with the teachers. Alternately, sometimes the students just sat on the chairs or couches in the teachers’ rooms, took a rest, and left. Sometimes they had tea or a snack on a table in the teachers’ rooms, especially after their third class sessions or during their lunch break (one hour). Some students were sneaky and took cookies from the table. They shared those cookies with their friends with giggles, and put their index fingers on their lips, indicating that this was a secret. Sometimes they brought snacks to the teachers’ rooms and left some portions for the teachers. Through the students’ frequent and casual entries, the teachers’ rooms became gathering spaces where students and teachers had many chances to have
casual conversations with each other. This promoted a sense of closeness and community.

Another space that nurtured a close relationship among members at Miso and a sense of belonging and community was the principal’s room. This room was open for the students and teachers because of the principal’s intention to work against the image of principals and their rooms representing school authority, hierarchy, rigid divisions between administrators and teachers, and distance from the students. In ordinary Korean schools, the principal’s room represented school authority. It was rare for the students to enter that room. If students entered the principal’s room, that might mean either they were about to be expelled from the school or they had gotten a big award from some organization. At Miso, the principal wanted to make his room welcoming and easily accessible for all Miso community members, without a lock, during the open hours of the building. In the principal’s room, there were two areas: In one area, there was a desk for the principal and a big conference table and chairs as well as bookshelves. In the other area, called Sa-rang-bang, there was a big low wooden table and sitting cushions so people could sit on the floor without a chair. In addition, there was a stack of teapots and cups that the principal frequently used to serve tea to himself, teachers, students, and visitors. Students often had conversations with the principal or their friends over tea, and they took naps with or without the principal’s presence. The principal’s room, along with the teachers’ rooms, functioned as a gathering space for Miso community members, and a sense of closeness and community was cultivated.
Aspect 3: Students’ creative use. Students’ creative and flexible use of the school space was also an important aspect of their experiences with physical space at Miso. Spaces in Miso High School seemed to be continuously evolving via the students’ creative use through school-wide communication for negotiation and a decision-making process, rather than by limiting or controlling students’ use to the basically given structure or by the authority of the school and the teachers. Even without big physical structural changes or without any outer change of the place, students at Miso used their own ways of using places and spaces through discussion and negotiation among the members of the school community. The school community flexibly accepted changes to the ways that were more relevant to the current Miso school community. There was a rabbit hutch behind the main building between the carpentry workroom and the parking lot. That space was used by the students who had an interest in breeding. Some students continuously tried to negotiate with the school to expand a space for breeding mealworms as their self-learning project idea. They temporarily used a space under the stairs at the back door of the first floor of the main building. Several months later, the school community approved this space to be used for the students with an interest in breeding. In addition, some students added their aesthetic taste around that area through painting the walls.

Theme 2: Students’ Experiences of Time at Miso

Students involved in this study recognized that how they experienced their time at Miso had an impact on their understanding of themselves and their lives. Regarding
students’ experiences of time at Miso, I identified three aspects: (a) unstructured and autonomous hours, (b) time for connecting with their inner selves and following their inner guidance, and (c) absence of school bells.

**Aspect 1: Unstructured and autonomous hours.** Miso students regularly had unstructured and autonomous hours, and it was considered an important aspect of their experiences in terms of time. Some of those hours were given to the self-learning project program, which is a feature of Miso’s curriculum as an alternative school. At Miso, the students were officially provided with 8 hours (from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays) each week for their individual self-learning projects. None of those hours were officially regulated or tracked by the teachers. The students were not obligated to report what they did or how or where they spent their time during those hours. These projects took the greatest part of the weekly curriculum hours at Miso. The students also recognized these hours as the biggest and the core part of their lives. By doing the self-learning projects, the students experienced an *alternative* way of living their adolescent years. Based on individual students’ interests, choices, and plans, the students could have internship experiences in the fields where they were interested. However, Miso High School left it as an option, not as a mandatory requirement, with the understanding that the students would have their own ways of learning about themselves. The only requirement of the self-learning projects (which were not graded or pass/fail) was to have presentations about what they learned from their experiences at the end of the semester.
Those unstructured and autonomous hours for the self-learning projects had various meanings for students, including liberation, hope, and uncertainty about their lives. Particularly, liberation from adult control and becoming agents of their daily lives was the most immediate and significant meaning for students. After three years of experiences with such unstructured and autonomous hours on a regular basis, one student defined the self-learning projects as “time [when] we can do whatever we want to do as long as it doesn’t violate community agreements” (4-GT-212). As this student’s comment implies, the individual students’ self-learning projects were based upon their decisions about what they wanted to do. Many students mentioned that they just simply liked the fact that they could have free hours inside and outside of the school so that they could freely do whatever they wanted during those given free hours. Even when the students had little ideas about what they wanted to do for the self-learning projects or how to do them, the students considered liberation from the teachers’ eyes on what they were doing in the school itself as considered a powerful and life-changing experience. It was important to them because they had rarely had such freedom in their earlier schooling years, and having more freedom and choice in their daily lives seemed to give the students a sense of agency and empowerment about themselves and their lives.

The self-learning projects not only gave the students liberation and a sense of agency but also hope for their lives, especially when they, as prospective students, made the decision to enter Miso High School. For current students, as well as prior prospective students, this part of the self-learning project program was considered one of the most
attractive and significant experiences of Miso. Woohee mentioned that when she was a prospective Miso student, she particularly liked the idea of the self-learning project in that this school valued students’ freedom to explore what they wanted for their lives and provided regular hours for the students to find out what they really wanted for their lives (or their present life). She had hoped that she would have an opportunity to learn more specifically about her rough but long-term dream of becoming a teacher through internship experiences. She remembered how excited and thrilled she had felt when she had imagined herself and her life at Miso, having such experiences, and that had convinced her to choose this school.

When I mentioned what and how I heard from the students about their experiences with their self-learning projects, Mr. Park explained the implicit but very strong message that the students were getting from the self-learning project program:

The self-learning project program in our school is a journey for the students to find out their dreams about their lives. So, it gives the students a hope about themselves and their lives. “I will be able to find what I really want for my life,” and “I can live my life in a way I want.” . . . Especially, for prospective students, this gives them a hope that if they go to this school, they can be the person they want to become. (02054-IP)

This comment by Mr. Park resonated with the feelings Woohee, as a prospective student, had about the free hours for the self-learning projects. In her middle school, Woohee had identified as a typical student who passively thought of what she had had from her
previous school as *the way it is* in school, so not so many complaints, or satisfaction either. But, once she learned about an alternative school like Miso, where she could have different experiences through the schooling, she felt excited and thrilled about her life in the school. I believe it is so powerful that the students can feel excitement and authentic desire about their schooling, with a hopeful image of life in the school, and the school can provide them with a positive feeling about their lives.

In addition, students learned how to live with uncertainty by having unstructured time. Unstructured time helped them to slow things down, and led them to gain better understanding about what they were truly feeling and thinking. Students dealt with especially their doubts, anxieties, and fears about the future. In fact, the students were situated to learn how to live with those free hours. One student stated, “I learned how to design my life here” (8014-RJ). That learning began by having unstructured time on a regular basis. It meant that they had control and became agents to own and design their lives. The students learned to create and find a different value and meaning of their time. They questioned and tried to unlearn their old ways of thinking about their use of time for efficiency and usefulness. Instead, they learned to value the meaningfulness of their lives and how they spent their time by being more responsive to their own pace and rhythm. Individual students gradually learned to figure out on their own how to understand, define, and conceptualize their time and life, which was important for students’ self-understanding.
Aspect 2: Time for connecting with their inner selves and following their inner guidance. Spending time connecting with their inner selves and following their inner guidance was also an important aspect of students’ experiences regarding time at Miso. Such time was often spent on the self-learning project hours. What was really important for the self-learning projects seemed to be how each student made sense of and used this project in accordance with their inner needs, rather than what they did or how much they accomplished. From time to time, many students did what Miso students called 잉여 [surplus] or Ing-yeo during the self-learning project hours, which meant that they spent their time without any specific plans each week. Although some teachers or students sometimes viewed Ing-yeo as lost or wasteful, many students stated that their time for Ing-yeo was an intentional choice as a way of deeply connecting to themselves.

One student said to me that she had decided to take her project hours as doing-nothing time during the spring semester in her second year. In her first year, she had volunteered at a local children’s center and a preschool, doing an internship as a part of her self-learning project. She and I had some private conversations, and she shared how she felt about her school experiences, including her internship. She frequently said that she felt unsure about her interests, and she seemed confused and frustrated. One day, at a meeting for students who were interested becoming teachers, and some teachers whom they wanted to invite, she came and shared her story:

My dream is not becoming a teacher. I just . . . my mom suggested being a teacher, like if you become a teacher, you will make good money and you can...
travel with that money during breaks. So, because I was kind of forced I am doing this now. Yeah. My dream is not becoming a teacher. But, if I don’t do this, I become like others who do nothing and wander . . . so, I did that, at least.

(12173-GM)

This meeting was held at the end of the semester. When I saw this student again during the following semester, she said that she had decided to take a break from doing and the obligatory feeling that she needed to do a certain thing, and to let herself do whatever she wanted to do each day, such as taking naps, reading interesting books, hanging out with friends, joining the activities that the school offered during self-learning project hours, and so forth. That was her way of connecting more deeply to herself for the journey of learning her true self, who she wanted to become, and how she wanted to live her life by freeing herself from a burden of needing-to-do-something and fear of being perceived as one of “those students” who were wasting their time and wandering around without thinking.

This was a meaningful experience for her because she clearly learned that teaching was not what she wanted to do and she reflected about what aspects of teaching she disliked. More importantly, she became more honest about how she really felt and what she wanted, and she learned to listen to her inner needs by being away from outer voices. Her story showed that the self-learning projects could serve both to deepen students’ interests by exploring possibilities and also to bring the students deeper inside themselves. The students seemed to find their own ways to think about creating their
projects, such as resting, hanging out, following what their close friends were doing, and talking with teachers and/or friends about their thoughts and feelings. Students seemed to find their own pathways, and their self-learning projects continuously evolved.

**Aspect 3: The absence of the school bells.** The absence of the school bells was also one of the important aspects of how students experienced time at Miso. As opposed to typical Korean schools, this school did not use bells to signal the beginning and end of class. It was decided when this school opened as a way of humanizing the school life and culture in order to nurture the students’ sense of autonomy.

Students were conscious about the meaning of having no school bells. The negative effect of the absence of the school bells was once raised as an issue at one of the community meetings, when this school community discussed the high rate of student absenteeism and students’ trivializing attitudes about traditional classroom learning (05214-RN). Using the bells like other schools was suggested as an idea of bringing out more awareness about classroom learning. However, through some more exchanges of opinions, students were soon reminded of how they had felt about the use of the school bells in their previous schools. Students explained that they would feel pressured, forced, and oppressed again, as they had felt in previous schools, if the school decided to use the bells. Students also emphasized that the school’s decision of eliminating the school bells was about learning autonomy above all (including punctuality), and they urged each other to keep in mind its important values (such as being acknowledged and respected for their capacity for autonomy). Their discussions indicated that students felt the school bells
were controlling devices of the students’ bodies, time, and behavior, while they felt that without the school bells, they were trusted and their autonomy was respected in terms of their time at Miso.

**Theme 3: Students’ Experiences of Relationships at Miso**

Miso students recognized that their relationships with peers and teachers were important experiences at Miso in terms of gaining better understanding about themselves and others. In particular, I identified three key aspects of their relational experiences: (a) democratic student-teacher relationships, (b) empathetic student-student relationships, and (c) collaborative and reciprocal learning relationships among students.

**Aspect 1: Democratic student-teacher relationships.** Having democratic relationships with their teachers was a key aspect of students’ experiences regarding relationships at Miso. Miso students recognized that such democratic relationships were formed during Miso’s school-wide weekly community meetings, where both students and teachers were involved in making decisions about important issues of the school through discussions and votes. The weekly community meetings occurred in Miso Hall every Wednesday afternoon. They usually took from 1.5 hours to 2 hours (from 3:30 p.m. through 5:30 p.m.). Student executive members (including a student president and vice president who were annually elected by students) selected the topics after they collected opinions from students’ suggestions, the student executive members’ meetings, and the teachers’ meetings. Topics varied and included group project ideas about a mobile learning trip, ideas of reducing food waste, changing the shoe-change policy, frequent
and heavy absences from classes, drinking or smoking, and so forth. The student
president and vice president presided over the school-wide community meetings.

When there was a topic about making a collective decision, rather than sharing or
gathering ideas, they had a vote. It took a majority vote of a show of hands to make a
decision. This meeting followed a one man, one vote principle. The students,
particularly, liked this principle in that everyone, including the principal and teachers,
was only allowed to have one vote, so the teachers and the principal couldn’t have final
authority regarding the issues discussed at the community meetings. Typically, in South
Korea, the predominant images of schoolteachers and relationships between teachers and
students have been about rigid hierarchical relationships, and top-down control of the
teachers over the students, without reciprocal communication involved. In addition,
students’ rights were hardly considered until very recent years (although they were still
marginalized), while students’ obligations (such as following and obeying what the
school and the teachers told them to do) were emphasized. Teachers’ authority to inflict
physical punishment had long been a naturalized and accepted way of educating students
in schools. These images and relationships had a long history, ever since modern
schooling and public school education were established in South Korea. However, since
the late 1990s, there had been an increasing critical awareness about the teachers’
physical punishment and authoritarian decision-making process in the schools as
problematic, dehumanized, violent approaches, along with the concern about what
message the teachers’ punishments were conveying to the students in the name of
education, such as justification of the violent use of power and authority. From this line of thinking, the alternative education to humanizing students’ schooling experiences in South Korea seriously considered establishing closer, more democratic relationships between teachers and students, empowering students, and sharing authority with students. Miso High School’s weekly community meetings were in the line of such efforts. The first principal of this school adopted this type of curricular activity from one of the alternative schools where he had worked as a vice principal.

Here is an example of how these community meetings worked. In this school, the distinction of using inside and outside shoes was an issue at the school-wide community meetings every once in a while. About a year ago, there was a debate on the same issue, and members decided to have a shoe distinction and to make a new policy (when teachers would take shoes from students who had violated the distinction for that day). A year after, during my study, in December, teachers raised this issue (such as wearing outside shoes inside the building or wearing the inside shoes outside) at a community meeting again. At this time, this issue had been discussed originally at a teachers’ meeting, and it was then raised at a community meeting. At the beginning of this community meeting, one of the teachers explained the reason of raising this topic in a community meeting. Teachers were frustrated by playing the role of police because of the new shoe policy and especially frustrated by some students who were frequently violating the policy. Some teachers said they wanted to stop such unpleasant and constant arguments with those students, and they suggested the idea of eliminating the current shoe policy. During the
debate and the vote, there was a tension between agreement and disagreement among students as well as teachers, and there were many other students and teachers who hesitated to make a decision to vote because they believed that the shoe policy was one of the important parts of the school’s culture, rather than just a matter of a rule or convenience. At the end of that meeting, the majority of students and teachers agreed on the idea of having a trial week without the shoes distinction and then having another meeting on this topic. After the trial week, a majority of students and teachers rejected the suggestion, and they discussed how they could adhere more closely to the policy.

Jaemin identified the community meetings as one of the school curricular activities that she treasured the most:

I personally believe that the community meetings are even more important than the self-learning projects among the curricular experiences in our school. It’s because that is when . . . each student and teacher becomes a citizen, and as a citizen, we can make our voice heard, and vote, equally. I actively participated in the community meetings more than anyone else. In this school, we have many freedoms, like, we can dye our hair and wear whatever we want to wear without the school uniforms. I like that part, yeah. But the community meeting is a more authentic type of freedom to me. I think the community meeting is the coolest culture in this school in that everyone has an equitable right to speak and to vote regardless if they are teachers or students. (09125-FJ)
Similar to this comment by Jaemin, the other student also acknowledged the community meetings, their value, and their contribution to democratic relationships with the teachers, saying,

The community meetings contributed to us having a more equal relationship with the teachers. The relationship with the teachers is not completely equal; it is still limited, because as you’ve also seen, not every issue regarding the students is decided at the community meetings. What’s important is that we have this *structure* that has many elements for equity. That’s powerful. Within that structure of the meeting, I feel that teachers tried to listen to the students’ voices, thoughts, and opinions very carefully. And, when they have a say, they share their opinion just as an *opinion* rather than in an authoritative, *decisive* voice. I feel that is really special. (09015-FD)

As these two students explained, the community meetings were important in this school because they made democratic relationships between the students and the teachers culturally and structurally possible. Through the community meetings, they became active agents and authentic members who reserved the right and freedom of speaking out.

These two students also acknowledged a challenge because of their relational dynamics with teachers and peers. The other student said, “Sometimes it takes courage for the students to voice problems in response to teachers’ opinions. It’s not always easy because we as students don’t want to be out of our teachers’ favor” (09015-FD). While
this student’s comment indicated a challenge with teachers, Jaemin recognized a challenge with peers:

I am aware of the fact that we don’t feel completely free to make our voices [heard] at the meetings from the influences of peer pressure or power dynamics among the students. It happens especially when I have a different opinion from my friends, or when I want to bring attentions to peers’ problematic behaviors. I guess that’s why I actively participated even more because I didn’t want to give up the right of making my voice [heard]. (09125-FJ)

As both students showed, they learned that democratic relationships or becoming agents did not come naturally, even with this structure. Establishing and maintaining democratic relationships required their efforts, courage, and active participation, which was also important learning for them.

**Aspect 2: Empathetic student-student relationships.** The empathetic relationships among students were another important aspect of Miso students’ experiences with relationships at Miso. Miso students recognized that they gained a better understanding of others through various opportunities of sharing each other’s thoughts, feelings, and opinions in multiple contexts in the school. Their increased understanding about others enabled students to have empathy for, closeness with, and connectedness to each other.

Miso High School made efforts to support more empathetic and connective relationships among students. Such efforts were evident in how the school structured
featured curricular activities. The entire group of students and teachers at Miso, at least, gathered together twice a week on a regular basis: during the week-opening meeting each Monday and a community meeting each Wednesday. These two school-wide gatherings were designed to provide students and teachers an opportunity to communicate with each other, so that the students and the teachers could nurture a sense of connectedness and community. For example, during the week-opening hours every Monday morning at 9 a.m., the whole group of students and teachers gathered at Miso Hall (as they did for the community meetings). Each student and teacher had an annual opportunity to have a presentation about themselves for about 15 to 20 minutes. There were usually three presenters each week. The ways of presenting themselves varied and included playing the guitar while singing, making autobiographical self-introductions, talking about important people to them (such as friends and family), sharing their recent interests or favorites, showing video clips or pictures, and so forth. This week-opening hour helped the students and the teachers learn more about individual students. Living in a dormitory was also acknowledged as an influence on students’ deeper connections with their peers. In addition, there were many curricular activities that provided students with opportunities to closely relate to each other in different contexts outside of the school, including mobile learning trips to Nepal, Jeju Island, and some mountains. Yuna said,

There are many school activities that helped me to feel closeness with other peers and better understanding, and contributed to my self-understanding. For instance, while I attended the community meetings, I often felt how different each person
really is. I mean, it is so obvious that every one of us is different. Our lives have
been different, as well. But I could learn it in a real sense, like I thought this way
and A, B, but other friends thought totally different ways and X, Y, and Z.
Sometimes, that surprised me: the fact that we really have different
understandings and views about things. I can better understand others’ feelings,
thoughts, opinions, and ways of thinking. At the same time, it helps me to better
understand myself. I sometimes felt my thoughts were clarified, better shaped, or
even strengthened in my head by listening to and being challenged by others’
thoughts and opinions. (01055-IY)

By sharing this comment, Yuna acknowledged that many curricular activities of sharing
each other’s feelings, thoughts, and opinions contributed to her increased understanding
about others and, furthermore, helped her to have a better understanding of herself.
Yuna’s comment showed that students’ experiences of describing and listening to their
true selves through their everyday lives became their important learning processes.

Similar to Yuna, Woohee also addressed how Miso was contributing to her
learning about others and herself by pointing out the students’ dormitory living and the
school-wide trips that she associated with learning about herself and others:

We live together in the dormitory and go many different places together. That
was a very interesting part of being here, to me. Because I saw many parts of
others, I learned each one has [his or her] own greatness, which is the fun part. I
was able to accept others as they are rather than ignoring or excluding. Even
when people acted annoyingly or strangely, I found myself seeing them more empathically or compassionately because I know many other parts, perhaps good parts, about them. At the same time, I experienced myself differently, too. I see many different parts of who I am, like multiple-Woohee-s. To me, the most essential learning that I got from the relationship with others here is that I need to have a good relationship with myself first before I can be good in interaction with other people. (08185-FW)

As Woohee and Yuna explained, Miso students appreciated that the school provided them with rich opportunities to closely relate with each other and learn about their peers so that they could understand other people more deeply through feelings of closeness and empathy, and vice versa. From the very first day at Miso, new students had a chance to individually introduce themselves to the entire community as a ritual of welcoming the new students. Then, the students spent their last day at Miso before the graduation day by describing their lived experiences at Miso. In addition, there were many classroom discussions and dialogues in which the students shared their opinions, thoughts, and feelings.

The self-learning project presentations and graduation thesis presentations also showed that the students had learned about other people more deeply. The students took how they presented their stories seriously. Because of the nature of these projects, the students often shared how their lives had been in connection with who they were and what they wanted for their lives. Many of their stories (such as being bullied,
experiencing violence, dealing with serious mental or physical health challenges, parents’
divorce, etc.) had never been told to anyone else, which made the students vulnerable
during their presentations. Such storytelling was especially powerful, and often made
audiences reflect on their own lives. Through rich story-telling opportunities, such as
their individual presentations of their self-learning projects and graduation thesis projects,
students deeply connected to each other and grew a sense of empathy, compassion, and
appreciation for their peers.

Aspect 3: Collaborative and reciprocal learning relationships among
students. The collaborative and reciprocal learning relationships among students were
another of the important aspects of Miso students’ experiences regarding relationships at
Miso. Miso students experienced reciprocal and collaborative learning relationships with
their peers by doing projects together and exchanging feedback and advice about each
other’s learning. Students’ experiences of doing projects with their peers and sharing
each other’s thoughts and opinions were important learning experiences at Miso.

Students’ collaborative projects often occurred spontaneously in their daily lives,
or, sometimes, collaborative projects occurred more strategically for very specific goals
or targets. For example, once there was an issue about the free meal policy in the
province where Miso High School was located. As an educational policy, students were
provided meals for free at their schools, but the policy makers tried to change the free
meal policy due to budget cuts. Some students did a signature-seeking campaign through
a collaborative project. One student who participated in this project shared her experiences:

I gathered the students who wanted to take action. We discussed our ideas, and decided to have a signature-seeking campaign, so we visited other public schools near our school. We went downtown to publicize this issue. We also had a press conference and indicated the students’ stance about the free meal policy issue. The project itself was meaningful for our rights, and I also still get along very closely with those with whom I did this project. By doing this project together, we built a special bond with each other. (09015-FD)

As shown in this student’s comment, the collaborative project contributed to deepen these students’ relationships beyond the project.

Students’ reciprocal learning relationships were evident during the presentations of the self-learning projects. The nature of the self-learning projects was about individual students’ own experiences and learning, but another big part of the self-learning projects was the project presentation. There was a particular atmosphere among students during these presentations. Students actively participated in the presentations by attending their peers’ presentations and attentively listening to the presentations. They also asked questions about the presentations and made comments and suggestions. One student explained how she felt:

I don’t know how this atmosphere was created, but that is what we naturally do for each other here at the self-learning project presentations. I think that receiving
feedback from others, especially when it comes from a deep concern with care and love, is a great experience, although when it is negative, it can make an emotional wound in front of many people. (09015-FD)

This student’s comment indicated that trying to contribute to their peers’ learning became something students naturally did in their daily learning contexts in Miso. Through many opportunities to gain a deeper understanding about each other, Miso students established emphatic and compassionate relationships. Based upon such emphatic and compassionate relationships, the students’ passion for encouraging each other’s learning and growth was also cultivated.

Among the students, there seemed to be certain expectations about the presentations in order to demonstrate authentic learning, including how presenter-students personally took on their experiences, and how they reflectively and meaningfully connected their project experience with who they were and what they wanted. Thus, when the presenter-students only focused on sharing what they did, without a meaningful connection to themselves, the audience-students often asked the presenters to elaborate on the reflections or connections, and sometimes they criticized the presentations. Evidence of the audience-students’ responses included the following: “So, what did that experience mean to you?”, “I didn’t see a connection between what you just shared and what you always seemed passionate about. Am I missing something? What happened there?”, and “Honestly, I was disappointed by your presentation. You said that you are interested in cars because you just “liked” them, and shared cool pictures here. I don’t
think you reflected enough. Not so much meaningful connection to who you are.” Such feedback and questions indicated students’ active involvement in each other’s learning. The students seemed to strongly believe that an essence of the self-learning projects, especially by the time of the presentations, was creating and finding their own meaning and learning from their experiences. When reflections were missing or the presenter-students showed a lack of reflection, the audience-students seemed to consider that the projects remained at the shallow surface level, and they shared their impressions, criticisms, advice, or suggestions.

The students’ active participation in each other’s learning was also evident when the presenter-students made good progress. The audience-students made comments to acknowledge and celebrate that, such as the following:

You’ve grown a lot. I sensed your confidence. As your friend, I am very proud of you and your growth. I know you’ve been struggling a lot about your dream, and about this presentation as well. We cheered each other up. You went through really nicely and made huge progress. I feel very happy for you.

Sometimes the audience-students shared their learning or reflection as responses to the presentations. After one student finished her presentation, another student said,

I didn’t know you went through such a difficult time. Your very deep and honest reflection about your learning and experience touched my heart, brought me tears. At the same time, it made me reflect on who I was as a friend to you. I feel very
sorry that I was not a good friend to you when you felt lonely. I didn’t know much about that. (12263-RN)

These comments showed that one student’s learning contributed to the others’ learning and grew their relationships, with a sense of collaboration and community. They learned to listen with respect, love, and empathy, and to exchange their thoughts and opinions about what they heard in this safe learning community. The students learned to speak about themselves freely and openly, and they also learned to receive feedback from others.

**Theme 4: Students’ Experiences of Learning at Miso**

Miso students involved in this study recognized that their experiences associated with how they understood about learning were important at Miso. In particular, I identified two important aspects of students’ learning experiences: (a) experiencing joy from learning, and (b) a broader and different perception of learning.

**Aspect 1: Experiencing joy from learning.** Experiencing joy from learning was a key aspect of the students’ learning experiences at Miso. To many students, feeling joy from their learning process was a new experience that they had never had in previous schools. It had an impact on how many students perceived learning and themselves as students. Woohee was one of them. Feeling joy from her learning was a transformative experience to her in Miso. She explained how she felt a genuine joy and pleasure:

Sometimes, I have felt our class period is too short. I never felt like this before, like in my middle school. The class had to end as soon as possible. But, after
coming here, I sometimes felt joy or I felt that I wanted to have some more. In particular, with Mr. Jang, I thought many times that this is really authentic learning, real education, you know. Also, in art classes, I often sensed I was really learning during the class. These experiences made me realize, “Wow, this is what people mean when they talk about the pleasure of learning.” (07144-IW)

She emphasized that she experienced joy from her learning process, although she wanted to clarify that her joyful learning experiences were limited to only a few teachers’ classes (in particular, Mr. Jang’s class and art class), and she still felt disengaged in other classes. In particular, to Woohee, feeling joy and wanting to learn more were a critical experience that she called authentic learning. Her perception of herself in the classroom changed. It made her see herself as a learner who knows a joy of learning from within. Woohee was no longer just a student in her term who sat, felt bored, so often daydreamed in the classroom, and waited for recess. Her years of schooling had made her develop good skills to cover her disinterest and make fairly good results on the tests, but she knew there was no authenticity in that learning. So, inner joy about what and how she learned from the classroom learning was so powerful to Woohee, and it was one of her “wow” moments. Similar to Woohee, there were two other students who shared their joyful learning experiences. One student said, “I like the art class in our school. We do something that I never thought that I would be doing in art class. The teacher expanded my understanding of art class. It’s really joyful learning to me” (09303-GM-E). The other student agreed with what this student said and further elaborated,
The art class in our school is very different from other schools. Typically, in the art class, we learn information or theories, and the art teachers would evaluate our ability to do art based on what we drew. But here, our art teacher looks at the person. To understand us, not to evaluate our drawing. Not just having fun. More than that. I sometimes felt healed from that class. I also like Mr. Jang’s class a lot because his class makes me think and look back. It may sound weird, but it’s painful sometimes; but at the same time, it’s great and fun. (09303-GM-J)

According to these two students’ descriptions, as well as Woohee’s comment, the students felt joy from what and how the teachers offered them learning opportunities. It was also noticeable that they constantly made comparisons with previous learning experiences. The classes that they mentioned were intended to create non-evaluative learning environments and to encourage the students to look deeply and differently at themselves through writing, group-dialoguing, drawing, crafting, and other artistic expressions. Their comments (such as “painful sometimes”) also indicated that what they meant by a joyful learning experience had a deeper meaning than just having fun. The students’ joy of learning came from their in-depth interaction and connection with themselves through the process of learning and creatively expressing themselves in non-judgmental learning environments.

**Aspect 2: Broader and different perception of learning.** Another key aspect of students’ learning experiences at Miso was their different and broadened perception of learning. Previously, many students had a narrow understanding of learning. For
example, learning meant subject-focused and test-oriented learning. However, in Miso their understanding about learning changed and broadened. Such change was possible because of Miso’s various learning opportunities that had different values and aims. For example, at Miso, gaining in-depth understanding about themselves and others, establishing collaborative and close relationships with others, and growing senses of connection, empathy, and compassion were considered educationally important values and aims for students. Reflecting on, writing about, and dialoging with each other about their feelings, thoughts, and opinions became important learning processes. Such experiences enabled students to perceive learning differently and more broadly.

Miso students’ perception about their learning was beyond that of teacher-led classroom learning, school curriculum-based learning, or learning for standardized tests. The fact that they had broader meanings about learning based on their alternative learning experiences at Miso was important and special for Miso students. In particular, when they addressed their learning experiences at Miso, students often used the term *authentic learning.* To them, *authentic learning* involved *learners* (vs. students) who had autonomy about their learning and could actively create their own meaning about it. This learning requires the learners’ active work on and participation in meaning-making in relation to themselves and their lives, rather than it being passively given. In contrast, traditional learning involves *students,* a term that is socially and institutionally defined and passive, and means a traditional type of knowledge acquisition, including teacher-led knowledge and standardized/objective knowledge, especially for the purpose of exams or
tests, with a lack (or absence) of personal meaning. Students’ learning experiences at Miso helped them to have broader perceptions about learning beyond the traditional concept of studying and learning in the school. And they, as learners, recognized that they were becoming producers and knowers of their own knowledge through the meaning-making process in learning.

Students’ learning experiences outside the school greatly contributed to their broadened understanding about their learning. Not only during the self-learning project hours but also other hours, including from after-school hours (beginning at 4:30 p.m.) until dormitory official check-in hours (9:30 p.m.), the students frequently went to many of the nearby locations and areas. So, as their learning space was extended, their learning also occurred beyond classroom learning. One student elaborated on her experience of being outside the school space for her learning:

I like that my learning space is not limited to inside the school’s physical space. I think that the school space might be effective to educate students about a certain type of knowledge or information. However, there are a lot of limitations when students want to learn, explore, or imagine more than just the given information. Also, I personally think that it is really important to critically examine the knowledge that is taught in the school, like if it is valid or not, and to reflect on how students actually experience such knowledge in their lives by interacting and acting outside of the school. (09015-FD)
This student in particular had once seriously considered deschooling herself after graduating from middle school because her learning in that school setting had been very limited to teacher-led instructions. The reason why she found a good fit in Miso was the fact that this school seemed to support students to learn beyond classroom learning. She also said,

During the self-learning project hours and after-school hours, I met many different people at different places outside of the school. Through those experiences, I could discuss, learn, and grow. Then, when I came back to the school, I had more things that I wanted to learn and know. So, I read books or news articles, or wrote about my thoughts. Sometimes, it led me to do a certain project. These experiences centered me and my life by giving me a feeling of satisfaction or fulfillment about my daily life. (09015-FD)

As this student experienced, Miso students used various learning resources (including Internet lectures and interest group meetings among adolescents or with adults in local communities) that were meaningfully associated with what they want to learn for their needs. Students recognized that being and interacting with people outside of the school enriched their lives and learning.

**Theme 5: Students’ Experiences of Miso’s Dual Positions**

Miso students involved in this study recognized that their experiences of dealing with issues associated with Miso’s dual positions were important in terms of their deepened understanding about themselves and others. In particular, there were two
significant and interrelated aspects of students’ experiences related to Miso’s simultaneous dual positions as a public high school and an alternative high school: (a) Miso-ache (students’ emotional challenges caused by complex, ambiguous, and contradictory realities at Miso), and (b) reflection through solitude and dialogue.

Miso students believed that after entering Miso, their lives became complicated with many unexpected issues generated by the unique contexts and natures of this school as a public high school and, at the same time, an alternative school that, ironically, aimed to create a different educational and schooling experience from that of a public school. On the one hand, as a public school, this school was established, funded, and administered by the provincial educational office and the South Korean public educational system. This meant that this school had to follow their systemic and administrative regulations, including school performance evaluations, teacher hiring policies, teacher performance evaluations, and student performance evaluations. On the other hand, as an alternative school, this school utilized an alternative educational approach to humanize students’ educational and schooling experiences by criticizing and opposing the mainstream public education system and schooling culture, and by creating a different and alternative schooling culture, which I described earlier in this chapter according to four themes (including physical space, time, relationship, and learning).

These dual positions of Miso High School were apparent in many aspects, including the curriculum. For the curriculum, Miso was permitted freedom in 43% of the curriculum to integrate activities (such as self-learning project hours, community meeting hours, etc.)
that aligned with the school’s educational aim and direction as an alternative school, while 57% of the curriculum consisted of traditional learning subjects, including Korean literacy, mathematics, social studies, and science. When Miso’s dual positions affected students’ lives, many issues arose. Students experienced Miso-ache in dealing with their conflicts, confusions, tensions, dissatisfactions, and frustrations about the school. Individual students’ reflections became urgent and necessary for dealing with the many emotional challenges that were caused by Miso’s dual positions.

**Aspect 1: Miso-ache (students’ emotional challenges caused by complex, ambiguous, and contradictory realities at Miso).** One of the key aspects that related to student’s experiences of Miso’s dual positions was the so-called Miso-ache. Miso-ache was a Miso High School insiders’ important term that students frequently used in daily life in the school. Miso-ache was defined as a symptom of students’ experience with emotional challenges in dealing with the complex, ambiguous, and contradictory realities of their lives that were often caused by Miso’s dual positions. Students’ learning and understanding about themselves did not come easily, especially within these complex, ambiguous, and contradictory realities. It often involved individual students’ emotionally

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5 Please see page 120 through page 132 in Chapter 3 for detailed descriptions about these important issues, which are related to Miso’s simultaneous dual positions as an alternative high school and a public high school, and which serve as a background information for this particular theme.

6 In this section, I only explain the Miso-ache that was directly caused by Miso (particularly Miso’s dual positions) and that was widely observed among students. However, not all students experienced Miso-ache in the same ways. There was another type of Miso-ache that I would call Miso-ache within Miso. In this within type of Miso-ache, students experienced emotionally difficult times at Miso, but this school did not necessarily cause their issues. These issues were usually generated by their unresolved life issues associated with their previous life experiences, or their relationships with families or friends; students also described it as “a sort of puberty thing.” Some students experienced two types of Miso-aches both together or separately at different times.
intense and painful inner processes, which were often referred to as Miso-aches by Miso High School students.

Miso-ache was widely present among students. In particular, in the beginning of their lives in Miso High School, Miso-ache often occurred because of a gap between individual students’ imagined images (such as utopia or heaven) and their actual experiences (such as many issues that originated because of Miso’s dual positions) in the school. Before their entrance, many students had high expectations about their alternative schooling experiences that built upon their idealized and romanticized views of the alternative school, both alternative schools in general and Miso in particular. For example, they hoped that they could be liberated from an oppressive school culture with strong teacher and school authority, control, and regulation; that they could do whatever they wanted to do; that their new teachers would fully understand, love, and care about them whatever they are; and that under the emphasis of collaboration, they could relate with their peers and classmates harmoniously without any power struggles or pressures. Such expectations and views were based on how alternative schools, including Miso, promoted their educational aims and directions, as well as strong stances against the mainstream schooling culture. Miso-ache began when these students realized that their imagined schools could only exist in their imaginations, and that they needed to deal with different types of challenges and difficulties by being students at Miso. They constantly encountered doubts about whether being a Miso student was a good decision for them and their lives. They could not know such challenges until they became insiders living
everyday life. There was a sweetness of being at Miso while there was a bitterness of being there. Miso-aches can be understood as a reaction to such bitterness. Miso-aches caused by the school often raised serious questions for students, including, “Did I make a bad choice or big mistake in coming here?,” “Can I make it through this?,” and “Should I consider leaving?” Some students’ Miso-aches were unnoticeable and short, while some students’ Miso-aches were more serious and known to the entire school community. Many students reported that they had their Miso-ache in their first year, but there were some others who had theirs during their second or even third year at Miso. And some students’ Miso-ache took about one or two semesters. Although few, there were students who experienced their Miso-ache for their entire school years at Miso. There were some indicators of Miso-ache. They included being absent from classes frequently, not participating in school activities, refusing to attend school, running away from home, and thinking of leaving the school. In particular, students’ Miso-aches often appeared in the form of their absenteeism. Many students’ Miso-aches were caused by the issues of Miso High School. When students dealt with such Miso-aches, they wanted to take some distance and withdraw themselves from participation and involvement in this school community, including attending classroom learning. Thus, according to students, their absenteeism was an inevitable and strategic choice to think deeply and silently about what was going on in their lives until they reached some conclusions or resolutions.
**Aspect 2: Frequent reflection through solitude and dialogue.** Having frequent reflections through solitude and dialogue was another key aspect of students’ experiences related to Miso’s dual positions. This aspect was interrelated with the first aspect, Miso-ache (students’ emotional challenges). That is, in their daily life at Miso, students often experienced confusions, doubts, conflicts, and tensions because of issues that were associated with Miso’s complex and contradictory dual natures. It gave them an urgency and necessity to reflect on what was going on and what those issues meant to them, so students made efforts to find solitude and privacy for self-reflection and had spontaneous dialogues with their peers in daily life. The curricular activities at Miso that had the value of discussion and dialogues about student’s life experiences also contributed to students’ frequent reflections. Students had various benefits from their frequent reflections. The benefits included their habits of reflection in their daily life; their increased self-awareness; their growing capacity to live with complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction; and their increased knowledge about personal values and life directions.

Students’ frequent reflections occurred through individual students’ voluntary solitude, dialogues with peers, and Miso’s curricular activities. For solitude, students frequently used the self-learning project hours and after-school hours. In addition, when students found urgent needs for being alone during school hours, they had a tendency to choose to respond to their needs over attending scheduled classroom learning. Students often honestly spoke with their teachers about the need to be out and alone. Alternately, sometimes they chose to go out without communication or permission, and then they
spoke about their absences with their teachers later. To talk about it honestly with teachers depended on the students’ comfort level or the teachers’ receptive level. When students chose absence particularly for solitude, they often chose to stay at the school and found spots to be alone quietly in the school; sometimes, they went outside the school. Furthermore, students used many curricular opportunities for reflection by sharing their challenges and concerns and by listening to others’ experiences through particular classes (such as Life and Philosophy, which was facilitated by Mr. Park and Mr. Jang) and school-wide community meetings. They learned to be conscious about what was going on in their lives and to articulate their experiences. They became better at understanding their experiences and lives from various lenses and perspectives. By having frequent reflection through solitude and dialogues with peers and teachers, students developed both the habit of reflection and critical awareness about themselves and their lives in relation with others.

Along with their habit of reflection and their increased awareness, their growing capacity to live with complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction and their increased knowledge about their personally important values and life directions were also important benefits that students had from their frequent reflections. In this school, students were often situated to deal with contradictions between two very different (or multiple) perspectives, directions, or suggestions through living with both the alternative school culture and the public school system. Belonging to both this school community with its alternative life values and a larger society in South Korea, students often felt confused,
conflicted, and uncertain about which way they wanted to choose or follow. Such confusion, uncertainty, and conflict often led students to think about what they truly wanted. That necessitated that they connected very closely with their inner selves in solitude. This was when students sometimes missed their previous lives, although they soon realized that that was not what they really wanted. They missed certain feelings, although they soon remembered that such feelings were false, and that was what they really wanted. Previously, they had felt oppressed by many controlling forces, including social and cultural agendas about being adolescents or succeeding in life, but their lives had had a clarity and certainty about what to do. When they felt greatly challenged by confusions or a lack of clarity at Miso, students temporarily missed their previous lives. Then, they soon remembered what they had really felt in their previous lives (such as feelings of powerlessness) and re-centered themselves to the direction in which they really wanted to live (such as living with a sense of agency). More importantly, by constantly experiencing these processes of being lost, remembering, and re-centering, students found their growing capacity to deal with fears, doubts, and confusion that were often caused by the complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities of their lives. Furthermore, by dealing with many issues with mixed feelings, students learned to navigate their lives between and among various worldviews, life directions, ways of living and being, and so forth. Later, students often found their personally important values in their lives, or in the purposes, meanings, and directions of their lives. Based on their critical consciousness about themselves, their lives, and their relationships with
others (including friends, families, teachers, this school, and Korean society), students learned that what this school promoted or believed as alternatives could (and should) not be transferred to their values or beliefs, as the mainstream sociocultural or educational values were not the answers for them or their lives. Thus, they learned to more critically understand their own values or decided to seek “alternatives to alternatives.”

Students involved in this study strongly emphasized that their lived experiences at Miso could not be reduced to this school’s stated curriculum or intended education, which came from the educators’ or administrators’ perspectives and viewpoints. Students emphasized that their lives and realities were not that simple and could not be told within such narrowly bound and prescribed frames, although they acknowledged the interconnection of their experienced learning with the school’s intended teaching and appreciated the well-intended aims and educational efforts of many teachers in this school. Students actively demonstrated that there were many aspects of Miso that constantly created confusion, conflicts, and tensions in their daily lives besides the goodness of Miso’s intended education. Their individually told and, at the same time, collectively interconnected stories about their complex, ambiguous, and contradictory realities showed their life burdens and struggles, which they hoped could be better acknowledged and improved. After providing a summary of my findings in relation to the first research question, to answer my second research question, I provide more detailed stories about the three focal students’ lives at Miso.
Summary

Three important aspects regarding students’ experiences with physical space in Miso High School were identified: (a) students’ easy and independent access, (b) students’ frequent and casual entries, and (c) students’ creative use. At Miso, the principle of openness and flexibility was enacted by loosening teachers’ control and surveillance. That is, this school unlocked many rooms (including the computer room, the library, the auditorium, etc.), and allowed students to have independent and free access beyond their homeroom classrooms and restrooms during the school building opening hours. Increased access to various school spaces had an impact on students’ daily lives and their perceptions about themselves, teachers, and the school. Students could have freedom and options to be where they wanted to be without constantly asking the teachers’ permission or being monitored and censored by their teachers in their everyday school lives. Such freedom helped students to feel their existence and presence accepted and valued, to feel more comfortable to be their true selves in the school. The teachers’ and the principal’s openness to allow students’ frequent presence in the teachers’ rooms and the principal’s room was also notable in this school. It enabled students and teachers to more frequently have informal dialogues in their daily lives. It helped students to have more comfort and deeper connections in being and interacting with teachers and to have closer relationships with teachers.

Three important aspects regarding students’ experiences of time in Miso were identified: (a) unstructured and autonomous hours, (b) time for connecting with their
inner selves and following their inner guidance, and (c) absence of school bells. Miso students had many unstructured and autonomous hours in their daily lives. Through one of the featured curricular programs, the self-learning projects, this school provided 8 hours of unstructured and autonomous time for students each week, which hardly happens in the traditional and regular schools. In addition, under this school’s educational stance to work against college entrance exam-focused education, this school did not require any regulated self-study hours after regular school hours. Thus, after-school hours were fully given to students every day. By regularly having those hours, students’ lives were differently framed. The immediate level of change was that they felt liberated from highly structured and standardized school schedules and the teachers’ control. At a deeper level, it made differences in students’ perceptions about themselves, their learning, and their lives, which gave them a sense of ownership and agency. They had opportunities to take their own time to know themselves and what they wanted in their own ways of learning about themselves. They unlearned what they had been taught about time throughout their lives, especially through schooling. That is, they rethought their conceptions about time with an emphasis of planning, efficiency, and usefulness. In addition, students newly had time for connecting with their inner selves, and they learned to follow their inner guidance and needs. Through their experiences of having free hours regularly each week for three years at Miso, students gradually learned to think about their lives and to design both their short- and long-term lives. By spending these weekly hours for three years, students developed hopeful and positive images about themselves.
and their lives. During hours that the students spent in the way they wanted by doing what they want to do, they grew their hope and trust about themselves and their lives: their capacity to live the way they wanted to live and to be who they wanted to become.

Three important aspects regarding students’ experiences of relationship in Miso were identified: (a) democratic student-teacher relationships, (b) empathetic student-student relationships, and (c) collaborative and reciprocal learning relationships among students. This school’s weekly community meetings played an important role in students’ democratic relationships with their teachers. Through these meetings, students became decision-makers and co-creators with their teachers of school culture and policy, and they established close and democratic relationships with their teachers. In addition, because of this school’s educational emphasis on gaining in-depth understanding about oneself and others, rich curricular opportunities were provided for students. Through these opportunities, students not only shared their life stories, thoughts, feelings, and opinions with their peers, but they also listened to others’. These helped students to have a better and deeper understanding of their peers with respect, empathy, love, and compassion for each other. In addition, students built more collaborative and reciprocal relationships for one another’s learning and growth by exchanging honest opinions, advice, and suggestions with each other.

Two important aspects regarding students’ experiences of their learning in Miso were identified: (a) joy from learning and (b) broader perceptions of learning. In Miso, there were classes where teachers focused on providing non-evaluative learning with a
meaningful connection to students’ lives through classroom dialogues, writing, crafting, and so forth. Through such classes, students had authentic learning experiences in which they felt inner joy during their learning processes. In addition, students had many opportunities to go outside the school for more individually suitable and meaningful learning for themselves, such as through the self-learning projects. They learned that they not only learned from teachers, textbooks, or classroom learning, but they also learned from many different sources. Students experienced having broadened views about themselves (beyond just being students bound in the school’s time and space) and their learning (beyond teacher-led classroom learning). They began seeing themselves as more active learners to search for their learning inside and outside the school by actively making meanings and connections for themselves.

Two important aspects regarding students’ experiences of Miso High School with its dual positions as a public high school and simultaneously alternative high school were identified: (a) Miso-ache (students’ emotional challenges caused by complex, ambiguous, and contradictory realities at Miso) and (b) reflection through solitude and dialogue. Students often confronted issues caused by Miso’s dual positions with conflicts, tensions, and confusions, and many of them were going through the emotional challenges of the so-called Miso-aches. Students recognized that their daily lives and realities had become complex, ambiguous, and contradictory. Such realities gave students urgency and necessity to critically understand and reflect upon who they were, what they wanted for their lives in the present and the future, and who they wanted to become, so that they
could better navigate their lives and center themselves among different perspectives and possibilities. By doing so, the students developed critical consciousness about themselves and their lives in relation with others. Although Miso-ache involved many emotional challenges, and was often painful for individual students, students gained many benefits through their experiences of Miso-ache and frequent reflections. Their benefits included their habit of reflection in their daily lives; their increased self-awareness; their growing capacity to live with complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction; and their increased knowledge about personal values and life directions.

**Research Question 2: How Do Students Spiritually Understand Themselves and Their Lives?**

In the current section, I describe three students’ journeys of gaining a deeper understanding about themselves and their lives at Miso. In order to answer the second research question about students’ spirituality, I carefully reviewed and analyzed the collected data about the three focal student participants. Transcripts of dialogic meetings and interviews with these students were major data sources. I also used my research notes taken during the data-collection period, the students’ writings from their classes and about the self-learning project, and the students’ reflective journals. I interpreted the data about these three students in terms of their experiences and how they came to spiritually understand themselves and their lives.

Through data analysis I found that there were key themes among the three students’ stories, despite the individual students’ unique paths of their spirituality
throughout their years at Miso. Those themes included the following: (a) the students’ previous experiences; (b) their initial experiences at Miso; (c) their Miso-aches (struggles and challenges at Miso); and (d) their interpretations of, love for, and passions about themselves, their lives, and their dreams. However, through data analysis I also found that each student experienced these themes at different times and in different contexts, and each learned differently. Each theme had a different meaning to the individual students. For example, although all three students experienced Miso-aches and gained a deeper understanding about themselves and their lives, their Miso-aches occurred at different times: Jaemin had her severe Miso-ache from the beginning at Miso, while Woohee had hers in her second year after enjoying her first year with excitement and liberation. In addition, the three students’ Miso-aches related to their dreams, but very differently: Yuna’s dream functioned as an important way of keeping herself grounded and centered at Miso-ache in her current life, while Woohee’s Miso-ache helped her to find her passion about and love for her dream. Thus, in describing individual stories, I tried to chronologically describe the students’ stories as much as possible in order to make the stories more easily readable. More importantly, I used different organizations for the stories, rather than following the same order according to each of the common themes, in order to preserve and honor the students’ individual uniqueness (such as meaning and path) in gaining spiritual understanding from their lived experiences at Miso.
Three Students’ Stories of Spirituality

Jaemin’s story.

Before Miso: How Jaemin decided to become a student at Miso. Jaemin was full of good memories about her previous schooling years before Miso. She described her middle school years as a “fun time with no problems” (07144-IJW). Her desire to become an alternative school student began with her learning experience with one of her middle school teachers, Mr. Choo, a Korean literature teacher. She had Mr. Choo’s Korean literature classes for two years in her middle school. Jaemin explained his class as follows:

We had a lot of writing in his class . . . I circled the “Korean language” class as my favorite class in my scheduler. His class made us think a lot about things closely connected to us and our lives. I became a more positive person. His class was just so great. Because of him, my middle school experience seemed alternative, you know. His class was an alternative school to me. (07164-IJ)

According to Jaemin’s description, Mr. Choo represented Jaemin’s middle school experience. To her, Mr. Choo was like a school, representing her entire teaching and learning experience before Miso. She liked how he taught his class, and later she learned from her older sister that his teaching was similar to what alternative schools try to offer. Her image of and fantasy about alternative schools was instilled through her experiences of Mr. Choo’s teaching. Jaemin’s connection with Mr. Choo made a big impact on her decision to apply to a high school with an alternative educational approach. During her
decision-making process, Jaemin had a great deal of help from Mr. Choo. When she first told him about applying to Miso High School, he said that there were teachers there he knew personally. Jaemin thought, “If the teachers at Miso know my teacher, they might be good teachers, too” (07164-IJ). He wrote her a recommendation letter when she applied to Miso High School. She said that it was very special to her because he was not even her homeroom teacher (such a teacher is usually involved in the application process in South Korea).

Jaemin had high expectations about her alternative schooling experience: “If one teacher, Mr. Choo, made me satisfied and helped me grow this much, then what if I have all classes and learning like that?” (07164-IJ). Although Mr. Choo mentioned one possible challenge of being an alternative school student, she was already firm about her decision. As a student-candidate, she found a good connection between what educational experience she wanted to have at the school and what Miso High School was trying to promote (such as a collaborative learning community rather than a competitive school climate). Thus, Jaemin believed Miso High School to be a perfect place for her.

*Jaemin’s Miso-ache in the beginning at Miso.* Jaemin’s first year at Miso was the most difficult time for her, with her Miso-ache caused by other students’ absenteeism and the teachers’ perception and expectation of her. Once she entered Miso, Jaemin’s romantic images of alternative school and its collaborative learning were broken. The students’ absence rates were heavy, and within such circumstances, classroom learning was often interrupted. The issue of students’ heavy absence rates was ongoing at Miso,
but Jaemin and her other classmates said that their 10th-grade year, especially the second semester, was particularly serious. Jaemin recalled that there were an average of four to five students attending out of 15 in the classroom during that particular semester. During her first year, in some worst cases, Jaemin was the only student who attended the classroom. In such cases, classroom learning hardly occurred. Teachers left and looked for the students instead of beginning teaching for a few students. When teachers went out to find other students, Jaemin was left alone in the classroom or with a few other classmates. She felt her presence and existence were entirely ignored by and invisible to those teachers. The worst part, to Jaemin, was that some teachers would ask her to go out and look for her classmates. She thought that it was unfair that the teachers would ask her to go find classmates and sacrifice her own time to learn, while many of these classmates hung out for fun together inside and outside of the school. Also, more importantly, she was upset about these teachers’ lack of sensitivity and consideration about her position as those students’ classmate and friend. She was positioned to play the role of the teachers’ spy to find out where her friends were, which made her and her relationships with her friends both awkward and uncomfortable.

Sometimes, her frustration and anger were intense and difficult to control. She even felt the impulse to throw and break things, while at other times she felt very lonely and sad. One day, there were three students, including Jaemin, in a classroom. Instead of beginning the class, all of a sudden the teacher began explaining the difficulty of the lives of the absent students, who were dealing with many serious problems because of various
hardships. That teacher emphasized that Jaemin and other students should have empathy for and feel responsible to academically and emotionally support these students by referring to Miso High School’s ethos of helping and collaborating with each other.

Then, the teacher asked them to go find their classmates. To Jaemin, the teacher’s comment seemed judgmental, and she felt like she was being blamed for sitting in the class. From Jaemin’s perspective, she was the one who attended the class, while others chose to be absent and had fun outside. Jaemin felt extremely angry, and she asked the teacher,

Why should I be the one who takes such responsibility for them? They are having fun out there. What did I do wrong? How come that’s our job? We also have to deal with difficult issues in our lives. Do you think our lives are so easy?

(07144-IJW)

The teacher responded that Jaemin seemed selfish and self-centered, and that she (Jaemin) could not think about other people. The teacher’s logic was that if Jaemin was able to attend the class, it meant that her hardship was quite tolerable to her and might be not so serious a thing, while other students who were absent were dealing with extremely difficult, traumatic issues such as bullying, violence, witnessing a parent’s suicidal attempt, and so forth. This teacher was known as one of the most devoted, caring teachers at Miso—someone who deeply, compassionately connected with the students, especially those who struggled a lot. However, to Jaemin, the teacher seemed fake
because Jaemin could not feel any of those qualities—such as love, caring, or compassion—from the teacher’s comments.

Jaemin remembered this as one of her hardest days at Miso. She couldn’t forget what the teacher had said. She wanted to scream out and say, “I also feel it’s very hard here! I also need caring and want some validation for my efforts!” (07144-IJW). At that time, Jaemin was having an emotionally difficult time at home with her father, who was drinking alcohol heavily and with increasing frequency, and who was making Jaemin’s mother, her older sister, and Jaemin herself feel worried and frustrated. She was very confused regarding what this school was about and what this school, especially this teacher, expected from her. She thought about what messages she kept receiving in such situations with this particular teacher, and she wondered the following to herself:

If I give up everything, then will people understand and care about me and what I feel? What should I be doing? I feel like: Is she telling me that I also need to skip the classes to prove how hard my life is. (02275-FJ)

She felt angry about the whole situation, but more importantly, she also felt very lonely, powerless, and helpless. There seemed nothing she could do.

Such incidents, especially how that teacher treated and positioned Jaemin, made her sarcastically question a symbolic phrase within the Miso High School community, “Let us walk together,” and the revised story of “The Rabbit and the Turtle’s Race.” In order to emphasize the value of collaboration instead of competition, the principal of

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7 The original story is Aesop’s fable, “The Tortoise and the Hare.”
Miso High School would use this story, along with the phrase “Let us walk together,” by claiming that the turtle should help the rabbit wake up, and continue the race together. The image of the story that the principal shaped was beautiful; as a student-candidate, Jaemin was attracted to this metaphoric image in relation to a collaborative learning community. That was exactly what she wanted to live by: nobody feeling left behind or excluded. However, what she experienced as a Miso student, especially as someone who was forced to play a role of a “turtle,” was harsh:

I don’t think I am “the turtle.” I am the same with them, you know, just a first-year student who felt extremely anxious about being away from home and who felt challenged to adjust my life to a new place. I am still young enough that I need to be cared for and loved. Even if someone might call me self-centered, I felt anger when I was told to lead for other peers. I just needed a person who would be concerned about and bring comfort to me. I felt worn out. I felt really lonely and angry. (02275-FJ)

Jaemin even felt betrayed by how Miso High School was described: as a happy place where every student is welcomed and respected, and where the students and the teachers learn together for one another’s growth. Everything, including the alternative school, the learning community, and collaborative learning and living, seemed unreal and fake. She remembered that Mr. Choo had warned her that she seemed to think of the alternative school as a perfect place for everything. He had said that she would probably be disappointed a lot when she actually went to the alternative school because there would
be different types of challenges. Jaemin became pessimistic about Miso High School and alternative education.

At the same time, Jaemin felt guilty and doubted if she was really a bad person. Perhaps this was because the principal’s story and phrase contained a moral value, although she couldn’t pinpoint it exactly. What was so obvious to her was what her feelings told her through anger: It was unfair, and she was mistreated. In the name of “togetherness” or “community,” she felt that she was constantly being positioned as a person who should actively help and serve others’ needs while her feelings and positions were not acknowledged or understood. Without having a solution for the school issue, she felt helpless. Her heart seemed to speak to her, saying, “I need some fresh air to breathe” (07164-IJ).

Learning from her Miso-ache: How and what Jaemin learned. One day Mr. Doh, Jaemin’s 10th-grade homeroom teacher, said to her,

Don’t harden yourself, Jaemin. Take some breaks at home. You will feel better then. Just do your part. There are many things that we, the teachers, need to take responsibility to improve. They are not yours. Let them go, [and] then you will be able to see and find good and enjoyable things available to you by being here. (07164-IJ)

Jaemin couldn’t completely understand what he said. She immediately thought, “What is he talking about now? He cannot understand because he doesn’t need to be here for 24 hours, like me. I am living here and need to sit here over and over” (07164-IJ).
However, his comment stayed in her heart very warmly for a while. She felt relieved and more secure because of his presence and support at the school. Mr. Doh suggested she take a break at home for a few days by using the curricular option of home-learning experience days. He was emotionally supportive to her while she had a severe Miso-ache; he listened to her with empathy. Jaemin took his advice. Taking a break was a good idea, and she felt refreshed. Thus, using learning-at-home experience days, or experience-focused learning days, became Jaemin’s new strategy for dealing with her stress while she was at Miso. When she asked Mr. Doh to give her permission to go home, he did not ask her for much detail, and let her go. She felt cared for and understood in a special way.

Jaemin often stopped by Mr. Jang’s desk at one of the teachers’ rooms. He always immediately stopped what he was doing, turned his body to Jaemin, and made eye contact with her. She always began complaining to him about the school, and would say, “I hate this school. I want to go home, Teacher” (07164-IJ). Mr. Jang would listen to her with a gentle smile, and she always felt better after talking with him. She knew that what she would say to him was not entirely true, especially the statement, “I hate this school. This school is not an alternative school” (07164-IJ). Mr. Jang seemed to know this as well. Jaemin did not really hate the school, but she did not know how to express herself and communicate with others about how she felt. Before she knew it, this became her pattern of initiating conversations with people, including teachers, friends, and her parents. She just needed and liked to get attention from the people around her, and so she
would say, “I hate this school. I want to go home.” This statement was a signal. She just wanted to have someone with whom to talk because she wanted to be heard and feel connected. She did it continuously while she was at Miso.

Things got better as time passed. There were school-wide and grade-wide efforts about the heavy absence rates, including group discussion meetings to raise awareness about the issue, communicate how each person experienced the heavy absence rates (students who were absent, student who attended, and teachers), and discuss how to support each other to find a solution. She used to think, “My classmates’ absences waste my precious time and learning opportunities” (07164-IJ), but not anymore. She developed a better understanding about the issues by hearing many other people’s positions, although the way that specific teacher had treated and talked to her was still hard to forget and forgive. More importantly, she gradually learned to think, “This is not that bad” (07144-IJW). She explained as follows:

My middle school years were all about having fun, you know, nothing hard. Time passed really quickly. But, here my everyday life seemed heavier, and I felt like my time here passed slowly. Every day was a hardship. But I intuitively knew that I would cherish and appreciate my time here, even when I was going through hardships. It was simply because I knew that I was getting more mature and learning from them. I learned to validate my feelings and the situations that I dealt with. Also, I guess I learned how to live and endure hardship. For example, I know I am having a difficult time right now, but I also know that it will pass; I
will get through this. I know that later, when I look back, I will say it wasn’t that bad or that hard. (07144-IJW)

Jaemin further explained how she had learned what she had learned:

My strength came from my journal. Writing in my journal about my life, my thoughts, and my feelings is my strength. I used to just scribble my random thoughts, but I began to write about my life every single day because I felt really challenged here. My favorite part is to read through my journal entries later. Sometimes I smile and laugh because who I was at that time now seems very naïve, immature, or funny, even though I thought that I was dealing with the most difficult thing at that time. That’s how I learned to know that the time passes, and in the near future I will feel better about the present hardship. And, actually, it got better, and I got better with things. (07144-IJW)

Jaemin became more resilient and mature about dealing with challenges or hardships in her daily life. She could see and understand her life and time at Miso more holistically. She began to cherish what she was learning from her own time and life beyond the classroom-based, teacher-led, and subject-focused learning. She also admitted that she had had a very narrow view about classroom learning. For a while, she had thought that her learning and happiness in her life seemed to depend on her classmates’ or teachers’ behaviors. That was why she had thought that her classmates and teachers were wasting her time and life. That was where her powerless and helpless feeling might have come from. As Mr. Doh had said to Jaemin, she found she was able to find and create good
things in her life at Miso, even when there were issues that she could not resolve or change, such as a high rate of student absenteeism.

A few months after she entered Miso, Jaemin began doing her self-learning project through an internship experience at the local children’s learning centers with Woohee. She liked everything about this internship, including teaching and playing with the children, and planning with Woohee about what they would do for their students. Jaemin had been lucky to have Mr. Doh, who had a connection to the local children’s learning centers, so that she was able to begin her internship as her self-learning project.

Jaemin became more strategic and wise about her use of Miso’s curricular opportunities (including home-learning experience days and experience-focused learning days, etc.). Her initial use of them was as the survival strategy suggested by Mr. Doh. Then, she could observe herself, and her state, and proactively plan to arrange those days. Her second-year homeroom teacher did not always positively recognize Jaemin’s use of the out-of-school learning options, and sometimes there was a conflict between him and Jaemin. From her teacher’s perspective, using an opportunity of an outside-of-school experience meant that Jaemin would be distant from the school during the days she was spending her time outside of the school. Her homeroom teacher hoped she would remain in his classroom as a model of a good student. To Jaemin, such a hope was a burden. She was firm about her use of these out-of-school days because she considered her use of them as her way of “getting air” (07164-IJ) to affirm her being an active learner, which was a core element of how she saw herself. She got better at getting this teacher’s
approval through their communications. Moreover, Jaemin wanted to use these out-of-school days more meaningfully for her current and future life. She independently searched for various learning opportunities outside school (including visiting other alternative schools, attending college class sessions about education, listening to web-based lectures about psychology and philosophy, etc.).

Jaemin’s learning experiences helped her have a broader view about learning, instead of limiting her best learning place to the classroom with a teacher. Her conceptions about learning gradually expanded and transformed her and her life in many ways: “I sometimes imagine, What if I did not harden myself much in my first year? Perhaps I could’ve enjoyed my life more” (07144-IJW). She elaborated further as follows:

At that time, I was a little obsessed with my idea about learning. I used to think that classroom learning by the teacher was the only way, or at least the best way. But gradually I learned that I also could learn with friends outside of the classroom. It was more fun, actually. I only counted studying and reading while sitting in the classroom as learning, which is not true at all. (03035-IJ)

Jaemin could learn from the many other opportunities that Miso High School offered whether the students’ absence rates were heavy or not. Her previous conception about learning had been true in her previous schools but was not true at Miso. Her rigid idea of learning was smoothed over and broadened. What Jaemin had expected from alternative school and education had been limited to classroom learning, so when absence rates were
she had felt that those students who were absent were wasting her precious time. Now she realized that her learning never stopped. She actively used Miso’s curricular options for out-of-school learning experiences and received a good amount of support from the teachers, although many of her learning experiences were not the way she anticipated or planned initially.

She began to enjoy the many available curricular options in meaningful ways and could see her schooling experience more holistically. Also, the absence rates became better. In the meantime, she learned how to enjoy connections and relationships through out-of-classroom learning. She found herself enjoying learning with peers both in and out of the classroom-learning context, with or without a teacher. She did a collaborative project with peers by participating in a creative science feast, which she thought was very fun. She also thought gardening and potting flowers were joyful activities to do with her friends in the school garden. When the teachers asked her to find classmates, she could gladly offer her help. Moreover, she was able to be hopeful again about her school and cherish her ideal image of schooling and education.

These out-of-school learning experiences were critical to Jaemin for another reason. She explained they were critical because seeking actively for learning opportunities was an important way of being herself:

In the school, I felt marginalized and was placed at the periphery. I was a sidekick or extra in the school. However, outside the school I did what I wanted to do, so that I could place myself at the center as a main character in my life.
When I talked with my family and took a short trip by myself, I felt that I owned my time. I felt as if I really owned those times and spaces. [It was important to me] because I never felt that way at the school. In school, I felt like my life was paused for those “rabbit” students’ adjustment periods. (02275-FJ)

Jaemin was able to find meaningful learning experiences in the philosophical and curricular supports of Miso High School beyond the teacher-directed learning in the classroom. Thus, to her, Miso High School was not the perfect place of which she had dreamed, but it was still a great place where she could have multiple flexible learning opportunities to creatively design her own experiences.

**Jaemin’s dream, self-love, and commitment.** “What do you want to do for your life?” and “What does it mean to you?” were important, also burdensome questions for Miso High School students. Jaemin also felt heavy when she thought of these questions. Whenever she had time to be alone, she thought, “What am I going to do?,” which often made her anxious about her future. Perhaps that was why she made herself busy by being involved in many activities. During the self-learning project hours in her first semester at Miso, Jaemin actively participated in the local children’s learning center with Woohee on weekdays, while at night she went to music institutes near the school for piano and guitar lessons. In her second year, she went to two local children’s learning centers on weekdays and volunteered at a multicultural children’s learning center near her home on Sundays. She even had a part-time job on the weekends at a super store in her hometown. Her everyday life was filled with work.
At her self-learning project presentation in the first semester of 11th grade, Jaemin excitedly shared her lists and pictures showing what she had done during the semester. However, after listening to her presentation, her 11th-grade homeroom teacher and her self-learning project advisor had a different impression. They thought she was doing too many different things without depth, direction, or purpose, and it was hard to know what she really wanted. They strongly suggested she take things more seriously, choose one area, and focus on it, rather than scattering her energy to many places. Their tones of voice were unusually strict compared to how they gave feedback to other students. Their comments made her overwhelmed, embarrassed, and upset because there were many audience members, including her classmates, friends, and mother. She thought that they could and should have said such things more nicely, or earlier in a private conversation.

More importantly, Jaemin was upset because those teachers had said things too easily, with a lack of knowledge about her and her life, and they had not tried to understand what had made her do multiple things at the same time. To her, considering the choice of one specific area was not something new or something she had neglected. It was just not an easy decision to make. She had invested in learning music, especially piano, for a decade. Although her investment was not about being a pianist as her future career, learning and playing piano had been a significant part of her life since childhood. Moreover, since her 10th-grade year, she had worried about her life, especially her future.
Her personal diary was full of such worries and fears about her future. These teachers were judging her and her life only by what she presented at the end of a semester.

Clearly, education had been Jaemin’s area of interest for a long time. That was why she had begun her self-learning project through an internship at a local children’s learning center during her very first semester at Miso. She was devoting her time to many different types of work that were related to teaching and education through her self-learning projects and other learning opportunities (such as visiting other alternative schools, attending discussion meetings about education and schooling through the out-of-school learning experience programs, etc.). During her weekly dialogic meetings with me, she excitedly shared her thoughts, visions of, or opinions about education and school, and her love of teaching and learning.

Until Jaemin’s senior year, however, when people would ask her if her dream was to become a teacher, she always said “no.” Even during dialogic meetings with me, she was reluctant to say that becoming a teacher was what she wanted, although she did not say “no.” Instead, she seemed to prefer to describe education and teaching as one of her areas of interest. In her senior year, after she became more decisive about what she wanted to do with her life, I asked Jaemin if there was a particular reason why she had rejected or avoided identifying herself as someone who dreamed of becoming a teacher or working in education. First, she had a fear that she wouldn’t be admitted to a preservice teacher program at a university because of the high competition rate of those programs in Korea. She was afraid of failure. In addition, she said, “I felt like there was
something missing, but I didn’t know what it was until I found exactly what it was” (07164-IJ). What she meant by “what it was” was a sense of calling and purpose with commitment. She wanted to become a teacher not just because of her interest. She wanted to have some larger meaning than that. She also wanted to have certainty from her heart before she identified herself as, or allowed other people to identify her as, someone who dreamed of becoming a teacher.

During her second semester of 11th grade, Jaemin intentionally made time to better understand what she really wanted to do, especially during her self-learning project hours. She took a break from almost every type of work that she had been doing in the previous semester, including going to the music institutes and the local children’s learning centers. This occurred a few months after she received her teachers’ painful feedback (at the self-learning project presentation) that she had better choose one specific area on which to concentrate her energy as a 11th grader. She was not ready to make a decision. What she thought she really needed was a break, because she realized that she had become burned out physically, emotionally, and spiritually. She decided to have time for herself and with herself alone:

To me, the self-learning projects were like, I felt pressure that many teachers wanted us to do things. And if I was doing something, I felt safe because I was doing something, you know. I didn’t know I was tired. Sometimes I noticed that I needed a break, but I didn’t take one. I tried to find even more and did more. I was participating in discussion-and-debate group after school, even though I knew
I was not interested in it. At that time, it was important for me to feel that I was doing something. (07164-IJ)

A driving force for her to do many types of work was her fear and anxiety. She couldn’t face those emotions directly. Her involvement in multiple types of work in her first year was a survival strategy for avoiding her difficult emotions. To Jaemin, taking a break from everything was an even bigger decision than quickly choosing one area of interest.

After taking one semester for a break and solitude, she shared her experiences at the next presentation of her self-learning project, saying,

It was about having my own time or being alone. I really liked it. Literally, I did not do anything, but I didn’t feel that I didn’t do anything. It was my looking-back time about what I have done so far. It was really meaningful. Sometimes I was on the bus for hours. I just listened to music and enjoyed being outside. Sometimes I wrote things I was thinking and feeling. Also, every Thursday, I met Minyong. During each meeting, I talked about myself: what I did, what I thought, and what I felt. That made me reflect, so I could learn about myself, what I like, and what I want. (12273-PJ)

Jaemin continued this type of self-learning project in the following semester, during her senior year (12th grade). At the next presentation, Jaemin said,

At my early presentations, I simply reported what I did. But, at a certain point, I thought that it was not meaningful to me. When I worked really hard and went to the music institutes, the local children’s learning centers, and other places, I rarely
had time for me, even one hour. Things became meaningless. So, I began to take time for myself. It [this time for myself] includes remembering how my life was in the second year of middle school, what made me to decide to come to this school, why I wanted to live my life here, etc. They were all important types of work. They were more important than doing multiple types of work. I am sure I changed a lot and matured. I feel this way about myself. (07094-PJ)

Jaemin had begun to have reflective time in order to be more decisive about her future direction, but it turned out that this reflective time had a bigger meaning. Her solitude and reflective time became a way of more intimately connecting with and loving herself.

Jaemin’s commitment to becoming a teacher solidified in April 2014. At that time, there was the Sewol ferry disaster, which killed more than 300 people. The vast majority of those killed were high school students who had gone on a school trip. It was revealed that the ferry’s cargo was overloaded, and the captain and the crew had abandoned passengers, escaped from the ferry quickly, and survived. The Sewol ferry disaster was heartbreaking to Jaemin. She felt extremely sad for the souls who died in this disaster; at the same time, she felt rage toward the adults, including the captain and crew, who had been so irresponsible. Her strong feelings remained for a while. She shared her devastation with a few friends and Mr. Jang, and Jaemin and her friends developed a ritual to console the souls who were killed by the Sewol ferry disaster, especially the high school students who were her age. Jaemin also wrote about how she felt in her journal:
I cannot explain why this Sewol disaster stirred my whole life like this. It broke my mentality. I just cannot stop crying. I cannot do anything but pray and think of those students who I never met before. I never felt like this before. I am afraid if there [will be] more things like this from which people are killed by people.

Why do I feel this disaster changed my life? Why do I suddenly want to make a change to the society [in which] I live? Why do I feel so right about becoming a teacher to do that? This feel weird because things have suddenly become clear to me, although I still feel strange about what I feel. Being a teacher. It is not just a choice or my decision any more. That idea came to me with clarity. It was almost hitting my head, like a spark. The fear I’ve felt when it was about my choice, whether I want it or something else, has disappeared. I don’t feel fear anymore. I don’t have a word to explain this thing. Destiny? What can I do to change this world? Education that helps people to have their own voices. Education that makes humans humane. I believe this is critical to make a difference. I will remember this deeply in my heart, and I won’t forget it.

(08144-EJ)

The Sewol ferry disaster was Jaemin’s turning point at which she discerned with clarity what she wanted for her life and what kind of adult she wanted to be. Reflecting on the Sewol ferry disaster, Jaemin learned that she needed to take action and speak up when she felt dissatisfaction, frustration, or anger. Jaemin promised herself and the souls who died on the Sewol ferry that she would not passively accept injustice, and she would
contribute to making a better, more humane society by educating her future students to
develop critical mindsets about themselves, their lives, and society.

Woohee’s story.

Before Miso: How Woohee became a Miso High School student. Woohee’s consideration about applying to Miso High School began with her father’s suggestion. She described herself as a typical student in middle school who was “without much serious or critical thinking about [her] education or life” (07144-IJW). Her academic interest was not too high or too low. Her academic ranking was fairly good. Woohee did not like the way she was taught by her middle school teachers, but she did not really hate it either, because she thought that was the way it was, and it became naturalized to her.

One day, when she was in her third year of middle school, her father mentioned Miso High School as one of the alternative schools where Woohee might find more interest in different types of learning experiences. Before her father mentioned Miso High School, Woohee had had no idea about alternative schools or alternative education. When she first searched for more information about alternative schools, including Miso High School, via the Internet, she was shocked by many negative descriptions of alternative schools’ students, such as “trouble-maker,” “maladjusted,” or “dumb head.” However, once she learned more specifically about the types of activities and learning Miso High School might offer, she began loving it, especially because of the school’s mission to help students to find out what they really want in life through the school curriculum.

Woohee had had a rough idea for a long time of wanting to become a teacher. Thus, she
was excited to become a Miso High School student and hoped that there she could further explore her dream of becoming a teacher.

**Woohee’s beginning at Miso.**  Woohee’s beginning at Miso was all about liberation and excitement. When she first entered Miso High School, she thought that she unexpectedly had found a perfect place:

Especially in my first year, I loved this school so much, I even thought that every school should be like Miso High School. At that time, many friends suffered from Miso-ache with their disappointment about this school. I didn’t have any.

(7143-IW)

Liberation from the oppressive school culture and the teachers’ strong authority of the middle school gave Woohee great satisfaction about her life at Miso. In the beginning, everything she experienced at Miso seemed very new in a pleasurable way. She especially liked how Miso teachers tried to closely interact with and listen to students both in and out of the classroom, beyond their subject areas, although she did not have a special relationship with a particular teacher.

Woohee also liked doing her self-learning project. The self-learning project was a major factor in Woohee’s decision to become a Miso student. A couple of months after Woohee entered Miso, Mr. Doh—who knew she and Jaemin were interested in becoming teachers—introduced her and Jaemin to a local children’s learning center. During her self-learning project hours, Woohee began volunteering as a teacher’s aide at the local children’s learning center twice a week, along with Jaemin. She knew that she and
Jaemin were very lucky to have such support and the connection to do this internship in their first semester at Miso; many of her peers were dealing with various challenges in initiating their self-learning projects, either because of a lack of specific ideas about projects or a lack of teachers’ support in connecting to a possible internship place.

Woohee and Jaemin’s active participation and engagement with the children impressed a director of the children’s learning center, and the director gave Woohee and Jaemin an opportunity to actually teach a group of young children (between the ages of 4 and 7) about a subject that they could teach and one in which children might be interested. So, Woohee taught English songs and played games. She really enjoyed being in charge of something specific at the center that was beyond the role of assistant. Planning and preparing what to do with the children during after-school hours, along with Jaemin, became a fun part of Woohee’s daily life at Miso, although leading and playing with the children was not always easy.

Another important experience of Woohee’s in the beginning at Miso was about student absenteeism. She was surprised by seeing many students skipping their classes. At first, she thought, “Is it really okay?” (07144-IW). Her perception about classroom attendance soon changed. When she explained to me her absences for the first time, she was with her friend. Her friend framed it by saying, “Trivializing attitudes to classroom attendance was inappropriately habitualized in our beginning at Miso” (09303-GI), and Woohee nodded and said something similar, using a tone of self-judgment. However, when I asked again during our later dialogic meetings, solely focusing on what Woohee
felt and what skipping classes personally meant to her, I heard a different story. She said, “I did not think much. All my friends or classmates skipped, so I did. This is not an excuse. I just like hanging out with my friends” (07144-RN). She followed by saying, It was fun. Like deviation? You know, fun playing outside during school hours. Classroom attendance was like students’ choice here. Some kind of strong and exciting feeling that I had and I liked. I wanted to have something exciting. I was bored in the classroom. I used to pretend that I was learning in my middle school while I was daydreaming. But here I just didn’t need to pretend anymore. (07144-RN)

She also said,

In my middle school, attending the classes was a responsibility of the students. It’s unquestionable. However, my attendance doesn’t mean I engaged or learned anything from the classes. Also, whether we were taking a nap or not, they were doing what they prepared to do, and left. That was it. They didn’t care what we did. Some teachers physically punished us when they found any of us sleeping. It didn’t mean that they cared for us. We just became skillful at avoiding that punishment, you know. We pretended we were awake for their teaching, which was not true at all; most of us were daydreaming. Teachers also pretended they didn’t see us. (07144-IW)

At Miso, Woohee frequently skipped classes and hung out with friends inside and outside of the school during class hours. Even though her teachers excused many of her
absences, she had about 30 instances of official absences recorded in her first year. In her middle school, she had never even thought about being absent from classes because nobody was doing it and because absentees would get a physical punishment from teachers. Presenting at classes was considered as a mandatory for her as a student. At Miso, her acts of absence were initially about participation in her peer group and belonging to Miso student culture rather than intended acts of non-participation or resistance to classroom learning as a symptom of Miso-ache. Making a choice about something that she never been allowed to choose made her realize how much she had felt oppressed in her middle school years. By choosing to be absent, she felt empowered and liberated. Choosing absence also gave her a sense of agency with a power to make choices. She simply enjoyed her freedom and liberation.

After her second semester at Miso, she got better with her attendance for classroom learning. She explained what happened to bring such change: “As I was getting closer with the teachers, I came to think about their positions and their feelings, and felt sorry for them” (07144-DW). She compared with her middle school experience. She said that in her middle school, the teachers did not seem to care about student learning or what the students did. However, she felt that Miso teachers were truly concerned about her, treated her with caring (even though she was frequently absent from their classes), and were interested in establishing relationships with her. Also, there were discussions and disputes between the students and the teachers that raised her awareness about the seriousness of the situation with a high rate of student absenteeism at Miso.
After she listened to multiple voices about the issue of student absenteeism, including the perspectives of teachers and students who remained in the classroom, Woohee understood the teachers’ frustration and disappointment in the classroom, which made her feel guilty about her choice of being absent. She made efforts to increase her attendance.

**Woohee’s late Miso-ache and her enriched understanding about her dream of, love for, and passion about working for young children.** Woohee’s Miso-ache began after having the first individual meeting with her new homeroom teacher in 11th grade. It was a one-to-one introductory meeting in which the new homeroom teacher met each individual student. Students could share their overall individual concerns, their plans for the year with the self-learning project based on their dreams or interests, and so forth. Woohee’s main topic for the meeting was about her dream. When she discussed her dream with her new homeroom teacher, Woohee heard that it was impossible to enter any elementary preservice teacher programs with her current academic performance scores because entrance to those programs was highly competitive. Her teacher said, “Listen to me. That’s reality. Face the reality.” As she recalled that meeting during one of her dialogic meetings with me, Woohee angrily said,

> She sounded like she was saying “No, you can never enter this door” to me. It hurt a lot. I was like, “Then, what should I do? It’s been like forever that I thought of becoming an elementary school teacher.” She literally asked what your dream is, so I wrote my dream. That was it. Then, she suddenly said such
things, like that’s impossible and this is reality. Why did she ask my *dream* in the first place? (07154-W)

Her homeroom teacher’s comment was disappointing, considering what Woohee had been dreaming for many years. Woohee had a long history of dreaming about becoming an elementary school teacher. During sixth grade (in elementary school), she had begun imagining herself teaching young children by observing her schoolteachers. In addition, since her early elementary school years, Woohee had always liked playing and being with children, and she was good with children. She often babysat her neighbors’ children. She emphasized that what she did was “playing *with* them rather than playing *for* them or taking care of them” (124-GTW). Woohee was fascinated by being a teacher, especially whenever she saw her teachers writing something on their desks during recess, because that led her to imagine herself writing a book as a schoolteacher. Since then, she had had an idea of becoming an elementary school teacher. When she had learned about the Miso High School curriculum prior to her entrance to Miso, she had been excited that she would finally have a chance to really explore her dream. She also liked Miso’s educational direction of trying to support students in exploring their dreams and what they truly wanted for their lives. Woohee had volunteered as a teacher’s aide at a local children’s learning center for her self-learning project from her first semester at Miso. Volunteering was a meaningful experience to her in terms of being more determined about her interest in becoming a teacher. As she had gotten better with her work at the center, Woohee had felt that she was getting closer to her dream. However, at the
beginning of her second year at Miso, her new homeroom teacher suddenly appeared and disapproved of her dream based on her academic records.

Woohee hated her teacher for a while. Her long-time dream had not been welcomed. Rather, she had been judged by and disapproved of due to her academic ranking in the name of “reality.” The way her teacher had treated her at their meeting was not different from what other teachers at typical high schools would have said.

Woohee had not expected to have such a conversation in this school. What her homeroom teacher had said was not new information to Woohee at all: Entering a preservice teacher program for elementary school was highly competitive in South Korea because of stability of employment. Woohee already knew that was not easy. To Woohee, her teacher’s gatekeeper-like comment made her feel like she had hit the wall of cold reality. Her dream was broken. She did not know how to deal with it. She felt overwhelmed and scared about the question, “What am I going to do for my life?” (07154-IW). What she had been doing through the self-learning project at the local children’ learning centers seemed meaningless. She felt very lost, disconnected, and helpless. After the meeting with her homeroom teacher, she began to make excuses and skipped going to the local children's learning center quite often. Moreover, she did not attend her classes or showed up to them late. In her first year, Woohee’s absence had been about having fun and being liberated, but this year it was not fun anymore. Her absence became a sign of Miso-ache. She needed to take some time off and get physical and emotional distance from her cold reality.
At an opportune time a few months later, Woohee had a chance to be a good distance from her reality. The 11th graders went to Nepal for three weeks. The trip to Nepal was one of the features of Miso High School’s curriculum, with its purpose of providing different learning experiences for students to be outside of their own life boundaries. The Nepal trip gave Woohee some strong impressions that led her to go more deeply into her inner self. She had many chances to talk more deeply and openly with her friends. While she had lost her confidence in and hope for her future life, her friends seemed to be full of bright ideas about their future and ready to live as adults with clarity about what they wanted for their lives. By listening to what her friends talked about (their thoughts about, plans for, and visions of their lives), Woohee was constantly reminded that she no longer had a dream. She could not stop thinking and asking herself, “What am I doing? What am I going to do in my future?,” even though she wanted to get some distance and escape from such questions for a while, at least in Nepal. She decided to ponder those questions in silence. It was easy to find alone time and space in Nepal. She had special moments in which she could feel her in-depth connection with her inner self. There was no sparkling vision or idea that came to her mind or heart, but she could reach her deepest feelings, such as her fear of becoming an adult and her doubts about her capacity to live her adult life. As Woohee explained,

There was a fear of becoming an adult deep inside of my heart. I was afraid of letting go of my childlikeness. I felt my desire to remain in my childhood forever, but at the same time, I had great anxiety about being stuck in the place where I am
now without any growth or maturity. They weren’t the answers or directions I was looking for, but they were really cool. When I felt them, I immediately thought that this is what people say about deep, authentic, or spiritual realization.

(07144-IJW)

Feeling and acknowledging her inner fear of becoming an adult and her doubts about herself was a powerful experience. Woohee’s conversations with her inner self continued, and she soon figured out what had been making her feel so fearful about being an adult. As a child, she had seen adults whom she did not want to be like. Her images and memories of those adults had caused her fear of and anxiety about becoming an adult. After Woohee reached understanding of what was going on in her heart, she was able to proceed in pondering who she wanted to become and what kind of life she wanted to live.

Another critical moment that Woohee had during her trip came when she was blowing bubbles with local children in Nepal. Many young children there were seeing blowing bubbles for the first time, which amazed them. Woohee showed them how to blow bubbles and how they could make longer bubbles by running around. When bubbles in the sky popped, the children and Woohee looked at each other and laughed together. Then, there was an aha moment for Woohee. She felt intense joy and happiness deep inside her heart. She said to herself, “I really like being with the children” (07113-PW). That was a powerful moment that led her to clearly recognize what she truly wanted and to feel centered and connected to her heart. It became clear
that being around children was something that constantly brought her joy and happiness. She realized that being an elementary school teacher was just one of many ways that she could work with young children. She thought that she would be able to find even better things for herself. The Nepal trip helped her to feel renewed and refreshed. She was able to surrender her feelings of hurt and decide to focus on her life. Her heart opened to exploring available options. After coming back from this trip, she resumed her ordinary routines, including volunteering at the children’s learning center, and focused on exploring further what she could do with her heartfelt joy and desire. In an effort to keep her deep connection with herself, she added a new routine of meditating early each morning.

Woohee actively searched for career options. She often heard from Miso teachers, people she liked and who had congruent beliefs with Miso’s educational aims, who suggested that the students focus on knowing what makes them happy and their lives more valuable rather than focus on deciding on a specific career path or profession. However, to Woohee, as an adolescent girl who often felt fear about her uncertain and ambiguous future after graduation, it was important to have certainty about her future direction. Particularly at this point, because she had gained knowledge about what she truly liked, Woohee was excited about and wanted to have some concrete ideas about what options would be available based on her interests, potential, and capability.

One of the great options Woohee found was a becoming preschool or kindergarten teacher. The more she learned about this profession, the more she loved it.
One day, Mr. Doh introduced to Woohee a possible mentor (which was me) who planned to conduct research in her school for the next semester and had expertise in early childhood education. She thought that it was just perfect timing for her. Her conversations with me led Woohee to believe that her heartfelt love of and joy in being with children was unique and special, and could be thought of as a gift and a talent. She really liked the idea of a gift and a talent because her many other friends in this school seemed unique and talented, especially in art, music, and so forth. She often found herself comparing herself with them and wishing she could have a talent. At the initial meeting with me, she was excited and thought that she had found her uniqueness and giftedness.

A few weeks later, there was a presentation day for the self-learning projects. Woohee spent two weeks preparing her presentation. It meant a lot to her. She wanted to do it well. In her secret daily journals, she wrote about her thoughts and feelings about her inner and outer struggles, and her journal entries became a great resource for her as preparation for reflecting on her life during her difficult time. As she looked back on how she had gone through this time, she could sense her growth in self-trust and wisdom through her struggles with her uncertainties, fears, and doubts. She felt thrilled to share her stories in front of the audience. She spoke confidently to others at the close of her presentation:

If you now feel very challenged or lost, that means you are doing great. I know that’s really hard. I’ve been there, too, especially for this semester. I did not want
to do anything for a while. I felt very lost and helpless. I thought I had hit the wall and a very cold, harsh reality, but from that point I was able to find what I truly love and am passionate about in my heart. Keep doing what you feel is right. I strongly believe that you will soon find what you want to find, too. That’s what I learned. (07113-RN)

She felt very proud of herself for going through a tough time.

_Woohee’s second Miso-ache and her learning about self-love and children’s lovability._ After her powerful learning following her first Miso-ache, Woohee had another Miso-ache. This Miso-ache was caused by her conflict and emotional wounds from her mother’s abusive behaviors toward her, which made her run away from home for a while. According to Woohee’s description, this Miso-ache was an “adolescence thing with achiness that I had [at] Miso, not from Miso” (09094-FW). Through this Miso-ache, Woohee learned to believe in the importance of self-acceptance and love. Moreover, as someone who dreamed of becoming a teacher of young children, she came to believe that children deserve to be loved by their caregivers, which she wanted to consider as her core belief.

Woohee recalls that her serious conflicts with her mother began when her mother found out that Woohee’s grades had dramatically dropped in the second semester of 11th grade. Even though Woohee had poor attendance records, her academic performance grades had been pretty good at Miso. Woohee’s poor academic grades made her mother very upset and angry. Her mother suddenly started yelling at her and physically punished
her. Woohee was shocked and threatened by her mother’s aggressive and abusive actions and comments. She also felt sad about and disappointed by the fact that her mother was judging and punishing her because of her academic grades. Her father’s response was not very different from her mother’s. Since that day of having a serious conflict with her parents, her parents had denied her presence at home. They excluded and ignored her at home. The way they treated her and looked at her was insulting and hurtful. They seemed to tell her that she was a useless troublemaker and they didn’t want to have her in their house anymore. Her home was no longer a place where she could feel safe. Rather, she felt threatened by her parents’ presence. She wanted to find refuge. She remembered her grandmother’s house was empty, so she stayed there for a couple of days. That was how her running away began.

Woohee’s school life was difficult too. She was devastated and traumatized at home, but no one at Miso school really knew what was going on. It was impossible for her to act as if nothing had happened. She could not connect herself to being present in the classroom, so she skipped school for many days. This was the way that she was letting other people know that she was dealing with an urgent, serious issue and she needed attention and help. She knew that unless she could communicate her hardships, people wouldn’t know and wouldn’t help her. To her, absenteeism seemed the best way that she could communicate her difficulties to the people at Miso. Many teachers knew about her absences for several consecutive days and running away from home. Her homeroom teacher took extra care of Woohee and had closely contact with Woohee’s
mother. One night, Woohee’s mother came to see her at the school dormitory, but Woohee felt too scared to see her mother’s face. The teacher did not force Woohee to meet her mother or try to make her go back home with the thought that Woohee needed to take her time in order to take care of her traumatized experience.

In the meantime, Woohee began to seriously worry about herself because of her depression and self-destructive impulses, so she looked for adequate help. She was introduced to an art therapist near Miso, and she went to weekly therapy sessions there for a while (during her self-learning project hours). She was able to unpack and validate her memories, experiences, and feelings associated with her relationships with her parents, especially her mother. What her traumatic experience of her mother’s abusiveness at this time represented to her was unconditional love and acceptance. More importantly, it triggered many other memories associated with the theme of being loved in her life. It was quite a tough journey but a worthy and meaningful one. She gained deeper awareness and understanding about who she had tried to become in order to gain love and in what ways. She had been doing her best to satisfy her parents by being a good daughter, but her own desire to be unconditionally accepted and loved had not been satisfied in her relationship with her parents. She had always wanted to be loved at the level of her existence and presence, rather than at the level of her performance or behavior. She thought that her mother wanted her to be the daughter that her mother wanted to have, such as hard-working Woohee or obedient Woohee. When she could be the daughter her mother wanted, she was so loved and cared for. When she could be not
be the one her mother expected or wanted, her mother withdrew love and tried to fix or
punish her. Woohee had developed self-judgment and hatred inside of herself up to this
point without much consciousness. By experiencing her second Miso-ache, she gained a
high level of awareness about herself and her life, and she could heal her emotional
wounds.

Beyond gaining self-awareness, Woohee learned some important lessons that
would be her guidance in her life:

It was just clear that my mom’s way of loving and caring just didn’t fit with me.
It is not blame. Maybe she did her best in a way she felt right. She is also an
imperfect human. By going through this difficult time, I learned to think that I
need to or I still can love myself, even when I have nobody who loves me or treats
me well. Loving myself is just an unquestionable thing. I don’t need an
explanation for that. Also, I want to and need to know more about myself in order
to love myself. (09094-FW)

By just recalling that time, Woohee had tears in her eyes. Although she found great
personal value in this experience and learned a lot about herself that she could treasure
throughout her life, it was still painful. She had to learn it in a very painful way.
Learning the value of loving herself was a particularly important lesson. Woohee became
passionate about learning more about herself as a way of loving herself.

Furthermore, Woohee’s learning from her second Miso-ache helped her as an
adolescent girl who had a dream of becoming a teacher of young children:
It developed and strengthened my belief that children deserve to be loved in a way they can really feel. “In a way they can really feel” is critical. This belief is a core belief and message that I want to convey through the work that I will do as a teacher of young children and as a writer of children’s books. (09094-FW)

Woohee thought that her interest in writing and becoming a writer could connect to her interest in working with young children. She could be a teacher and a writer of children’s books. In the following semester of her senior year, Woohee’s particular learning and core belief about children’s rights to be loved became a topic of her self-learning project. During her senior year, Woohee deepened and narrowed down her exploration of the field of early childhood education based on her core belief. She searched for and read children’s books and other books related to children, and she also tried to develop a storyline with her particular message of love. Trying something related to her long-term goal was also a meaningful learning experience for Woohee. In addition, as she read and learned more about early childhood and children’s growth, she found herself constantly making connections to her own childhood and her observations of children in her life. She thought that pursuing work in the field of early childhood education could personally mean that she would know herself better. Learning about children and childhood seemed to encourage her to think and learn about life (including her own life) and humanity (including herself).

Although Woohee was very determined and passionate about working with young children, she still sometimes felt challenged about and doubted her passion and love for
that profession, especially when she was about to prepare her applications for college admission and especially when people would ask her if she was absolutely sure about her passion and if that would be really her lifetime profession. Such questions not only made her feel annoyed and frustrated but also doubtful about her choice. However, she soon found that she did not need to have the all answers for the time being:

I am only 17 years old. I cannot know everything now. My interest is early childhood education. I just like it. So, I want to learn more about that field and do something in that field. Isn’t that just enough? (07154-DW)

This particular remark showed her growth in trust in and confidence about herself. As she approached her graduation from Miso, she often reflected on the three years of her journey there. She elaborated as follows:

Before Miso, I lived my life without much thinking. This school made me “think.” During my three years here, I could think so many things. I believe that it is just wonderful enough for the teenagers if they find out what they really want to do. I feel great about my life. I learned, grew, and matured a lot here. There are many miles and ways that I need to walk further. There are also many different paths that I can make to walk. I will just trust myself. Honestly, it is still hard to say that I know who I want to become. What is clear is that I am just who I am. If who I am could be defined as a certain person with a few words, that would not be me. Who I am can be someone with limitless potential. This is enough for now. (4-GT-33)
As she looked back on her life at Miso, Woohee believed that her most valuable growth was in gaining awareness and understanding about herself and her life. She also considered cultivating a habit of thinking and reflecting as a key growth and change because she understood herself and her life better and more deeply through self-reflection. She learned to accept and love herself as she was. That was how she grew her self-trust and hopeful image of her life. She also learned that she could be more than who she thought she was or who she was told to be.

Yuna’s story.

Before Miso: How Yuna became a Miso High School student. Yuna described herself as “an outgoing and playful child with a good sense of humor” (10103-DY) during her elementary school years. However, starting in her sixth year of elementary school, her health weakened both physically and emotionally, and she “suddenly became quiet and timid” (11073-DY) in the classroom. When she entered middle school, her health became more serious. Continuing schooling seemed too much of a burden to her at that time. Yuna and her parents decided she would leave middle school in her first semester and be home-schooled instead. Her decision to leave the school at that time and take care of her health was inevitable. However, after that decision, what she mostly struggled with was not her physical health. Rather, it was her everyday life without any structure. Her parents would go out for work, and they were not able or available to academically or systematically help her in her daily life during her homeschooling years. She was only 13 years old. Managing her everyday life on her own was not possible.
There was not much to do at home. She called that time a period of “blank . . . without any social life,” and expressed that she and her life were “not like [that of] a human.” There was little opportunity to see and find herself in relationships with others in other social contexts outside her home after leaving school. She was soon addicted to computer games, and she suffered from Internet game addiction until she was introduced to a night learning center (called Yahak) for adolescents. This was in her second year of homeschooling, and it was how she ended her addiction.

This night learning center for adolescents was established to provide learning opportunities for dropouts and/or deschooled students with an alternative educational philosophy that emphasized establishing a close relationship between the teacher and the student within a small-group learning environment. According to Yuna, there were fewer than 10 adolescents attending Yahak, and only three, including her, came regularly. This center offered various learning opportunities, such as tutoring, hearing special speeches, and walking along the mountainside. A group of volunteer teachers who were teaching at local middle and high schools served the students. Some Miso teachers were involved in this school as volunteers.

At first, going to the night learning center was not easy for Yuna. Being around people was emotionally and socially challenging for her after she had had such periods of feeling “blank.” It was painful for her to see herself become “a girl with no words” when people were around her. She remembered that her relationships with other peers at the center were not positive. There were occasions on which they gossiped about and
misunderstood her, and she could not get these occasions resolved. However, once she could feel a good connection with some of the volunteer teachers, she soon became a regular attendee and core member at this center. Through her regular attendance and active participation in various learning programs that the teachers arranged, she was able to establish a close relationship with one teacher, Mr. Shon. She explained how her relationship with Mr. Shon had an impact on her and her life:

Mr. Shon helped me, trusted me, and respected me really always. I feel grateful the most. I was very fortunate. Since then, the direction of my life has been greatly changed. Because of my involvement with the center, I tried to live my life seriously and more actively. (09123-DY)

Yuna’s experiences of being cared for and trusted by Mr. Shon empowered her to think about her future. As a long-term goal, she thought that she wanted to become a teacher like Mr. Shon and other teachers at the center. In addition, for her near future, she began preparing for the qualification exam for a middle school degree. Her connection to this center smoothly led her to consider Miso High School as her next step. When she thought of applying to a high school after taking her middle-school degree qualification exam, she compared the mainstream schools and Miso High School. She doubted if a typical mainstream high school could be a good fit for her because of such a school’s competitive culture. More importantly, she liked the way of teaching and learning at the center, and she found that there were many common activities at the learning center and Miso. After she attended informational sessions about Miso
admission, she was convinced that this school would be better for her. She liked that this school’s teachers sought to help the students live more happily and freely. Yuna successfully passed the national qualification exam for middle school graduation, and entered Miso in 2013.

**Yuna’s beginning at Miso.** Yuna’s experiences in her first year at Miso were about healing and affirming her selfhood by actively remembering and reconnecting with her past. This was critical work for Yuna to do prior to living her current life and exploring her future.

“My heart is healing and becoming healthier.” While many first-year Miso students had Miso-ache in dealing with challenges based on the gap between what they had dreamed about this school and what they faced in their realities, Yuna was very happy with and satisfied about just being a student again in a school. She said, “[The] Miso-ache thingy is not an option for me. I only feel grateful about being able to attend the school every day. When I entered, I had a sense of commitment: ‘I need to be good and successful here’” (10073-DY). However, this did not mean that she had no difficulty. She just did not express it in an explicit form, such as absenteeism, the way many other Miso students expressed their hardships, struggles, or conflicts with Miso-aches. Her issue, especially during her first year, was different than those of many other students at Miso. She had a critical job of healing. After she began her schooling at Miso, she noticed that she was frequently reminded of her past experiences by her daily
interactions with peers. This made her think that her past was not in the past. It still had a huge impact on her current life at Miso.

She had thought that her life was a “blank” during her homeschooled years (including leaving middle school, developing a game addiction, having a lack of social connections, etc.). This image had impacted her and caused her to consider herself as a person who was deficient, unlovable, and not good enough. In addition, she described how the occasions on which her peers had gossiped about her (at the night learning center) still seemed like emotional wounds in her heart. At Miso, she often felt anxious and fearful when her classmates were around. She explained her feelings as follows:

I don’t really want to be alone, but if I am alone I can avoid things such as being misunderstood or gossiped about, so it’s hard to let myself get closer to people. If I feel closeness, I want to avoid that person. Also, I am accustomed to being alone. When I am suddenly conscious about being around people, I seem to feel overwhelmed and want to have distance. (10103-DY)

What she feared the most was if her actions or words were to be misunderstood or if she were to make mistakes. She did not want to take the risk of being hurt by others again. During her conversations with her classmates, she often found herself hesitant and silent because her mind was filled with fears and doubts about how to act and react to other people. She was extremely self-conscious and censored herself a great deal. Sometimes, when she felt closeness with her peers, or when her classmates demonstrated friendly acts or words, she even had an impulse to flee from them. She often chose to
withdraw from conversations. Then, she regretted and judged herself. In addition, she felt frustrated by witnessing a huge gap between who she wanted to be (such as the playful girl she used to be during elementary school) and who she was perceived as by others in the school (such as a quiet and shy girl). She believed that she needed to make a concrete effort to revisit her past and heal so she could stop her painful past experiences continuously and negatively affecting her current life:

Lately, I am getting better at understanding my heart. Even though I thought I’d forgotten what happened in the past, I feel like it is connected to my present anyway. Even if I say I forget, it is not forgotten. It seems to be in need of uncovering and healing. That’s what I feel. I have a negative experience? Or a trauma? What is traumatized consciously or unconsciously is repeated at the school here. I mean that it seems to gnaw at me still. I better make an effort to heal my traumatic past experiences. (10103-DY)

Yuna emphasized her urgency and necessity to remember and unpack the stories of her past. She had a strong will to face and overcome her experiences in order to live her present life more fully. During dialogic meetings with me, she brought up her memories that she associated with her current life at Miso: how her memories came up, how they influenced her current self, how she currently understood them, and what she wanted to do with them. In addition, she often shared with me what she learned and discovered through those activities. Many class activities encouraged her to think of revisiting her past as a meaningful way of working to live more freely and happily, and to reflect on her
life in connection with her past, current, and future. During our dialogic meetings, her eyes often filled with tears when she talked about her out-of-schooling years, but, after taking some time, she would continue her story. She created and found multiple layers of meaning. The fact that she allowed me to be so close to her and be a part of her healing journey, and that considered me as a trustworthy person with whom she felt safe in being vulnerable, was a powerful and gratifying experience for me.

One day, she said, “Lately, my heart is healing and becoming healthier” (10103-DY). She elaborated as follows:

I wrote a letter to a 13-year-old me and drew pictures of myself during art class. I learned that I had a desire to be loved. I was struggling with my emotional need of being loved. Also, I realized that I became who I am now because I actively lived my life by going out to meet people at the night learning center and by solving the problems in my life. That was me who made these changes possible. I was too young to make a decision about my life. I want to empathically understand that. Also, I want to respect my decision of leaving school and how my heart felt around that time. I had a reason for that decision. . . .

I still feel the impulse to be alone and escape, sometimes. But once I spoke out about those feelings, things got smaller. And I know better now that breaking and getting out from [my thinking and emotional patterns from dealing with memories] is doable work for me. I will make more efforts to be close with my friends. I am still very young. I have not yet met enough people in my life to
believe that people are not trustworthy. So, I guess I will need to meet more people and make friends. And, by doing that, I will learn more. And through those wounded experiences with people, perhaps, I have become a more considerate person with empathy for others’ feelings, you know. (10103-DY)

After Yuna focused intensely for some months on talking about her reflections and learning about her past experiences (during weekly dialogic meetings with me and with many other activities at Miso), she gradually moved on to the next step of her healing journey. She began to talk more about her current life in Miso.

Growing a sense of confidence and worthiness about herself. One day, Yuna talked to me a lot about being confident and deserving the right to speak. She began our dialogue by excitedly saying, “Today, in Life and Philosophy, for the first time, I raised a hand and spoke. I want to celebrate and praise myself today” (10303-DY). To her, it was a big step forward. It was a thrilling day. Previously, she had been highly engaged in her learning in classes, but she had engaged silently and invisibly. Her participation was very limited during classroom learning. Even in math classes, which were her favorite, she felt extremely nervous about going up and standing in front of her peers in the classroom. When the teacher would ask her to solve a problem at the board, she would always refuse. She said, “I thought that now it is time for me to encourage myself to speak up and be more active as a next step” (10303-DY). She elaborated on what it meant to her:
I’ve been thinking a lot lately that I need to become more confident. Life and Philosophy today made me think more clearly about how I act and why I act like a certain way. I often found myself withdrawing from speaking out my opinion and hiding. I know it’s from my past. Things turned to a pattern or habit. But more importantly this time I am thinking that I need to know that I have a right to speak up and to take action. Otherwise, such things will never be broken. I mean, now is different from the past. Now, the right is available to me. . . . What I need now is not worry or regret, but action. (10303-DY)

From that day, she began a small project as a part of her self-learning project, named “a project for confident-me.” She began writing about her efforts in speaking up and her feelings during classroom discussions, casual conversations with peers, and so on. She was pleased and proud of herself in making these efforts. She felt that who she used to be and who she wanted to be were affirmed by concrete actions and intentional efforts.

Through the process of doing “a project for confident-me,” she learned more deeply about herself. She said, “I guess my fundamental issue is my sense of self-worth. Everything seemed to be connected to that” (11143-DY). She defined self-worth as what makes people love and trust themselves, and what makes people feel free to think and do things without worrying about mistakes, results, or others’ judgments. By continuously working on her project to grow her sense of confidence and self-worth, she learned that her negative scenarios existed in her head; they hardly happened in reality. Receiving
positive feedback from her teachers and peers reinforced her attempts to continue to try and grow a sense of confidence. She also surprised herself in that once she opened up to speaking up in the classroom or during conversations, her fears and worries disappeared. She did not feel shy or nervous, which made her happy, because she had been so worried about whether she had already lost an active and playful aspect of herself. By seeing herself speaking out without shyness, she felt relieved and pleased that there was still a possibility to become her true self again. She felt that she was reconnecting with who she had been before she had left middle school: a playful and active child. It made her happy about and comfortable with herself and with being around people.

**Yuna’s Miso-ache.** As Yuna healed and became emotionally healthier, dealing with the many issues caused by Miso’s complex and contradictory natures in relation to her dreams became important for her throughout the years at Miso. These issues included the school’s comparison-based academic ranking system and the school’s cultural emphasis on growing a sense of collaboration and community based on criticism of the mainstream schools’ competitive learning atmosphere. Her Miso-ache was distinctive from many other students’ Miso-aches because her Miso-ache did not have an explicit or expressed form (such as absenteeism). Rather, her Miso-ache was internal. She often addressed what was going on in her heart in relation to the emotional challenges associated with the issues with which she was dealing at her dialogic meetings with me.
Yuna’s new experience with the academic ranking system and its conflict with her genuine joy of learning. For Yuna, dealing with Miso High School’s academic ranking system (given Miso’s status as a public high school) was a new and emotionally challenging experience. Because she had not gone to middle school, she had never been placed in an educational climate that caused her to feel the pressure of getting higher scores or competing with others for better rankings. By being exposed to students’ academic measurement in the Korean secondary school education system, Yuna realized that her genuine joy in the learning process was a special trait of hers as a learner. She missed her past self, who had genuinely enjoyed learning and felt great joy in it because her learning was constantly measured and ranked. The school’s measurement and ranking system of students’ academic learning and performance made her confused about the purpose of learning. She said, “I feel like I am studying for the academic record, and studying to defeat someone” (1073-DY). She also said, in another dialogic meeting, “I am afraid of seeing people not as people but as competitors. Seeing lower or higher, like that?” (01055-IY). Yuna’s homeschooling experience after elementary school had protected her from experiencing the highly academic culture and competitive measurement system of academic scores and grades in middle school, where many students lose their interest in learning and studying. She had nurtured and safely grown her genuine interest in and positive image of learning. She had studied hard in order to pass the middle school qualification exam, but that exam was a pass or no-pass exam. The process of preparing for the exam had been pleasurable for Yuna. This was not only
because it had made her closer to the teachers at the night learning center, but also because it had been a big step for her to recover from her state of addiction and depression, and discover a different possibility for her life. In addition, during the process of preparing for that qualification exam, she had learned how to self-direct: for example, she had learned how to set goals for herself, how to work things out to achieve those goals, and how joyful it could be to achieve those goals. She had experienced pleasurably finding herself and gaining better understanding by studying hard. She had gradually developed self-determination and self-management related to her learning and life after her years without mainstream schooling.

After Yuna entered Miso, however, the academic measurements of the Korean school system threatened her pure joy of learning. Pressure from the measurement and ranking system even made her concerned about her morality. During one of our dialogic meetings before her final exams, she said, “When I was homeschooled, I was good-hearted, but nowadays because of [comparison-based] evaluations I think I am changing. Maybe I am becoming bad. In some parts I’m just getting better at things. I don’t know” (1233-DY). Her academic performance was measured: She was scored on the standardized tests and then ranked in comparison with other students’ performance scores. Being ranked according to exam scores was already a familiar, naturalized process for those who had gone through the regular Korean middle school system. At Miso High School, many students and teachers reported that they hardly felt competitive or stressed because there was much less frequent testing at Miso, whose cultural climate
contained less academic pressure even though it was under the same measurement system. However, to Yuna, the school’s ranking system was a very new experience and made her feel overwhelmed.

*Yuna’s complex feelings about her aspiration to become a teacher, the comparison-based evaluation system, and Miso’s cultural emphasis on collaboration.*

Having a long-term goal and dream of becoming a teacher seemed to make things more complicated for Yuna in dealing with her academic learning. She elaborated how she felt about herself, her dream, and standardized tests:

I would be very sad if I could not achieve my dream only because of my scores on standardized tests. The more I want to become a teacher, the more I feel all sorts of pressures, burdens, and fears. I feel like the college entrance exam and becoming a teacher are huge mountains. By looking at the top of the mountains, I realize how tiny I am. I feel very small. It makes me sigh heavily. I am very afraid of not being able to do what I want to do or not being able to become a person who I want to be. (9123-DY)

Such anxiety about her dream and test results got even bigger during exam periods.

Right after she finished her final exams, she said,

I found myself becoming extremely sensitive about the results of mid-terms and finals. I got only one answer wrong in [my] math test, but that stirred up my fears and anxieties: “What if I cannot be a teacher because of this test score?” (12233-DY)
Yuna was happy and hopeful just by having a vision and dream about her future. However, as she walked on the path of aspiring to become a teacher, as a high school student in Korea facing the comparison-based measurement system of the high school and admission policies, her dream often became a burden to her. During an intense dialogue at one of our meetings, she also said, “I wish I could hear, ‘I welcome and support you whatever you are’” (1173-DY). This particular comment powerfully showed me how deep her emotional and spiritual challenges had become due to the pressure of being measured and ranked by academic performance scores on standardized tests.

As someone who dreamed of becoming a teacher, Yuna wanted to be a licensed and qualified teacher. In order to be licensed, she first would need to receive preservice teacher training as an education-related major at a four-year university. So, her dream of becoming a teacher made college entrance necessary, and her academic ranking became an important factor in whether she would be able to become a teacher or not. Her levels of anxiety, pressure, and fear increased even more as entrance to preservice teacher programs became highly competitive. As South Korean people experienced economic hardship in the late 1990s with the IMF, and felt threatened about their security under neoliberal economic principles, people’s career preferences changed dramatically. Job stability became a top priority, as exemplified in the highly increased competition rate of universities’ education majors and the national exams for public officials (including

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8 The IMF’s intervention brought dramatic changes into people’s lives and ways of living in South Korea. I discussed these changes from page 26 through page 30 in Chapter 2.
public school teachers). In these social contexts, managing her academic records was an important and sensitive issue for Yuna in relation to her entrance to a preservice teacher education program in a college. Her academic ranking became an important issue in order to achieve her dream, and she felt emotionally burdened.

Moreover, she felt discomfort because of her awareness of the dual meaning of her competitiveness in a comparison-based ranking system. She said, “I became sensitive about my test scores, but I don’t feel good even when I get good scores and rankings. I rather feel uncomfortable because it means somebody is getting a lower ranking” (06164-DY). She wanted to have good results on tests as rewards for her best efforts and hard work, and in order to get closer to the achievement of her dream, but she did not feel free to be happy or pleased about her good test scores under the comparison-based evaluation system. She felt this way because of the nature of the comparison-based evaluation: when one gets a better ranking, another gets a lower ranking. This type of system also means that getting good scores never guarantees good rankings because each ranking is made in comparison with other peers’ performance levels. Within her critical consciousness about the ranking system and her strong aspiration to become a teacher, Yuna’s constant emotional burden, conflict, and discomfort were inevitable.

Although she never regretted her decision to become a Miso student, Yuna recognized that there was an extra hardship for her by being a student at Miso:

Our school tries to educate and direct us to go a different, alternative way. I like it. But we also live in this bigger society. I feel that being a Miso student and
dreaming to become a teacher are really burdensome. It takes a lot of extra hard work to live for both here and the outside world. The responsibilities are all on me as a student. (06164-DY)

On the one hand, as a Miso student, Yuna devoted her time and energy to actively participating in Miso’s curricular activities, including the self-learning projects. On the other hand, because this school rejected providing education for preparing students for the college entrance exam or for enhancing students’ academic performance, especially on standardized tests, Yuna had to make an extra effort to find time and means for more intensive academic learning.

Yuna’s emotional burdens got heavier with Miso’s cultural emphasis on growing a sense of collaboration and community. She often had emotional conflicts and tensions—and sometimes even moral guilt—as a student at Miso, where counter-cultural experiences with collaboration and gaining deep self-understanding (compared to the highly competitive academic culture in Korean mainstream schools) were greatly emphasized. She said, “I even questioned myself why I had come to the alternative school if I care so much about college entrance, academic performance rankings, and competition like this” (06164-DY). She doubted herself and felt confused. She also morally judged herself about caring so much about her academic performance on standardized tests and her rankings because she thought that such caring was the exact opposite of Miso’s educational and cultural emphasis. When she tried to pursue academic learning and work to be better in her academic performance, she doubted if her
attitude to academic learning was appropriate, and she even morally judged herself if she was becoming bad and selfish. Value-laden images of the school, with its emphasis on collaboration as an alternative school and its academic ranking system as a public school, created emotional conflicts and tensions in Yuna.

**Yuna’s centering efforts in relation to her dream of becoming a teacher.**

Although her academic pressure and struggles were ongoing, and they were not something she could easily resolve, Yuna did not allow them to be an impediment to her dream of being a teacher. She had three important ways of keeping herself strongly grounded, centered, and re-centered in living with the many ongoing struggles in her life at Miso. They were remembering her dream of being a teacher, actively creating personal meaning about her current experiences at Miso, and remembering the special way her life was leading her to have that dream. In dealing with many ongoing struggles at Miso, she often lost but then found her ground. As she continuously experienced these struggles, she strengthened, grew, and shaped her passion and belief about her life.

Creating her personal meaning from her current experiences at Miso deeply related to Yuna’s dream of becoming a teacher. Even when she suffered from a high level of anxiety and pressure about her midterms or finals, she was rarely absent from her volunteering, which was a core part of her self-learning project. She put great emphasis on her learning from Miso’s alternative curricular activities, including self-learning projects. She could have considered using self-learning project hours for her extra academic learning, but she did not use those hours for academic learning. Rather, she
continued to do her projects in accordance with Miso’s intended educational aims. Yuna had begun her self-learning project through an internship at a local children's learning center during her first semester at Miso. Throughout her three years at Miso, she continued her internship experiences at various places, including as a facilitator of a children’s reading club at a library, a teachers’ assistant at local children’s learning centers and a kindergarten, and a teacher at a seniors’ night learning center. She explained what her personal meaning for doing the self-learning projects was:

I say a lot to you that I feel a lot of conflicts, pressures, and anxiety in terms of academic learning, ranking, college, and my dream, but I do not mean that I ever regret my decision to be a Miso student. My belief is that I am becoming a better person by doing, for instance, my self-learning projects because I am learning a lot about me, people, and things. I’m sure that I never could have learned them in other typical high schools. Even if those projects won’t make me get into college, they are still valuable and will be helpful for my future life and the work that I want to do for my life. It is just really sad and depressing that society looks for only one thing: the academic ranking. We, students, are only judged by the ranking, nothing else. That’s not what I want for my life. (06164-DY)

Actively working on her self-learning projects was critical for Yuna as acts of affirmation of her beliefs about and hopes for who she really wanted to become and what type of work she wanted to do in her life. She believed that she was becoming the person she wanted to become by doing her self-learning projects in accordance with her dream. She
found a much bigger meaning in spending her adolescence on her projects than in solely spending her all energy on enhancing her academic skills for better test scores.

In addition, according to Yuna, Miso was a place where each person could make individual meaning from experiences. She considered attending many teachers’ classes as a great learning opportunity because she could observe and learn how each teacher taught classes differently and how teachers communicated with their students. In addition, she envisioned how she wanted to relate with her future students, and she made connections to what she did with children at her internship places and how she did it. Having dual positions and making connections between what she did and felt as a teacher through her internship and what she did and felt as a student were also meaningful learning experiences for Yuna. She said, “I thought that when I could understand myself and my feelings well, I could become a teacher who understands my future students well” (11143-DY). She considered her internship experiences to be another way of learning about herself through the mirror of the students she helped at the children’s learning centers.

Yuna considered going to the night learning center where she had met Mr. Shon and preparing for the middle school graduation qualification exam as a turning point in her life. She believed that what she had received from the center had had a great impact on her thinking about her life, including continuing her schooling at Miso and dreaming of being a teacher. She explained what she believed that she had received from her experiences at the night learning center:
If that center did not exist, who I am now could not exist. I received so much help. What I really received was their love. What I learned was that I can be loved and cared for. There were only a few students there. I was lucky. Those teachers sometimes came to the center and stayed at night just for me. To teach me to prepare for the exam. I felt that I could be a person who matters. I could also be such a person. When I think back of that time, that’s the most powerful and thankful thing. (09123-DY)

How the teachers perceived and treated Yuna had a positive impact on her understanding of her selfhood and her life. By receiving love and caring from the teachers, she grew her sense of being lovable and was empowered to anticipate and envision her future. In addition, by being accepted and treated as an important person within her relationships with teachers at the center, she learned to consider herself and her life as important. She believed that she had received so many great things from the teachers, and she wanted to pass on that love and caring to other children like herself. She elaborated on how her experience of being perceived as an important person who deserves to be loved led her to dream of being a teacher:

What the teachers did for me was not really about tutoring for the middle school qualification exam. Through the close relationships with them, especially Mr. Shon, I learned that taking care of marginalized children is very meaningful work to do. You know, it’s possible you just pay no attention to those kids. I began hoping to do such work as a teacher just like they did for me. (12233-DY)
Through her own life, Yuna witnessed the power of loving, compassionate relationships through teaching and learning. To her, dreaming of becoming a teacher in order to serve marginalized children was grounded in her personal experience of being served and received, and she considered it as a repayment and expression of gratitude that she deeply felt.

Yuna’s life taught her the importance of trusting herself and believing her worthiness as well as the power of having emotionally supportive adults for children and adolescents. Based on this learning, she wanted to become a teacher who would be easily accessible to students and listen to their stories with empathy, love, and compassion. She was especially passionate and compassionate about deschooled adolescents. From her own experience of being out of traditional school, and from her research on the topic of deschooled students or drop-outs, Yuna saw that these students’ self-worth would be especially vulnerable to being hurt because of a lack of sociocultural understanding and systematic and structural support. So, she wanted to become a supporter or mentor for these students beyond just being a schoolteacher who could validate their life choices and the hardships associated with those choices. She hoped to help her future students to be hopeful about themselves and their lives with the belief that they would be able to live their lives in the way they want to live, without being anything else other than their true selves.
Summary

The above stories of three students’ spirituality have illustrated how individual students gained in-depth spiritual understanding about themselves and their lives through their lived experiences at Miso. The process of gaining such spiritual understanding involved many emotional challenges, struggles, and conflicts. Jaemin’s first year at Miso was the most difficult time for her, with her Miso-ache caused by other students’ absenteeism and a lack of classroom learning. She gradually learned to go through these hardships without hardening herself and to find meaning in experiencing hardships. In addition, she developed a habit of reflecting and writing about her daily experiences. She learned to reflect on what goes on in the context of her life and to validate what goes on her heart. She became more resilient and mature about dealing with challenges and hardships in her daily life. She could see and understand her life more holistically. Her narrowed conception about learning became broader as she strategically used the extracurricular learning opportunities that Miso offered for students’ out-of-school learning experiences.

Jaemin’s stories about her dream of being a teacher were also important. Education was clearly Jaemin’s area of interest for a long time. She began her self-learning project through an internship at a local children’s learning center during her very first semester at Miso. She devoted her time to many different kinds of work that related to teaching and education through the self-learning projects and other learning opportunities (such as visiting other alternative schools, attending discussion meetings
about education and schooling through out-of-school learning experience programs, etc.). She learned to value solitude and reflective time in order to be more decisive about her future direction, but it turned out that her solitude and reflective time had a bigger meaning. Her solitude and reflective time became a way of more intimately connecting with and loving herself. In her senior year, she found her sense of calling and purpose about being a committed teacher through the heartbreaking experience of the Sewol ferry disaster in Korea, which made her feel a strong spiritual connection with the souls who were killed by the disaster. By becoming a teacher, she wanted to contribute to making a better and more humane society.

In turn, Woohee believed that her most valuable growth at Miso was gaining awareness and understanding about herself and her life. Woohee’s first-year experiences at Miso were pleasurable because of the various options and freedom that were culturally available for students. Liberation from the oppressive school culture of her middle school, with the teachers’ strong authority, gave her great satisfaction in her life at Miso. Starting in her first semester at Miso, during the self-learning project hours she volunteered as a teacher’s aide at the local children’s learning center due to her interest in becoming an elementary school teacher.

Contrary to her first year, Woohee’s second year as a 11th grader was a difficult one, with two different Miso-aches; however, those Miso-aches led her to connect with and learn deeply about herself. Her first Miso-ache began because of her 11th-grade homeroom teacher’s negative comment about Woohee’s dream of becoming an
elementary teacher. Through her Miso-ache, Woohee began to connect more deeply with her inner self through searching for her love and passion. She found significant meaning in particular during a trip to Nepal, which was a part of Miso’s curriculum; this trip allowed her to have more extended time for inner connection through reflection and solitude, as well as deeper communication with her friends. She was able to reach her deepest feelings, such as her fear of becoming an adult and her doubt about her capacity to live her adult life. Feeling and acknowledging her inner fear and doubt was a powerful experience. It led her to ponder who she wanted to become as an adult. Through another critical moment during the Nepal trip, she felt intense joy and happiness deep inside her heart. She said to herself, “I really like being with the children” (07113-PW). That was a powerful moment that led her to clearly recognize what she truly wanted and to feel centered and connected to her heart. Woohee actively searched for career options, and one of the great options she found was becoming a preschool or kindergarten teacher. By experiencing her first Miso-ache, she not only found her heartfelt joy and love of being around children, but she also grew trust in herself, her inner wisdom, and her intuition about living with uncertainty, fears, and frustrations. Woohee’s conflicts and emotional wounds from her mother’s abusive behaviors toward her, which made Woohee run away from home for a while, caused a second Miso-ache. Through this Miso-ache, Woohee learned to believe in the importance of self-acceptance and love. Moreover, in dreaming of becoming a teacher of young children, she came to believe that children deserve to be loved by their caregivers, a concept that she wanted to consider as her core belief. She
became passionate about learning more about herself as a way of loving herself. This second Miso-ache also contributed to growth of her self-trust and confidence.

Yuna’s previous life experiences were important to understanding her story at Miso. Due to her health issues, she left school for three years during middle school. She entered Miso after passing her qualification exam for her middle school degree. She thought that her life was a “blank” during her homeschool years (including leaving the school, her game addiction, her lack of social connections, etc.). This image impacted her so that she began considering herself as a person who was deficient, unlovable, and not good enough. Thus, Yuna’s experiences in her first year at Miso were about healing and affirming her selfhood by actively remembering and reconnecting with her past. This was critical work for Yuna prior to living her current life and exploring her future, and Miso’s curriculum was supportive to Yuna’s healing process.

As Yuna healed and became emotionally healthier, dealing with many issues caused by Miso’s complex and contradictory natures in relation to her dream became important for her throughout her years at the school. These issues included the school’s comparison-based academic-ranking system and the school’s cultural emphasis on growing a sense of collaboration and community based on criticism of the mainstream schools’ competitive learning atmosphere. Yuna’s issues, especially her academic pressure in relation to her aspiration of becoming a teacher, were not easily resolvable. However, she had some important ways of keeping herself strongly grounded and centered while living with the many ongoing and constant struggles and pressures in her
life at Miso: remembering her dream of becoming a teacher, actively creating personal meaning about her current experiences at Miso, and remembering the way her life had led her to have that dream. Her life had taught her the importance of trusting herself and believing her self-worth, as well as the power of having emotionally supportive adults for children and adolescents. Based on this learning, she wanted to become a teacher who would be easily accessible to students and who would listen to their stories with empathy, love, and compassion. In dealing with her many ongoing struggles at Miso, she often lost but then found her ground. As she continuously experienced these struggles, she strengthened, grew, and shaped her passion and her beliefs about her life.

**Research Question 3: How Do Teachers Spiritually Understand Themselves and Their Lives?**

In this section, I describe two teachers’ spiritual journeys at Miso High School through the stories of their experiences of their personal growth and change as teachers. Maintaining individual teachers’ own perspectives and experiences was important, so that these teachers’ stories could reveal what it means to become more spiritual, what it means to understand themselves spiritually as teachers, and what happens when they change from within. To answer this research question, I carefully reviewed and analyzed the data about the two focal teachers. Transcripts of interviews with these teachers and their speeches, as well as my research notes during the data-collection period, served as important data sources that I used to construct stories in response to this study’s third research question. I interpreted the data about these teachers in terms of how they
spiritually understand their lived experiences through their senses of (inter)connectedness, wholeness, integrity, and centeredness, all of which are key in understanding the spirituality I utilize in this study.

Data analysis revealed that the teacher participants frequently mentioned their previous experiences in order to articulate their current experiences and changes at Miso, so their previous teaching stories were critical to understanding their journeys and changes at Miso. For example, Mr. Jang’s major distress about working at mainstream public schools stemmed from the following: a lack of freedom and flexibility to implement his teaching suitably for students; his expected role to manually teach the standardized, mandated curriculum in accordance with exam schedules; and to control and censor students in their everyday school lives for the purpose of preparing them for the national college entrance exam. And Mr. Jang’s major theme of change at Miso was the reconstruction of his teaching. Mr. Park’s major distress about teaching at mainstream public high schools concerned the bureaucratic school system and culture and was based on his active involvement in school administration; his major theme of change at Miso was his shifting perception of himself as a teacher with authority. Thus, I begin these teachers’ stories by describing their previous years of teaching. Then, I move to the stories of the beginnings of their journeys at Miso to describe what and how they changed in terms of their teaching, educational beliefs, and perspectives, as well as what the meaning of such changes has been for them. By doing so, I present each teacher’s unique stories of spirituality more organically and holistically.
Two Teachers’ Spiritual Journeys

Mr. Jang’s story.

*Why he became a Miso High School teacher.* Mr. Jang, the Korean teacher, summarized his previous teaching years as “avoiding.” He saw a disparity and a disconnection between what he believed his teaching to be and what he actually could do in his practice of teaching. At his previous schools, despite his best efforts to teach and interact with the students in his classroom in a more connective way, he had many limitations to educating differently as a teacher at a mainstream Korean public high school. Regardless of his efforts, he inevitably played “a prison-guard-like role” by regulating and censoring students from 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. for college-entrance preparation. There was little autonomy or flexibility given to him, as a teacher, to make the necessary pedagogical decisions for his students. Classroom teachers were required to follow and cover heavy amounts of standardized, prescriptive curricular cycles (such as those on monthly and yearly bases) for the standardized tests. His distress about the competitive school culture, with its high emphasis on standardized tests and college entrance preparation, went deeper. He was having a hard time making a meaningful connection to who he was and what he was doing for education in the school, so he often asked himself, “What am I doing here?” After experiencing constant distress during his career at the public high school, he decided to move to a middle school to avoid the intense pressure of meeting standards for the tests and preparing students for the high-stakes college entrance exams. However, after he moved, he soon had the frustrating
realization that even middle school was not free from the standardized, test-oriented school culture.

Along with this distress, his “yearning” for a new type of education and school was growing inside of him. At that time (in the 2000s), many new private alternative schools were being established; the alternative education movement emerged and spread widely. Mr. Jang was interested in alternative education, and he liked what alternative educators were seeking to value and offer through schooling and education (such as creating a different type of education and schools that emphasized freedom and happiness rather than entrance to higher ranked colleges). He told me that he actively searched for a position at one of the newly emerging private alternative schools, although he ended up staying in the public school system. Years later, he heard the news that a public alternative high school would be opened in his province, and he moved to Miso in 2011. Thus, he made his decision to become a Miso High School teacher in order to fulfill his vision of a different education and willingly change his previous ways of being and teaching.

How his new teaching began at Miso: Encounters with different students at Miso. Encountering a different type of student at Miso gave Mr. Jang the urgency and necessity to reconstruct his teaching. When he first moved to Miso, Mr. Jang was surprised by facing students who did not seem to live with tension or pressure about their standardized test scores and preparation for college entrance, like his previous students in other schools had. Mr. Jang said,
The test did not work for new students to pay attention to my teaching. That was something I never thought of, because previously at my other schools, test preparation was an urgent need. There was no time to think about other things.

(02134-IS)

Mr. Jang was surprised by his new students, whose source of interest and motivation for studying was not better preparation for college entrance or increasing their test scores or rankings. His new students’ different reaction, with their lack of tension about their test scores, pushed Mr. Jang to reflect on himself as a public school teacher and his own teaching more critically. He realized that what, how, and why he taught had been internalized in many ways during his previous experiences teaching at mainstream public schools for over a decade, as well as through his learning experiences as a student in his own schooling years.

Moreover, he admitted that he had been one of the mainstream Korean schoolteachers, which meant that he could not be free from that culture. That is, it was inevitable that his teaching was grounded in mainstream Korean formal schooling culture, despite his critical awareness about the problems of mainstream Korean school education. Measurement of student academic achievement and preparation for standardized tests for college entrance are typically considered the top priorities for teachers in South Korea. Mr. Jang’s teaching subject, Korean, is considered one of South Korean secondary education’s three most important subjects (mathematics, Korean, and English). Thus, there was always a heavy amount of content he had to teach in order to
prepare students for the standardized tests and measure students’ academic achievement. What he had previously taught in these classes could hardly have gone beyond the content that the standardized curriculum required. In addition, he was also used to using exams or grades as a carrot-and-stick strategy in order to make students learn, using the name of motivation by saying things like, “Pay attention to this, because it’s important for upcoming tests.” This realization was the beginning of his investigation in order to rethink and reconstruct how his teaching could resonate with his real self, his adolescent students’ selves, and the school’s aims.

**Happiness and freedom: Reestablishing grounding in his internal core values.**

To Mr. Jang, happiness and freedom are the core values and aims of his teaching. When rethinking and reconstructing his teaching became an urgent issue to him at Miso, not only did he think about his foundational beliefs and values about education and school (why he teaches), but he also had to redesign the structure of his classroom teaching (how he teaches) and the content of his teaching (what he teaches). What he cared about the most, and what he thought of first, were the educational values and aims for his adolescent students’ lives, which would anchor him with new grounding in his teaching. He explained why he considered freedom and happiness as core values of his teaching, especially in the Korean sociocultural context:

I hope to help my students to be free and happy. . . . I’m not talking about the definite answer of being a happy person or a free person. . . . As you know, in many aspects, Korean culture is abusive with lots of must-to-dos. Like, you must
go to college, or you should be successful. Rather than forcing such things, I wanted to help my students to have questions such as, “What makes you really happy?” and “How are you going to live your life for that happiness?”

Grounding his teaching in the values of freedom and happiness from his own perspective was a critical and transformative decision for Mr. Jang, who used to teach according to the taken-for-granted aims of Korean public school education (such as top-ranked college entrance). He selected those core values through a deliberate process because he acknowledged that his educational values would guide him in how and what he was teaching. He first asked himself, “What would be the most significant values, aims, and directions that I would like to carry through my teaching and my interactions with my students?” At the same time, he also kept in mind having a meaningful connection with his students and congruency with Miso’s educational aims from the perspective of alternative education, as well as what kind of learning might be most beneficial for his students in their current and future lives.

Thus, Mr. Jang carefully selected learning materials for his students in connection with the core values of his teaching. He explained,

I select the texts for my class at Miso. I do not mean the mandated curriculum materials or textbooks. Texts that I choose in accordance with the intention of my teaching. In that, it is inevitable to have the teacher’s own values or worldview. So, I select the texts that I believe might help my students live happily and freely. Such as a text about somebody else’s life in literature or the humanities. I do not
mean cramming an exemplary person’s life into their heads as a type of knowledge. Nor forcing them to follow. What I want is to shed a light on another person’s life in order to provide my students something to think about. I do this because basically I believe that they need to find their own way of living life. My job is to help and guide them to create or find a way of being and living their own lives. (02134-IS)

Mr. Jang’s core values put a great emphasis on gaining self-understanding when the students learn from his class, because his class leads the students to learn what makes them happy and free and what that means to them and their lives. Thus, how he uses his class to help his students to know themselves better in relation to their happiness and freedom is also significant.

**Gaining self-understanding and the human right of learning with genuine joy.**

For Mr. Jang, finding a meaningful connection between his teaching subject and his aims for his teaching and education was also critical. He found a meaningful connection between his subject and general education and humanities. He also reflected on contemporary values for his adolescent students, asking, “How and why are language, literacy, and literature important for people and people’s lives?” and “What is the nature of these subjects that has made people interested in learning about them for a long time?”

Moreover, he carefully examined whether his subject, Korean, would truly make worthwhile and interesting learning for his students and their lives. The more he
investigated these questions, the more he was convinced of the value and importance of learning and teaching Korean in relation to humanities for his students.

Most importantly, he believed that his subject is “what every individual person deserves to learn” (02134-IS). He wanted to provide his students with an experience of having genuine joy and interest in their own learning process. He hoped and believed that students’ joy in their learning process would make them want to continuously seek learning, especially for themselves and in their future as lifetime learners, even without an immediate or direct reward or use for what they were learning.

Individual reflective writing and dialoguing with peers became crucial parts of learning in Mr. Jang’s classroom. In particular, he frequently provided opportunities for the students to have dialogues and discuss themselves, their lives, and their relationships with others. To him, love and friendship were also important aspects of learning demonstrated through frequent classroom interactions between him and his students and among the students. He believed that education should offer learners opportunities to receive and give love and friendship in the process of learning and relating together, rather than opportunities to win or compete. His interest and focus was to make his class a space where he and his students could learn together and from one another as persons (rather than as students and teacher) who were trying to live their lives more fully, happily, and freely.

He also believed that when an individual person’s way of being and living is valued and accepted as it is, by creating a safe and trusting learning atmosphere, the
process of learning is richer and deeper. The following guidelines, which he placed on his writing worksheets, indicated such a belief in his students’ learning:

1) Write things as they are (the way you act, think, and are);

2) Write vernacular/dialect and slang/spoken words as they are (but use abusive language only when it is necessary); and

3) Be careful about a thought that you want to write in a cool or fancy way.

His writing guidelines showed his welcome, acceptance, and encouragement of the students to bring their memories, thoughts, and feelings straight into their writing, without the pressure of right or wrong, good or bad, or judgment or censorship. He believed that writing could lead students’ in-depth spiritual reflections about themselves, their lives, and their relationships with others, but this could be done only within a safe and trusting learning atmosphere, so they could share vulnerable parts of themselves beyond their comfort zones. He believed that writing could be a life-enriching experience for his students and that things could be unexpectedly uncovered or discovered through students’ self-reflective writing or classroom dialogues with peers.

This seems how learning became more individually meaningful and powerful for each student through Mr. Jang’s class: because it might touch (or sometimes stir) the students’ ways of being and their lives in new and unfamiliar ways. Mr. Jang provided his students with a very different learning experience than what they were used to being taught about the subject of Korean through assigned textbooks.
Mr. Jang’s teaching intentions and his belief in his teaching resonated with his students’ comments about his class. For example, Yuna said,

What I liked the most in Mr. Jang’s class was that recently we wrote a letter to first-year students. After we read their letters concerning their lives at Miso and about freedom and such things, I replied to one letter, and we shared our writings. That process made me look back to how I lived in my first year, and how I tried to relate with classmates and friends at that time. Also, I could connect to my previous life, and I gained a better understanding about myself, like my way of thinking and feeling. And, by thinking and writing about my thinking, my thinking is newly creating, and continuously shaping itself. Mr. Jang’s class is my most favorite class at Miso, and it is the class that has had the biggest influence on me by now. I only had some scattered thoughts and ideas, but I could make meaningful connections to myself. I felt that was how I truly understood who I am. (01055-IY)

Yuna articulated what she liked about Mr. Jang’s class and how and why she liked it. She was able to make many levels of connections (including connections between her past self and her current self, as well as between her experience and other first-year students’ experience), and how powerfully her learning in this class held meaning for who she had become. Similarly, another student said,

His [Mr. Jang’s] class is making me think. Leading me to look back, to think of myself and my life, like self-reflection. And, writing about this self-reflection. I
don’t always like it, but I like it a lot. Like, you know, I know I learn from that.

(09303-GI)

This student’s comment implies that the learning process, including thinking and writing, has not always been fun or pleasant, but she knows that it is meaningful and worthwhile for her; learning about herself and her life has led her to feel great about her learning.

From Mr. Jang’s perspective, when Korean is taught in connection with humanities and with an emphasis on deepening self-understanding, rather than as a test-oriented subject or as textbook-focused learning, the learning process becomes very powerful. It is because the students learn and have the language, or words, to explain a phenomenon or culture, and the human action and reaction to it in the society in which they live, through the process of their learning. The students meet who they are through various lenses by mirroring and being mirrored in other people’s lives in literature, as well as within classroom dialogues with their peers. Because their learning enables them to have the appropriate language to explain what goes on in their society and world, they also can articulate themselves and ideas about their lives within particular contexts. Mr. Jang believed that there might be an intellectual joy in such learning processes; he also believed that students can gain deeper understanding about themselves and their lives through these learning processes.

Mr. Jang’s change in teaching and his beliefs grounded in that change, however, were not always welcomed. He sometimes heard sarcastic or sceptical comments from other teachers about how and what he was teaching and who he thought the students
were, especially in the beginning, such as “It might be too difficult or advanced for those low-level students” or “Korean grammar or spelling should be taught first.” However, his interest was not in developing students’ so-called basic academic skills or techniques of writing and reading (such as grammar and spelling), as shown in his writing guidelines. Rather, he was against such ideas because they seemed to assume that students have a deficit of something and that there is a hierarchy or linear path of learning, knowing, and knowledge. He strongly believed in the important value and meaning of learning Korean in the way he taught, regardless of where his students were academically.

Moreover, when he taught in the classroom, he experienced the opposite of those teachers’ sarcastic opinions. In his classes, the students known as academically good students seemed to encounter more challenges to share their own stories about their experiences and reflections through writing or during classroom dialogues. Conversely, he often found himself surprised by the students who had been identified as academically not ready or not interested, or as problem students; they engaged in their learning seriously by actively participating in their writing and classroom dialogues. They brought their reflections and insights about themselves, their lives, and their relationships by making meaningful, empathetic connections to their own experiences and to others’. Thus, their contributions made classroom discussions and dialogues richer and deeper.
Teaching as a sacred work and the sense of a calling. Along with the process of reconstructing his teaching in order to provide learning that was more meaningfully connected to students’ lives at Miso, Mr. Jang experienced some remarkable moments when he strongly felt a spiritual presence in his own classroom and in other people, including teachers and students. Such experiences led him to live with a sense of vocation or calling as a teacher. In addition, he came to believe in how sacred his classroom work can be for students’ inner spirits and how powerful education can be when it is acknowledged and nurtured.

According to Mr. Jang, he had some aha moments while observing other teachers’ classrooms. Miso High School encourages teachers to open their classroom teaching to their colleagues in order to promote the idea of a “school as a learning community” for both students and teachers so the teachers can learn from each other by observing other teachers’ teaching and students’ learning. At Miso, Mr. Jang had many opportunities to observe other teachers’ classes and their teaching from which he developed a new way of viewing teaching and being a teacher. He explained how his aha moments had brought him into a profound awareness about the spiritual meaning of teaching and being a teacher:

I hardly had a chance to spend so long in observing other teachers’ teaching before. Previously, you know, we [teachers] closed the door and we only saw ourselves teaching. Here, I could observe how others teach. For example, Mr. Taek in his sixties spent his whole life in the classroom, and met the students. It
is his life. I thought that is amazing work. Being a teacher. Not limited to Mr. Taek.

And, I went to Japan, and I observed one gray-haired teacher teaching with the students. I am not talking about the excellence of his teaching. What I am trying to say is that I felt what I saw was sacred and phenomenal. I mean . . . Wow! I was amazed by the fact that those delicate souls of children sat there, and the teacher taught them by reciprocally exchanging things during the given time. . . . I realized that teaching cannot be reduced to just making them memorize for the tests. Not that simple thing. (01085-IS)

These moments were when he strongly felt the presence of spirituality in education and began to believe that teaching is a sacred work of closely engaging with human souls.

In addition, Mr. Jang pointed out that witnessing changes in many students caused by the influence of teachers who closely relate to them with love, compassion, and trust was also an important experience for him in starting to believe in the power of education and living with a sense of vocation or calling. He felt amazed by the spiritual power of love, compassion, and trust in the student-teacher relationship, by the students’ human inner potential and growth, and by the teachers’ power of goodness at heart. These powerful spiritual moments at Miso touched his heart deeply: They led him to strongly believe that education and teaching are so powerful their impact can go beyond the classroom and really make a difference in both society as a whole and a person’s life. He said, “That is the point where I sensed responsibility of my teaching with weight. My
education has meaning in contributing to an individual person’s happiness in life and beyond” (12173-G). This comment explains why he made various intentional efforts to contribute to students’ learning about themselves positively and deeply through his teaching. He also stated that doing so was what was sustaining him as a teacher, especially when there was a hardship in his teaching. His sense of vocation or calling and his awareness of sacredness in teaching made him think even more responsibly about who he could be for the students, as a teacher with a sense of vocation or calling, and, more holistically, think about what he does (including his way of being, his teaching, and his relating with students) and how in relation to a possible impact on students and their lives.

_His expanded capacity to believe in human potential and understand people._

Mr. Jang also pointed out that his capacity to understand people had expanded by witnessing the remarkable changes and growth of the students as well as the teachers at Miso:

In the mainstream schools, once a problem student, always a problem student. But, here those who used to be labeled as problem students have changed amazingly. Teachers change too, here. That made me wonder with awe, “Wow, what is life? What is a human being really?,’” and I felt that my inner arrogance faded away. I mean that the idea of “What I see and know now is all that exists” is totally collapsed . . . When we think that we have the right answer or the absolute answer, that is when arrogance grows in us. But here it’s totally
deconstructed. [Chuckles.] So, I feel more liberated, and that liberated feeling makes me happier because I feel more comfortable.

According to Mr. Jang, “arrogance grows” when people are unaware of or deny the possibility that what they think they know and what they see could be wrong or, at least, only partially right; it also grows when people are overdependent on measurable standards and observable aspects or dimensions of people or lives. Such arrogance has been easily naturalized in schools where linear understanding about human development and progression is dominant, and students’ development is interpreted as highly predictable and based on standardized measurements. Sadly, within such climates, students’ remarkable changes rarely occurred. Mr. Jang said,

One of the great examples that I witnessed here is about one student. He was kicked out of his previous school. He was involved in violence and crime. Once he entered our school, he went very deeply into the band music for a while and soon became a serious reader. Then, he found what he liked to do: “I want to contribute to make the world a more beautiful place by making coffee.” That was his final word at his graduation. It is impossible to see such a change in the mainstream school. I once imagined, what if he was at the typical high school? I feel dizzy just thinking about it. So, I feel the great power of education when it is done with trust and love.
As Mr. Jang explained further, what he experienced at Miso was that when the school climate changed to provide more openness, acceptance, trust, and love, the students brought changes into their lives:

When we understand a thing or a person, we tend to be less abusive. Like, we become violent by being judgmental to each other because we don’t know [each other] well. For example, because we don’t know the student, we approach [him or her] with punishment. Because we don’t know our colleagues deeply enough to understand them, so we judge. It’s another way of being violent.

**Finding more happiness in his life as a teacher.** This school’s philosophy and curriculum, and the way Mr. Jang teaches, are aligned well with alternative education and schooling, so many aspects of what Mr. Jang does in this school are not standardizable or objectively measureable. For example, in the mainstream schools, teachers and school evaluated their educational success by records: measuring students’ performance scores and ranks on the standardized tests and the level of colleges to which students were admitted at the time of graduation. When I asked Mr. Jang about an alternative to such culture—because Miso High School’s teachers, including him, intend to work against many aspects of mainstream Korean school culture—he said the following:

We all cry at the graduation ceremony. We feel really sad that it’s time to say goodbye. As you know, it hardly happens in other schools. It gives me a feeling that it just feels right about our direction. We’ve always self-doubted, like, “Is this really the right thing? What if what we are doing is ill-directed to the
students?” But, after graduating, they often come see us, and they do well in their next places. This cannot be measured by numbers, like how many students cried. No way. My intuition feels good about what we are doing. And, I feel great about what we do with joy. This is a huge change, you know. My own satisfaction as a teacher has greatly increased. (01085-IS)

As Mr. Jang stated, Miso High School, which intends to work against such a mainstream culture, seems to depend more on quality (e.g., depth and closeness) of relationships with each other for teachers and students, and individuals’ lived experiences with feelings and intuitions, their meaning-making through dialogues with others, and their self-reflection. It was powerful to listen to how Mr. Jang described his intuitive feelings and the inner happiness and satisfaction he felt about what he has been doing through teaching since he came to Miso; at Miso, he can bring who he is into his teaching and relationships with students, and he can connect more deeply with his teaching and students.

_Teaching grounded by and in who he is: Creating a safe learning atmosphere for everybody to be heard._ The learning atmosphere of Mr. Jang’s classroom was very much a reflection of him as a person. When I observed his class, Mr. Jang seemed to make subtle but very intentional efforts to create an atmosphere of learning and classroom community. During my classroom observations, one of the most distinctive efforts I noticed was how and where he placed and moved his body in the classroom. During the class, he frequently moved to the back or the side in natural and smooth motions without any intrusion in the students’ ongoing dialogues, and he seemed to avoid
becoming the center of the students’ attention himself. To me, it looked very interesting and powerful because it seemed to make the classroom a whole. I found myself feeling very calm and immersed in that environment. In addition, the classroom dialogues went very deep very quickly, and the students shared their experiences about love and loving relationships. When I shared my observations and impressions about Mr. Jang’s use of his body with his students, they agreed that that was who he had been in every class that they had seen. Yuna articulated how she felt in Mr. Jang’s class:

    Mr. Jang creates our learning atmosphere really well. It plays such a big role. When we dialogue with each other, he never stands and makes comments in front of the class. He either comes inside of our groups or stands at the back of the classroom. I think that make us comfortably talk about our stories. . . .

    He actively reacts to what we say. Like, when we laugh, he also laughs. He jumps in when our dialogue is distracted so that we continue our dialogues. His responsiveness is great. He nods and smiles while we talk. I guess he makes an atmosphere in which we are able to listen carefully to each other. For example, when someone talks about her story, somebody else makes a comment in the middle. If there is a possibility for that person to get hurt by that comment, he jumps right in, intervenes, clarifies, and redirects. That is how, I think, he makes us feel free to speak up about our thoughts. Like, courageously, because he will not let us be hurt. (01055-IY)
Yuna’s description of Mr. Jang’s classroom atmosphere and his selfhood in the classroom resonated with my own observations.

Later, Mr. Jang articulated to me his intention behind the way he used his body position, voice, and so on. When I shared my observations with Mr. Jang and asked if he did the things that Yuna and I had noticed with specific intent, he explained,

Yes, I do that intentionally. I have reasons for doing that . . . I think that there are waves and flows of energy created among students . . . I guess I do it, to help my students stay immersed in their own learning, I tend to think about and carefully do things like my gestures with hands and body or my word usages. I minimize talking. Usually, in my class the students mostly speak. What I do is to propose the text to them. (01085-IS)

He connected the remainder of his explanation to spirituality:

There is a spiritual presence among the students and the teacher in each classroom of learning. When I can sense that presence, I feel very excited. We meet each other with an essence of our being. That is when we can spiritually look deep inside of our hearts. Fascinated by such spiritual energy that is made by each individual’s stories from deep within . . . To me, if I describe something with an image, hues of spirits mixed together. I prefer the sound. The sound of air, silence, and breath. What’s critical to this is that I don’t place myself at the center. My students should be at the center of those spiritual energies . . . Yes, I
am their background because my students should own their own spirit. (01085-IS)

I asked Mr. Jang what drives his sensitivity to the spiritual presence of learners during his teaching and what it means to him. He talked about his personal tendency in relation to his sensitivity to spiritual presences in learners and learning, and he described his intentionality in creating a safe atmosphere for listening and sharing stories:

If there are 100 children, those who rarely speak out loud, [are] quiet, or speak with a lower volume also tell a lot of stories . . . My eyes naturally look for them. We tend to ask them to speak up louder, but I like when their voices are heard and welcomed [as they are]. That small things are gently acknowledged as they are makes me happy. When every little thing is respected and even a tiny little voice is welcomed as it is, I feel peaceful. I think that there is no one greater than others, or uglier than others, but each one has their own hue. Yeah, I have such a tendency. I hope everyone is treated preciously as they are, and we engage in dialogue all together. But, I don’t like asking, “Say more” or “Say it louder.” We all have our own hue. We are just amazing as we are . . . That is how I do things when I meet people. I have such an inner desire. (01085-IS)

He added,

That’s sort of my tendency. It matters to me, personally. I realize it now as I talk through this aspect. That makes me feel really good and happy. I feel peace
when things, especially each one of the very small little things, are respected and welcomed.

My observations and conversations with the students and Mr. Jang showed that Mr. Jang has considered the careful movement of his body during the class, especially when the students are talking, to create a safe learning atmosphere for the students. His views about teaching and relationships have been visible in how he has positioned his body in the classroom. With the use of his body, Mr. Jang has created boundaries and togetherness. His particular use of his body also has centered the presence and existence of the students on a spiritual level. His body has become a tool for giving boundaries to and centering students’ attention and energy on their learning. It has formed safety and comfort that has enabled the students to open and bring out who they are without masking or censoring. The students have felt safe and trustful in speaking from their hearts, even though sometimes doing so may have made them feel “vulnerable, exposed, and naked” (09303-GM, 10203-RN). The students have been able to uncover and unpack their stories deeply inside of themselves and gain understanding of themselves and their lives. In this way, Mr. Jang has made classroom spaces more spiritual and welcomed a spiritual presence among the students. His teaching style also has contributed to nurturing a sense of connectedness, belonging, togetherness, and community.
Mr. Park’s story.

Who he was before Miso. Mr. Park, the mathematics teacher, remembered that his very first day as a teacher at a mainstream public school was full of disappointment because of the disparity between what he envisioned about his teaching life (including establishing a close relationship with the students and making a positive impact on students’ lives) and how he was asked to play certain roles as a strong authority figure according to the school culture and system. The experienced teachers in the school taught him to be suitably socialized in the way that he could be an effective teacher for the school: for example, by saying, “This is the way things work here in the real school.”

After an initial reaction of disappointment in the reality of school life, however, he enjoyed becoming better at understanding the system and fitting himself into the bureaucratic school system with guidance from many other experienced teachers. The more he fitted himself into the school system, the more he was acknowledged with higher positions.

Such enjoyment did not last long, and his school life became inert. He reflected on his past and said,

The school system uses people’s desire. Making them compete. Then, they are trapped in the system. Then, the education disappears. In order to survive, they need to make themselves fit into the bureaucratic system. They need to let go of human dignity and need to dehumanize, especially if someone wants promotion in the school. (02054-IJ)
To him, the bureaucratic school system and culture seemed to dehumanize him and his relationships with colleagues because the one-way, top-down order was a main principle; teachers’ ability was measured by administrative performance in an efficient manner and results of student performances on standardized tests for college entrance. The emphasis on the standardized ranking system, accountability, and competition applied to the teachers as well as to the students.

It was questionable to Mr. Park if promotion was worthy of trading off his selfhood, while it became clear to him that being promoted in the school was not what he truly wanted. Thus, he declared to himself and to the people to whom he was close that he would not ever look for a path of being promoted, because a higher position in the school was not the direction in which he wanted to go. Who he wanted to be was a good teacher who deeply connects with students and contributes positively to their lives. However, after spending years on fitting into the school system, he realized that he was mostly trained in how to manage and control students. Instead, he found himself being a successful, efficient teacher who was contributing to the smooth operation of the school system without noises or problems through controlling the students.

There was a disconnection between how others saw him from the outside and how he felt deep down about himself and his life in the school. At his previous schools, his reputation among other teachers and the students was pretty good. His appearance was always polished, with a suit and tie on, suitable to the school culture. Furthermore, his administrative ability developed efficiently each year, and that ability was acknowledged
with higher positions in the school. His administrative ability became his strength in the school. His students liked him and his teaching. He often played soccer with his students on the school playgrounds. He had a good sense of humor. Although many students in Korean schools typically consider his teaching subject, mathematics, a boring subject, his humorous manner made the students more engaged in his teaching.

Ironically, however, he often doubted deep inside if his students were really getting anything meaningful for themselves and their lives from his class. He sometimes found himself looking awkward when he taught and interacted with the students. The more he realized that his school life was becoming inert and not meaningfully connected to him, the more he felt uncomfortable and suffocated in his formal suit and tie. He really wanted to escape from such discomfort, but he couldn’t in his previous schools because of the strict dress code, which, like those of other typical Korean schools, required a formal look. Finally, his change began at Miso after he was able to freely decide to take off his formal suit and undo his necktie; many subsequent changes followed as he developed a stronger foundation for his beliefs and values in his life, more integrity in himself and his life, and deeper connectedness with the students as well as himself.

*How his spiritual change and growth began at Miso: Undoing his tie and teacher’s authority, and uncovering his selfhood.* At a surface level, Mr. Park’s current style of teaching and relating with his students might be not very different than that of his past. However, taking off his formal suit and undoing his tie brought transformative
change to him from within. The necktie had a significant symbolic meaning personally to Mr. Park: It represented wearing the image of a teacher with school authority. And taking it off was how his changing journey began at Miso. He said,

I always wanted to undo the necktie, but I couldn’t . . . . That is an authority. I thought and was told that I was not authoritative, but I did not want to be under the heel of the students. Neat and tidy look that suit and necktie provide. Refined way of speaking. I might have thought that] the students won’t easily look down on me. (02054-IJ)

After he moved to Miso High School, which is without strict dress codes for both the students and the teachers, he was finally able to decide to undo the necktie and take off the suit. He felt liberated from the suffocated feeling. In addition, he felt much freer with himself and more open to the students about himself as a person. Previously, when he was with his students, he had felt guarded against his fear of “being under the heel of the students” by the suit. He had hidden behind the image of a teacher with school authority. More importantly, he had known that doing so made him feel distanced from both himself and his students, and he had felt pretentious when relating with the students. In addition, he had heard that the students harshly criticized the teachers when the teachers were not around them, even though the students acted like they would “obey and listen” in front of the teachers. That was a fear to him, and he had felt an even bigger distance from the students.
Removing his formal suit changed the way he felt about his relationships with students. He found himself more humane when he was around his students. As he became more humane by surrendering his strong teacher authority, he could allow himself to be vulnerable with and show his feelings to his students and colleagues at Miso:

Here, I was able to become aware of my limit. Then, I could be more honest about my feelings that were hidden. Sometimes, I could cry at the school. Previously, you know, there was this kind of idea that the teachers should not show their tears to the students. (02054-IJ)

Mr. Park could express his feelings more freely through communication when he was in the school with his students and his colleagues. In addition, he was able to listen and meet more deeply and closely with the students on a human-to-human level in and out of the classroom. He found himself feeling more genuinely interested in and connected to the students, their lives, and their growth, without judging if the students were behaving appropriately to the teachers and elder people or not. He found love, compassion, and empathy naturally growing inside of him in relation to his students. His trust in and respect for his adolescent students’ inner strength and ability to learn and live their lives on their own also deepened. Moreover, he felt that his students seemed to share more authentic stories about their feelings, thoughts, and opinions. What he feared (such as “being under the heel of the students”) did not happen. Instead, by taking off his formal suit and necktie, which means he was developing the courage to just be himself, he could
experience mutual respect, companionship, and reciprocity in his relationships with his students.

Compassion for and connectedness with students as a foundation of his teaching beliefs. Undoing his necktie (symbolically, his authority as a teacher) also led Mr. Park to believe that, rather than what teachers teach, what is more important in education is how teachers connect and relate with the students. Along with this belief, he also had a strong belief about the students’ potential power. Thus, he thought that when students are ready and really want to learn, they can learn effortlessly. These beliefs became his foundation for education. This does not mean that he was undervaluing the contents or pedagogy of teaching; instead, he believed that what he was teaching might be meaningless without a humane connection to the students or without valuing the relational aspect of learning, although it might result in good academic performance records.

This might be critical, especially to Mr. Park as a mathematics teacher in South Korea. In South Korean educational contexts, learning math creates a high level of pressure, anxiety, and resistance among students. According to a nationwide, large-scale survey in 2015, about 60% of high school students in South Korea identified themselves as Soo-Hak-Po-Gee-Ja (which means people who give up learning math) (“Reality,” 2015). Many students have difficulty following the high standards of the math learning cycle, which was made for the purpose of accurately measuring students’ ability in order to sort and rank them for college entrance. In order to teach all required content
according to high standards, and to prepare students for the tests efficiently, teachers often use a learning-by-rote approach in the classroom. This also makes the students disengaged from their learning. Thus, both the students and the math teachers feel challenged and frustrated in helping students to engage in their classes. The math teachers often feel a dilemma of considering the students’ interest levels or meeting math curriculum standards.

In such circumstances, Mr. Park’s belief about the importance of meaningful relationships, open communication, and in-depth connections with the students and their lives through teaching and learning seems a very powerful change. Grounded by this belief, he began to find a deeper meaning in being and learning together with the students in his classes, rather than struggling to force his students to learn more or higher levels of content. One student articulated what mathematical learning has meant to her:

I never felt interested in learning math in my entire life. Mathematics is a subject that I feel it is difficult to closely engage with. I once told Mr. Park about this because it concerned me. Because I like him a lot, I really wish I could enjoy his class, but I just hate math. I can’t help it. He seemed to understand that.

I shared this student’s story with Mr. Park, and he explained one of his changes in understanding classroom learning:

At first, especially my first year here, I was also concerned and actually felt hurt by the students’ heavy absences and lack of engagement in my class. I never had such experiences before in other settings. I was recognized with an excellence of
teaching, previously. As a teacher and as a person, I felt ignored and disvalued, at first. Then, I realized where those feelings came from. It was my pride as a good teacher and desire to be a good teacher. Finally, I fully admitted that my students have their own stances and choices. (01065-IJ)

This comment explains how his viewpoint of classroom learning was transformed from his teaching to students’ lives and their learning. A deep compassion grew from his new viewpoint, especially for the students who were struggling to engage in learning mathematics in his class or those who were frequently absent. As he explained,

I need to be careful to say this because it can be misleading, but honestly now I do not take our students’ heavy absence rates or lack of engagement too seriously. This kind of opinion might cause other teachers to feel upset. I mean that, of course, it would be really great if all students [could] actively participate in classroom learning. But what if the student was up all night and couldn’t sleep at all? Or what if the student really hates to sit down on a chair for the class right now? It will be just a cheat if they sit down, hold still, and open their eyes. Then, I think, it is sometimes better for the student to take a nap a little if that will help him recover his energy and feel refreshed for the rest of the day. (12173-GD)

Mr. Park’s comment implies that he views his students based on a larger understanding. He sees his students as not just the students who attended his class but as people who had other parts of history in their lives. He further explained,
Let’s say that there is a wounded horse. If I whip on the horse, can that horse really run? This metaphor just popped up just now. I mean that our Korean students have been wounded by the Korean educational culture and system since they were really young, you know. That is how I see my students and their absences. Let’s say that the students who were deeply hurt from their years of previous schooling moved to a school like ours. Can we really expect that those students will be able to run right away because they like this new school? I am doubtful. They need time. I believe that the teachers should wait and be patient, with a deep trust in their students. Their wounded hearts need time to be ready. They might need to take time to see if they are really accepted or not, to find comfort for their wounded hearts, like that. And, even the students who have not hurt much, they have not had freedom like in our school. So, they also need time.

(01065-IJ)

**Becoming a learner.** To Mr. Park, his own learning and growth as a person is one of the significant meanings he has found in his experiences at Miso. At Miso High School, new and different issues and questions often challenged him, and he frequently experienced not having an answer, a solution, or a clear-cut conclusion. This made him learn and accept his own limits as a person as well as a teacher, and this acceptance brought many changes to him. Most significantly, he turned from a teacher to a learner-teacher. This new identity led him to reflect upon himself and his teaching life at existential, epistemological, and philosophical levels. He explained,
This school makes me read more books, because I realize my limits. Also, I became an agent here, not a part of the system. This school makes me question who I am, and how I live my life. And I have begun wondering if my teaching is really meaningful to the students, what Miso really values, what the community is. These are very confusing, actually. Then, what kind of person should a teacher be in an alternative school? What should an alternative teacher teach? Am I really an alternative educator? What should I be teaching at Miso? What is this Miso High School about? These series of questions came to me, but none of them could be resolved. So, in order to solve one question at a time, I read a series of books related to my questions. And, during my class when I talk with the students, when there is an issue in a relationship, I think again about things.

(02054-IJ)

He admitted to himself that he had hardly asked those questions before. Of course, he did not have answers for them other than those answers given by the school authority, including, “That’s the way it is,” “You should listen to and follow what the teacher says,” or “This is what I need to do as a teacher.” Mr. Park added,

In order to establish, maintain, and perpetuate power, it is easy when the people below you do not know much about [how the system works and who gets benefits]. It is the same in the school. Teachers are like a part. If the system functions well, there is no problem. Teachers did not need to be smart. From that
perspective, teachers having their own educational philosophy and beliefs isn’t needed, actually. (02054-IJ)

In his previous schools, guarded by school authority and power over the students, Mr. Park did not have an opportunity to deeply reflect upon and examine why he was doing what he was doing. More straightforwardly, he did not have a real need to know why, because the system was functioning very well according to the way it was, so there was no real reason to think deeply or problematize things. In the mainstream public schools at which he had previously worked, making the system work and move smoothly was a priority to the teachers as just a part of the system. However, at Miso, influenced by students who raise questions and a school that tries to welcome them, Mr. Park’s learning process was activated. In the learning process, he realized that he was beginning to see himself as a learner, thinker, and researcher seeking truth. This made him feel alive. He found himself enjoying the problems that his students raised, and he felt refreshed and renewed. He felt that he was seeking something profound and pursuing truth. In addition, he liked having rich opportunities to honestly and authentically communicate with and learn from his students and colleagues, individually and collectively, about ongoing issues. I frequently found him chatting with the students inside and outside the school building. He actively participated in community meetings or small-group gatherings with other teachers and students. Doing so echoed what he had said about his core values in education: building in-depth relationships and having open, reciprocal communication based on mutual respect.
**Joy of being a teacher with a new lens with which to understand students.** Mr. Park shared an image (shown in Figure 1) and explained that it showed how his lens of viewing the students had transformed:

There was a tension between the teachers and the students around this issue. The teachers complained to the students about being messy with their toothbrushes in the school restrooms, and tried to correct them to have better manners, but the students didn’t follow; you know, back and forth. And, one day, I looked at those unorganized toothbrushes in the mirror, as you can see in the picture. I could feel a sense of beauty. Something can be seen as chaos or messiness, but we can also find a beauty of symmetry by looking through a different lens. That is the image of my students and our school I see. (01194-JP)

As in this type of learning moment, Mr. Park learned to look at things, including himself and his students, through a different lens. Such learning brought curiosity and amazement into his life. He felt much more joy in being a teacher after moving to Miso because the Miso High School community enabled him to consider himself as a person who learns and grows. When I asked him what made that change, he said that it was the students at Miso who constantly problematized and challenged many of his naturalized conceptions through why and why not questions.
Typically, the students who show a lack of obedience to the school or adult authority are often identified at the schools as problem children or troublemakers. However, at Miso High School, there is a school-wide effort to work against such negative views about the students. Moreover, it is claimed at Miso that there is no problem child but instead a problem school that has such a view about the students. Miso students often question naturalized processes and tacit rules that give and justify the power of the school and the teachers to control the students (such as the idea that students should follow the teachers’ or the school’s schedules or directions and the students should learn what teachers teach; otherwise, the students may receive punishments or be disadvantaged according to the teachers’ or school’s decisions). Their questions are heard, valued, and often discussed together with students and teachers in their everyday school lives, especially during school-wide weekly community meetings where many issues related to students’ lives are discussed.

Mr. Park learned to validate what the students were saying as important, valuable issues that the teachers and the school administrators would also need to think deeply
about in order to determine how to offer better, alternative, and new schooling experiences for their students. Because of his constant encounters with those students who question, Mr. Park had an even greater shift in his perspectives about the students at Miso. To him, these students became his teachers and problem *raisers*, instead of problem children, because they were making him think about things that had been naturalized in him (without questioning or examination), examine those things, explore other possibilities, and learn many new things in the process of solving the problems that students were bringing up.

**Seeking integrity in his life.** Throughout his years at Miso, Mr. Park also realized in depth the connectedness of all things. As he became a learner-teacher, he found himself using very different sets of vocabularies in his daily interactions with people. He said,

> Words or issues like world peace, freedom, ecology. I don’t think they are far from me and my life, because everything is connected with each other. I think this can be considered as my growth that I use such words, because I didn’t use those words in the past. I mean that this indicates that I have an awareness about their values. (01065-IJ)

Although in his learning he had originally begun to have deeper ideas about education based on the ongoing issues and questions that he had in the school, he naturally became more actively concerned about sociocultural, political, economic, and environmental issues. He said,
Living life could actually mean dying. Being closer to death... On this earth, can I claim the right of my possession for anything? Then, I thought that every thing is connected. Even with a tiny little bug, I might be connected. And I questioned, “Can we really be abusive to such things, then?” I used to have such thoughts in abstract ways, like, “Don’t hurt others.” But this type of thinking got more expanded to my thoughts about the students... Then, it expanded to food, materialism, and the economy. Things are continuously linked one thing to another and expanded. (01065-IJ)

In my interviews with Mr. Park, which occurred over the year, I noticed that his perspectives became more sophisticated and integrated, and I felt more strength in his voice when he talked about his beliefs, his changes, and his learning journey. When I mentioned my impressions to him, he agreed, and said,

I am trying to have more integrity in my life. There are some inevitable dilemmas or inner conflicts as a public school teacher with an alternative educational approach in this school. For example, I am introducing alternative ways of being and living in our society, but, at the same time, I know that I, as a public school teacher, belong to the mainstream social system. I felt like a hypocrite. If my students ask, “How about your life?,” you know, I couldn’t say much about it. That’s a public school teacher’s dilemma in this type of school, because we are not free from judgment in that we receive benefits by being in the mainstream educational system. So, I wanted to be more confident with myself and my
students about what I say and believe. I’ve made efforts to be more integrated. Also, I honestly admit and speak about my dilemmas and limitations to my students. (01065-IJ)

He was seeking integrity. As a public school teacher, he often felt inevitable dilemmas and inner conflicts, but as he sought the authenticity of being himself and acting on his true beliefs, he found more integrity in his words, feelings, thoughts, actions, and daily choices, and he felt more grounded by having fewer inner conflicts or dilemmas.

Summary

These two teachers’ spiritual journeys at Miso began from painful realizations and acceptances about who they were as teachers. Once Mr. Jang and Mr. Park moved to Miso, they realized that their educational approaches, pedagogical strategies, and teaching subjects were deeply influenced and internalized in their minds by the Korean public educational system and culture. They were frustrated about their previous teaching in the mainstream public schools and had inner desires to provide a different education that included critical awareness about problems and limitations of current public education. However, they were also some of the teachers who had belonged to and long participated in Korean public schooling, in which educational directions and curricular cycles were solely focused on preparation for college entrance exams. Furthermore, they accepted that they had never had the experience of deeply and concretely thinking about and teaching in the way they had wanted or believed. After such painful realizations and honest acceptances, they began their journeys by
questioning the essence of education, teaching, and learning in order to become more spiritually connected, centered, and integrated teachers both for themselves and their students.

At Miso, both Mr. Jang and Mr. Park were able to decrease or eliminate a gap between what they believed about education and school and what they did in their practice of teaching, which had constantly given them inner conflicts in their previous teaching experience. Both teachers acknowledged that this school’s educational beliefs, direction, aims, and cultural atmosphere enabled them to make changes. Both teachers also recognized that Miso students played a pivotal role in their changes and growth as teachers because they constantly questioned the naturalized, tacit laws of schooling in which major principles are control, discipline, and punishment, and the students’ only goal and life priority should be entering better ranked colleges, no matter what they want. Miso students’ different attitudes toward and expectations of classroom learning expedited these two teachers’ changing processes.

Both Mr. Jang and Mr. Park gained a deeper sense about their teaching work through their experiences of feeling spiritual presences in their teaching and their students’ learning. Mr. Jang began to consider teaching as a sacred work and engaged in his teaching with a sense of calling after witnessing spiritual presence in classroom learning. Mr. Park also had experiences of sensing spiritual presence in students’ learning, and both teachers were humbled by individual students’ innate strength and power. The teachers’ capacity to trust and respect individual students’ potential also
expanded. Most importantly, by undergoing these changes, both teachers also deepened their understanding of themselves: they became more integrated, centered, and grounded in their lives; they felt freer to be themselves in their teaching and in their relationships with their students in and out of the classroom; and they found more happiness and satisfaction in themselves and their lives as teachers. Moreover, they became more active in making their voices heard to promote sociocultural and structural changes to Korean schooling and education both in and out of schools.
Chapter 5: Discussions and Implications

Given the pressure of successful entrance to top-rated colleges, South Korean adolescents have experienced severe competition on high-stakes standardized tests. Education and schooling have solely focused on increasing students’ academic performance, with less attention paid to students learning about and investigating themselves and their lives, which have long been recognized as some of the most critical life tasks for adolescents. Embracing spirituality that nurtures connectedness can potentially serve adolescents’ learning about themselves and their lives in schools. However, there is limited research on how schools and teachers can explicitly embrace students’ spirituality and what influences such schools and teachers can have on students’ lives, especially in South Korean contexts for adolescents. Researchers on the topic of spirituality in education in South Korea, including E. J. Sim and K. H. Lee (2012), have issued a call for empirical research to provide examples of how teachers can support students’ spirituality in the school and the classroom, and how students can experience spirituality through schooling. Descriptive research on how students spiritually understand themselves and their lives in relation with others when spirituality is welcomed and valued in schools can be a cornerstone of this area of research.
My main purpose in this narrative case study was to gain a deeper understanding of spirituality in education: more specifically, how teachers and students understand themselves and their lives, and how school, teaching, and learning can contribute to their spiritual sense and understanding of themselves and their lives. A better understanding of the perceptions of students and teachers experiencing spiritual growth from their lives in this particular school, Miso High School, can provide insight about how South Korean education can be differently experienced for adolescent students. My findings from this study on students’ and teachers’ spirituality at one public alternative high school in South Korea have allowed me to address the following research questions:

1. How is school experienced as a place to nurture students’ spiritual understanding of themselves and their lives?
2. How do students spiritually understand themselves and their lives?
3. How do teachers spiritually understand themselves and their lives?

In this chapter, I discuss the results of each research question, address the limitations of the study, and provide implications for future research and educational practice.

Discussion

Research Question 1: How Is School Experienced as a Place to Nurture Students’ Spiritual Understanding of Themselves and Their Lives?

In responding to the first research question in Chapter 4, I presented a detailed description of students’ experiences at this school by focusing on how this school fostered their understanding of themselves and their lives through everyday life. In order
to address such students’ experiences more holistically and organically, I developed five themes based on students’ experiences of Miso’s physical space, time, relationships, learning, and Miso’s dual positions. In other words, I did not limit or separate the students’ experiences in relation to spirituality, or according to curricular activities that the school offered (those with the direct intent to grow students’ self-understanding), because the growth of their spirituality was deeply integrated and embedded within every aspect of their daily lives.

The findings of this study demonstrated a relationship between the usage of physical space and students’ spirituality. The findings also demonstrated how students and teachers used the physical space of the school and what was nurtured in students’ experiences from such spaces. Miso High School administrators opened school spaces, including the computer room, the auditorium, and the principal’s room, during the school building’s opening hours so students could have more increased accessibilities to various school spaces. Students derived more flexible and open uses of school spaces from Miso High School’s intention to create a different school culture and learning atmosphere. This school decreased and minimized surveillance, control, and discipline, all typical strategies used in many schools. Instead, this school implemented the principles of connectedness, openness, and flexibility in using physical spaces. By having increased access, students had more freedom and options to choose where they wanted to be during school hours and afterschool hours, without the need to constantly seek the teachers’
permission. Through their experiences of more accessible, open, and flexible uses of the school space, students felt comfortable being in the school setting.

Students felt comfort, safety, acceptance, and belonging, all of which have been considered as key emotional elements for students’ growth of their spiritual senses in previous studies, including Zurmehly’s (2014). In her study on spiritually connective teaching for young children, Zurmehly (2014) viewed the school environment as a tool for establishing a relationship. According to her, for spiritually connective teaching and learning, the school environment should be designed and used to provide the students with feelings of comfort, safety, and welcome so that the students can connect with each other more interpersonally and explore inside their souls more deeply in the classroom (Zurmehly, 2014). Based on their feelings of comfort and safety, the students can then feel freer to become who they really are, and more freely be open to share their perspectives, knowledge, thoughts, ideas, questions, and feelings.

Many educational researchers (Apple, 1993; Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002; J. H. Kim, 2005; Kozol, 1991) have recognized that physical space has a power of influencing our way of being and understanding who we are, as well as a way of being related to one another: The physical environments of the school convey messages, including how the students are valued and what educational attitudes and values the educators have, and these messages affect the students’ conceptions of themselves. From the findings of this study regarding school spaces, it is also important to note that students’ perceptions and their experiences can draw upon how the school environment is used. This finding
highlights the importance of educators’ careful consideration about use and arrangement of the educational environment. When connectedness, openness, and flexibility are the principles of the use of the environment among the members of the school, the school environment can be more interactively co-created through daily life. That is, how teachers and students actually use the school environment in daily life can have an influence on creating a particular environment for the students. Miso created a spiritually and emotionally safe environment beyond the physical bodies of the school buildings. School environments are often constructed and arranged for the purpose of efficiency and convenience of management. Within such environments, educators often lose their sense and sensitivity about what messages and atmospheres the particular uses and arrangements of schools’ physical spaces convey and create (perhaps promoting disconnectedness), how the students feel about themselves within the school spaces, and how the feelings students associate with the uses and arrangements of school spaces impact their learning. The findings of this study show how educational values can be more intentionally embedded in the uses and arrangements of the educational environment when the impact of the environment’s uses and arrangements is carefully considered.

Another important theme of Miso High School students’ experiences that contributed to their spirituality was time. These students’ lives were differently framed by regularly having free, unstructured, and unregulated hours in their daily lives offered by Miso High School. In particular, students perceived the self-learning projects as one
of their important experiences of “time” and as an alternative way of living. By having those free hours for their individual projects, they had liberation and freedom, and they felt a sense of agency and empowerment. Such students’ experiences are opposed to what many researchers (e.g., Gatto, 1992; Vieira, 2013; Yang, 1999) have described about what happens by living with the time frame and logic that traditional schools use. For example, in her study on the concept and meaning of time in educational contexts, Yang (1999) noted that annual, monthly, weekly, and daily plans of educational activities are predetermined by school curriculums, which are mainly decided by educational offices of provinces or the national government, and those predetermined plans for educational activities are required for every student in the district, province, or nation. This fact specifies who the good students are and what kind of behaviors or attitudes are accepted and valued or unacceptable and regulated. The fact also specifies that class time is for learning and studying while break time is for playing. Thus, being late or absent is understood as a signal of a neglect of learning, and being present in the classroom is considered the students’ important duty, regardless of what they actually do and without consideration of the individuals’ flows of consciousness. The standardized, linear, objective, and impersonal time frame, from the mechanical point of view that most schools use, ignores the subjective, humane understanding and use of time. Yang (1999) argued that the standardized time frame is problematic when it comes to human growth. Similarly, Vieira (2013) also made the critique that the way schools structure and compartmentalize time for efficiency and productivity is a form of dehumanization and
oppression. By being accustomed to such time compartmentalization, students’ capacity and ability to take their time, time in which they can reflect and grow their critical consciousness, is suppressed. Their ability to live by their own rhythms is also suppressed. Furthermore, they lose the power and ability to make decisions about their lives. Since they begin their schooling in their early lives, students are hardly given the opportunity to plan or organize their daily, weekly, or yearly schedules by the educational systems. They become easily adaptable to the systems’ rules.

Contrary to Yang’s (1999) and Vieira’s (2013) descriptions about students learning from a traditional school time frame, Miso High School students developed a sense of power and agency in their lives by experiencing different time frames, which had unstructured and unregulated free hours and were in accordance with their needs, wants, paces, and rhythms. They learned to take their own time to learn who they were and what they wanted in their individually meaningful ways. The findings of this study demonstrate that students’ different experiences of their time in this school brought them to value their own learning processes and what they really learned and experienced through meaning-making and reflection, rather than focusing on advancement and achievement.

The findings of this study also indicate that students’ experiences of different time frames in this school, especially those unregulated and unstructured hours, made students develop a self-trust and hope about themselves and their lives. Many students were overwhelmed by and struggled to live with unstructured hours at first, even though they
were excited about those hours and had liberated feelings. However, as shown in one student’s comment, “I learned how to design my life here,” Miso High school students gradually learned who they were, who they wanted to become, what lives they wanted to live, and what it would take to live the lives they wanted. Such experience and learning were so powerful for the students that they developed a sense of trust and hope about themselves and their lives: They began to believe that they could choose what they wanted to do for their lives both in the present and the future, and they developed self-trust about their capacity to live their lives in the way they wanted to live them.

Due to their experiences of having many unstructured hours in their daily lives at Miso, students learned to value and treasure solitude for self-reflection. Kessler (2000) also explained that adolescent students can benefit spiritually from silence and stillness through the use of solitude and personal control over their time. According to Kessler (2000), through the benefits of being alone and in solitude, students can experience rich self-discovery, self-realization, and awakening by becoming more conscious about their deep feelings, yearnings, and values. At Miso, along with many unstructured hours in their everyday lives at the school, students naturally had time for being alone and still. At first, students had to develop their tolerance for being still or alone because they felt discomfort, anxiety, or fear of being alone, but students gradually learned to quietly be with their inner selves. In the meantime, they also developed strategies to create and find time and places in which to be alone inside and outside of the school. Being alone became critical work for students, especially when they felt lost, restless, conflicted, or
disconnected in their daily lives. As a benefit of having solitude, they felt more centered and connected to themselves, and they felt more in balance and ready to re-connect with others. They found themselves enjoying solitude and solitary reflection.

According to the findings of the current study, Miso High School students’ close and democratic relationships with their teachers were crucial experiences at the school in terms of their learning about themselves and others. A sense of closeness and democracy in the students’ relationships with their teachers was embraced in their daily lives in the school through their frequent contact and dialogues with teachers, and through the school’s weekly community meetings. This school had weekly community meetings where students and teachers became co-creators of school culture and policy by making decisions together as members of a community through discussions and votes. The community meetings changed students’ perceptions about their relationships with their teachers. Students explained that their relationships with teachers became more democratic, equal, and cooperative, rather than hierarchical. In addition, this school made the teachers’ rooms and the principal’s room easily accessible for students. This accessibility enabled students to have more frequent contact and informal dialogues with their teachers in daily life. Students felt closely connected with their teachers, and they recognized that their teachers were easily accessible and available to them when they wanted to talk about their concerns, issues, or plans. Both students and teachers developed a better understanding about each other, and they were able to talk and listen to each other more openly and compassionately. Thus, both the community meetings and
the frequent, informal dialogues between students and teachers contributed to
establishing close and democratic relationships between them. Such relationships were
important for students’ spiritual learning because more honest and deeper levels of
sharing and dialogues were possible based on their feelings of connectedness and
closeness to the teachers.

The students’ deeper connections with their teachers through their schooling
experiences at Miso High School is a critical finding in this study because disconnection
has been a core issue in educational contexts in many countries, including South Korea,
and such a finding addresses how students’ interpersonal connections can be nurtured for
spirituality. In her study on Australian youths’ spirituality, de Souza (2003) viewed
“disconnection” from the self and others as a crucial issue for youth in Australia’s
contemporary sociocultural and educational contexts that ignores nourishing “inner
reflective life” (p. 271) and harms adolescents’ psychological, mental, and emotional
well-being. So, de Souza (2003) asserted the needs of more attention to emotional,
spiritual, and reflective dimensions in education for youth. The issue of disconnection
and the need for nurturing the spiritual and emotional aspects of learning are applicable
beyond Australian contexts to the contexts of South Korean education for youth.
Defining spirituality according to a sense of connectedness frequently appearing in
contemporary literature on spirituality in education across many countries might be a
reflection of this issue of disconnection in this current time.
In this study, I also found that students’ collaborative and reciprocal learning relationships among themselves were also critical experiences for their spirituality because these relationships helped them feel a sense of connectedness and closeness with one another and nurture empathy, love, compassion, and respect for one another. Students’ reflections, discussions, and dialogues were important learning processes at Miso. Through their everyday learning contexts in this school, students had rich opportunities to reflect upon and share their life stories, thoughts, opinions, and feelings with each other. Such learning processes made student-student relationships more connected, collaborative, and reciprocal for one another’s learning and growth, rather than isolated or competitive. On the one hand, students developed a sense of safety and comfort to open up about who they were to their peers by telling them about who they were. On the other hand, by listening to other people’s stories, opinions, and views, students found themselves to have better and deeper understanding about other people’s lives through respect, empathy, love, and compassion. They also gained better, deeper, and, sometimes, new understanding about themselves and their lives by listening to others’ stories—stories that were similar to theirs, differently viewed, or better articulated.

Similar to this study’s findings, relationships and interpersonal connections have often been discussed as key in cultivating spirituality in schools. Pedraza (2006) stated that cultivating connections and relationships between students and teachers, and among students by giving them a sense of community, can nourish individual students’
emotional and spiritual well-being, and is an important way to embrace spirituality in schools. In her study of teachers’ spirituality in relation to their teaching, Pedraza (2006) demonstrated some concrete ways to nurture students’ spirituality in their daily lives at school. These ways include having frequent communication among students and between students and teachers; welcoming and validating students’ different thoughts, feelings, and ideas with respect; and encouraging dialogues, negotiations, and collaborations (Pedraza, 2006). These ways are aligned with how the findings of this study demonstrated that students’ experiences in this school were associated with their relationships. Palmer (1983) also claimed that educators should be concerned with relational aspects in education. He was concerned about the way of learning and knowing in education from a spiritual perspective, arguing that when students’ learning and knowing are gained by the process of “endless competition for supremacy over each other” (Palmer, 1983, p. 38) or their own survival without acknowledging the communal and relational aspects of learning, knowledge, lives, and societies, such learning and knowledge can lead students to become manipulative in using their knowledge. Palmer (1983) valued a collaborative and communal learning process in education, like that of Miso High School students’ experiences, because he believed that such a learning process can help students to consider using their learning and knowledge in more cooperative ways.

In the current study, I found that Miso’s simultaneous dual positions (as an alternative school and a public school) made students’ realities more complex,
ambiguous, and contradictory, and, more importantly, boosted their critical and spiritual understanding of themselves and their lives in relation with other people and society. Miso High School’s dual positions as a public high school and as an alternative school made its students’ realities complicated, but these students gained critical awareness and deeper understanding about themselves and their lives in relation with other people, school, and society. Students’ complex, ambiguous, and contradictory realities often caused fears, confusions, and conflicts, which then often led them to ask important spiritual questions (e.g., What do I really want for now and for my life? Is there a meaning or reason for having difficult issues and emotions?). There was an urgent need for students to deeply connect with their inner selves in order to figure out their feelings, situations, and ways to re-center themselves.

Although such processes were difficult for students, by constantly dealing with complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction in their daily lives, students grew the capacity and wisdom to live with these feelings. Palmer (1983) stated that the capacity to live with complexity, uncertainty, and paradox is a benefit of cultivating spirituality. Furthermore, Miso students often found and shaped their personally important meanings, values, and directions in their lives as a result of navigating their lives within those complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions. Similarly, Kessler (2000) recognized that this particular type of learning (knowing the meanings and values of their lives) is critical for adolescents’ spirituality in education. Kessler (2000) explained that many adolescents make their decisions based on external pressures, expectations, or values (such as those
of friends, parents, teachers, or society) without the opportunity to cultivate their inner lives in searching for their life goals, directions, or careers, and later they find themselves unsatisfied. According to Kessler (2000), growing adolescents’ capacity to ask the so-called big questions is critical to guiding them to find meaning, purpose, and passion in their lives. This resonates with what happened to Miso students. As they dealt with complex, ambiguous, and contradictory realities, they asked questions about their lives. More importantly, they took time to ponder those questions in solitude in order to find meaning. These findings show how important it is for adolescents to ask and ponder questions as a process of finding meaning and purpose in their lives.

Research Question 2: How Do Students Spiritually Understand Themselves and Their Lives?

In Chapter 4, I answered the second research question by presenting three students’ stories of spirituality at Miso High School. I selected these students—Jaemin, Woohee, and Yuna—as focal student participants because of the following: (a) their voluntary and purposeful entrances to Miso; (b) their interests in and personal values of gaining deeper understanding about themselves; (c) their interests in becoming teachers and exploring that interest through their self-learning projects; and (d) their willingness to have dialogic meetings on a regular basis. Jaemin, Woohee, and Yuna considered the dialogic meetings as a part of their self-learning projects, and I served them as a mentor for their projects. The three girls’ stories demonstrated their individual, unique paths toward personal and spiritual growth through their lived experiences at Miso. I presented
their stories regarding (a) who they were before Miso; (b) their beginnings at Miso; (3) their struggles and challenges at Miso (Miso-aches); and (4) their meaning of, love for, and passion about themselves, their lives, and their dreams.

On the paths of their personal and spiritual growth, the three girls often confronted the struggles and challenges of navigating their lives at Miso, as they were going through a critical period of their lives by transitioning to adulthood (becoming adults, teachers, and women in the ways they wanted to be). More importantly, the three girls deeply connected to themselves and searched for the meaning of their lives through reflection and solitude. They actively engaged in dialoguing with me about themselves and their lives, realities, and dreams. They became self-aware, especially about what was going on in their hearts and minds, by reflecting, revisiting, and uncovering their stories of their lives and discovering the meanings within them. As a result, they not only grew a sense of empathy, love, and compassion for themselves and their lives, but they also developed commitment based on passion, compassion, and love to contributing positively to others’ lives and society more largely through the work they wanted to do by being teachers.

The three students’ critical and reflective self-awareness was apparent in their stories. As they learned to think about and deeply understand themselves and their lives at Miso, Jaemin, Woohee, and Yuna gained critical and reflective awareness of themselves. Such growing awareness contributed to gaining deeper self-understanding. Critical and reflective awareness, or consciousness, has often been recognized as an
important quality for spiritual understanding and growth by scholars, including Dillard (2006a), hooks (2003), Shahjahan (2005), and Tisdell (2003), because critical and reflective consciousness makes people become more aware of who they are and how they and their lives are related and connected with others (people, nature, society, the world, etc.). Jaemin, Woohee, and Yuna were observant and reflective about what was going on inside and outside of them in relation with others. Their stories demonstrated that they not only recognized how they understood themselves but also how others understood them. For example, Jaemin’s narrative highlighted her consciousness and resistance of teachers’ perceptions of her at a surface level (such as her classroom attendance). She also addressed her own perception of herself as a “typical 16-year-old girl” who also had inner struggles, felt vulnerable and anxious about her life, and needed support and love. Woohee directly mentioned that observing and understanding herself from multiple perspectives within different relationships with others was one of the self-discoveries that she made during her life at Miso. Yuna also showed multiple identifications of herself in different contexts by referring to herself with various identities, such as someone who dreamed of being a teacher, a marginalized student, a Korean adolescent, and an alternative school student. Based on their reflective consciousness, these students articulated how their particular lived experiences had influenced them, why they were who they were, why they thought what they thought, and why they felt what they felt. Through their participation in this study, Jaemin, Woohee, and Yuna used
autobiographical and self-reflective dialogues and writings as tools to remember, revisit, express, and embrace themselves and their lives.

Students’ lived experiences at Miso, in its capacity as an alternative school, encouraged them to live within a different culture from those of the dominant society or mainstream school. This led the students to see their lives at Miso critically through constant comparisons and contrasts, although it also made them and their lives complicated, ambiguous, and contradictory. Choi (2013) also found this aspect in her study on students’ learning about worldviews in Korean alternative schools. Choi (2013) stated that alternative school students in her study had “advanced meta-knowledge, the conscious awareness of one’s position internally and externally” (p. 250), and she made connections to the opportunities of self-directed learning experiences and decision-making, conflict-resolving discussions that alternative education offers. Also, alternative schools try to introduce students to different values and worldviews from those of mainstream society and create a different culture with different living principles. This greatly helps students to see their lives from (at least) two different viewpoints, which leads them to understand their larger societies more critically.

It is important to note that the three girls’ personal growth, including their critical self-awareness and deeper understanding of themselves, originated from their emotionally challenging experiences in their lives at Miso. The emotionally challenging situations and experiences led them to contemplate themselves, their realities, and their lived experiences in order to make and search for meanings. Researchers of spirituality
have often highlighted a positive influence of experiencing emotional pain (e.g., Chater, 1998; Rockenbach, Walker, & Luzader, 2012). For example, Chater (1998) argued that “emotional pain can be a powerful key to the understanding of self” (p. 147). Jaemin, Woohee, and Yuna also recognized this. Their experience of emotional struggles and painful experiences in life deepened their learning and understanding of who they are. Such experiences became foundational sources of spirituality through which they became more connected, centered, and whole.

Jaemin, who described her previous life as a “fun time with no problems,” explained that as she dealt with many challenging issues at Miso (such as a teacher’s judgment and misperception of her), she became more mature and resilient, and gained deeper understanding about herself. As she went through many challenges at Miso, she learned that she could enjoy her life and cherish her lived experiences, even if she encountered a hardship. With her growing resilience and maturity to handle challenges, her trust about herself and her life was also nurtured. In addition, Woohee’s emotionally difficult situations with her teacher and mother led her to deeply reflect on her life and ponder important spiritual questions, such as the purpose of her life and the fundamental meaning of herself.

It is also critical to note that what really led the three girls to grow a deeper sense of and connections with themselves, their lives, and others was their active reflection through both solitude and dialogues, rather than the presence of painful experience itself. This was made possible through their active engagement in reflecting on their
experiences. Tan (2009) considered reflection as an important vehicle with which to lead adolescents to be more aware of themselves and grow their sense of connections with themselves and others. The three girls’ lived experiences were critical sources for their conscious work of spirituality.

Healing was also an important process in the path of personal and spiritual growth. For Yuna, connecting and reconnecting with herself through the act of remembering her past was particularly important for her healing and affirmation of who she truly was. Although her journey of healing continued throughout her years at Miso, it was especially critical in the beginning of her life at Miso in order for her to live her current life at Miso more fully and connectively. Yuna’s intention and act of reconnecting with and remembering her past in her memories resonates with Dillard’s (2012) arguments on the power of remembering/re-membering memories. As Dillard (2012) explained,

our sense of who we are, our identity, our very selves and spirits are seen, understood, recognized, and grounded in our past: They make sense to us based on something that has happened (in memory) versus simply as a present moment or a future not yet come. (p. 7)

From the spiritual viewpoint, remembering/re-membering is “an act of piece-gathering, of collecting and assembling fragments of a larger whole, of creating and innovating identity” (Dillard, 2012, p. 4) and “a way toward healing” (Dillard, 2012, p. 11).
This viewpoint about the relation between remembering and healing was also evident in Yuna’s story. Yuna, who was a playful and active child at her elementary school, was emotionally wounded during her homeschooled years (before Miso) due to her game addiction and depression based on a lack of social connections and support. Such emotionally wounding experiences changed her images of herself and her life, and she suffered because of those images. For instance, she considered her life “a blank” and viewed herself as being “deficient, unlovable, and not good enough.” Such images were problematic in her daily life because they made Yuna withdraw and isolate herself from connections with peers in the school due to her fear of being rejected and wounded even more deeply. Yuna concluded that she urgently needed to heal from her past wounds and affirm who she truly was and who she wanted to become. She intentionally worked on her healing process through Miso’s curricular activities and her weekly dialogic meetings with me. Through her healing process, Yuna became able to understand herself and her life with compassion and empathy. That is, she not only reconnect with her past self, a playful and active child, but she also more compassionately viewed her past self as an out-of-school adolescent with emotional wounds. She could then acknowledge that what had happened to her during her out-of-school years was extremely difficult for a young child or adolescent (aged 12 to 14) to handle. Also, she could validate her struggles and efforts (such as seeking and receiving support at a local learning center) in order to get through those difficult times. Yuna learned to recognize her emotional pain as a part of who she was, while she could stop letting her wounded past negatively impact her current
life. It was powerful for me to witness Yuna’s inner strength and wisdom through her acts of remembering and (re)connecting. She intentionally remembered who she was in the past and actively identified an extroverted part of herself as her true self that she wanted to reconnect with and reconcile. She made deliberate efforts to unlearn who she had been, with her unhealed wounds, by uncovering her wounds through inner dialogues and in-depth dialogues with others, including me. In her life at Miso, Yuna’s healing process enabled her to have a more positive and authentic image of herself. She overcame her fear of being rejected and made closer connections to her peers. Soon, she found a group of close friends she felt were trustworthy and reliable.

Jaemin and Woohee’s stories demonstrated that deep connection to the inner self through reflective solitude was important for personal and spiritual growth at Miso. In her 11th-grade year, Jaemin decided to decrease her daily workload; she reserved ample time entirely for herself by using her self-learning project to be alone, and without any obligations, in order to learn more about herself, including what she truly liked and wanted. Woohee made her deep and powerful connection to her inner self during a very playful moment with local children and her solitary moments on a trip to Nepal, an extended learning program that was part of Miso’s alternative education curriculum. She immediately thought, “This is what people talk about: the moment of encountering one’s inner self,” and pondered what she felt and learned from the connection with her inner self. After the Nepal trip, she followed up with developing an early morning routine for
solitary reflection and meditation during school days with a hope to extend and enrich her connection to her inner self.

Jaemin’s and Woohee’s experiences with connecting to the inner self and solitude are similar to what Kessler (2000) stated about silence and stillness for adolescents’ spirituality. Kessler (2000) believed that it is important to provide students with an opportunity for silence and stillness, not only because silence can be a way of growing a core identity, connecting to the self, and finding meaning and purpose, but also because silence itself can nourish the spirit with rest and renewal. In addition, Kessler (2000) explained that strong connections with their inner and autonomous selves enable students to build meaningful connections and relationships with others, and that there is a paradoxical interrelationship between being an autonomous individual and connecting to others with belonging and intimacy. Woohee described her personal benefits of having solitude and self-reflection. Woohee not only felt more alert and refreshed, but she also became more open and willing to connect with others. She learned that only when she was well connected with herself could she relate to others more deeply and comfortably. Jaemin’s experience of solitude and reflection went further. As she was taking time just for herself and more frequently and deeply connecting with herself, Jaemin not only learned more about herself (what was going on her heart, mind, and life) but also felt a growing sense of love for herself.

Although Jaemin, Woohee, and Yuna uniquely and differently experienced their paths of personal growth, they commonly grew trust, empathy, love, and compassion
about themselves by building deeper connections with themselves and gaining better understanding about their individually lived, unique experiences. Yuna increased self-trust, empathy, compassion and love by actively remembering and reconnecting to her past self as a part of her process for healing at Miso, while Jaemin and Woohee increased theirs by frequently engaging in solitude to make deeper connections to themselves. They experienced growth of trust, empathy, love, and compassion about themselves and their lives.

The three girls’ growing inner desire and commitment to make a positive impact on others’ lives and their larger society was also important in their stories of personal and spiritual growth. Making a positive impact on others or on society was especially notable in Jaemin and Yuna’s stories. Yuna compassionately and critically remembered and reflected on her life, especially during her out-of-school years, and healed from her emotional wounds. She also remembered teachers she had met and from whom she had received loving support during those years. She not only developed a sense of love, compassion, and empathy for herself through her healing process, but she also created and found the meaning of her life. She extended her love, compassion, and empathy to adolescents who had chosen to deschool themselves and often suffer from a lack of social and relational support. She developed a sense of commitment to becoming a teacher to both academically and emotionally support at-risk or deschooled adolescents. She hoped to contribute to enriching their lives by affirming their worthiness and their true selves.
Jaemin’s commitment to becoming a teacher was built from a socially critical context in Korea and her personal and spiritual connections to that context. De Souza (2003) explained that some critical moments can lead people toward spiritual growth and people’s connectedness goes beyond their immediate contacts or relational circles and reaches out to a larger society or world. This is what Jaemin experienced in regard to the Sewol ferry disaster. The Sewol ferry disaster was a critical moment in Jaemin’s story of her personal growth. Although she never met them, she strongly sensed a deep connection with the people who were killed by that disaster, especially the high school students who were the same age as she was. Jaemin believed that the Sewol ferry disaster represented Korean society’s injustice and many innocent young people were sacrificed. As a becoming-adult, she felt a spiritual commitment to contribute to making a better society and world for social justice. She wanted to respond to such commitment by becoming a teacher.

**Research Question 3: How Do Teachers Spiritually Understand Themselves and Their Lives?**

In Chapter 4, I presented Mr. Jang and Mr. Park’s stories of spirituality at Miso High School in order to answer the third research question. These two teachers were widely recognized, by both students and colleagues, as teachers who greatly contributed to students’ understanding about themselves and their lives through their teaching and relationships with students. After they moved to Miso, where there were new educational, philosophical, and cultural influences, Mr. Jang and Mr. Park made
deliberate efforts of their own. As a result, both teachers experienced transformative changes at various levels (including spiritual and epistemological levels) in their understanding of teaching, learning, schooling, and education. In order to trace their spiritual journey with such changes and efforts at Miso, I presented their stories through four plot groupings: (a) previous teaching experience, (b) initial experiences at Miso, (c) educational perspectives, and (d) personal changes or discoveries. By doing so, I provided illustrations of the two teachers’ experiences as they learned, made realizations, and changed throughout their years at Miso.

Critical self-awareness through reflection about their teaching was important for both Mr. Jang and Mr. Park in their journeys at Miso. Since they moved to Miso, these teachers experienced challenges in their ways of understanding and approaching education, teaching, and learning that had been naturalized throughout their years of teaching at mainstream public schools. They became more critically reflective and conscious about who they were at previous schools. Their journeys began with their painful realizations about and honest acceptances of themselves as public school teachers and their teaching. Previously, they had had sharp criticisms about the public educational system, culture, aims, and curriculum, but they had seen it from a distanced and objectified view. However, at Miso these teachers realized their own paradox: that they were also parts of such a system and culture. They admitted honestly that they and their teaching also were not free from the influences of the Korean public schools’ hierarchical
system and competitive culture, in which educational directions and curricular cycles focused on standardized tests and college entrance exam preparation.

Reflecting on his past years at other schools, Mr. Park found he had enjoyed gaining power and higher positions by functioning well in the bureaucratic system. Also, within his relationships with his students, he had had a fear of being looked down on or ignored. Although he had not sought to obtain power or authority over students with an authoritarian attitude, he had not actively rejected a naturally given authority as a public school teacher. Instead, he had felt safe behind the given authority. In Mr. Jang’s case, his major distress about working in the mainstream public schools had been the teachers’ role of constantly controlling and censoring students, and having to follow mandated curriculum cycles for standardized tests and college preparation. After he moved to Miso, Mr. Jang found himself not knowing why, how, or what to teach since producing better scores on standardized tests for college entrance was no longer a top priority. Also, he had no experience of teaching beyond what he was obligated to teach for test preparation.

Palmer (1983) claimed that teachers’ inward reflection is critical in order to solve the problems of school systems or institutions because the systems and “institutions are projections of what goes on in the human heart” (p. 107). The change or transformation of educational systems and institutions must begin and be grounded in teachers’ hearts with the spiritual transformations of the teachers and their teaching. Furthermore, as these two teachers’ stories demonstrated, self-reflection and critical consciousness are
necessary for teachers to reach the deepest levels of personal meaning in their teaching work (Palmer, 1998). As Palmer (1998) claimed, self-reflection and critical consciousness are even more important if teachers want to be nurturing students’ inner lives and embracing a spiritual dimension of learning. In previous studies, other scholars have also recognized the importance of teachers’ in-depth understanding and critical awareness about themselves. Sunley (2009) pointed out that teachers need to have in-depth understanding of themselves and consciousness of a spiritual dimension in their lives, including their personal and classroom lives, in order to help students with spiritual growth and understanding. Teachers’ self-reflection and critical consciousness about themselves and their work as teachers are critical in nurturing their own spirituality, which enables teachers to be more genuinely present in their teaching, with self-authority and wisdom, and more deeply relate with their students (Sunley, 2009).

Both teachers’ journeys also showed that asking questions about what it means to be an educator and a teacher was also important to understanding their teaching and themselves as teachers. Their questions were both results and evidence of their spiritual growth and changes, along with critical self-awareness as an important vehicle for their further spiritual changes and growth. Palmer (1998) believed that spirituality encourages teachers to go beyond asking technical, rational, or content-focused questions when they think about teaching and learning. As shown in Mr. Jang and Mr. Park’s stories, teachers ask a more fundamental and inner level of questions by seeking the recovery and discovery of their inner resources (Palmer, 1998). By becoming critically aware of who
they were as teachers in their previous schools, these two teachers began their journeys of change. As they felt an urgent need for making changes and had commitment to change at Miso, they began to ponder questions about the essence of education, schooling, teaching, and learning, and they explored deeper meanings of their teaching beyond getting students ready for standardized tests.

These two teachers’ stories of spirituality demonstrated some important qualities that the two teachers commonly gained from their transformative changes. First, as they experienced changes of perception of themselves as teachers and their teaching, they developed a sense of self-worthiness with faith. Second, they grew humility by witnessing students’ and teachers’ remarkable changes at Miso. Third, they developed their capacity to live with paradox and uncertainty as they viewed themselves as learner-teachers pondering fundamental questions about education. Fourth, they became happier with and more satisfied about the work they were doing as teachers.

These two teachers’ changes at the level of self-perception were powerful in their stories, which shows their increased sense of trust and worthiness about their teaching and themselves as teachers. The stories of Mr. Park and Mr. Jang also powerfully showed how recognizing their work was meaningful both for themselves and their students. Reflecting on their previous teaching in other mainstream public high schools, the two teachers described their previous teaching experiences as those of avoiding (in Mr. Jang’s case) and functioning (in Mr. Park’s case), which indicates their passivity in relating themselves with their work. However, at Miso, they became determined to
become the teachers they really wanted to be and teach the ways they wanted to teach based on what they really believed education should be for students. Their perceptions about themselves and their work also changed. They became more active and had a sense of agency about their teaching lives. As he explored fundamental and essential questions on his own, Mr. Park’s perception about himself as a teacher also changed and expanded: He began to perceive himself as a learner and researcher continuously searching for new knowledge and the profound meaning of education, schooling, teaching, and learning. In addition, Mr. Jang began to understand teaching as a sacred work and found a sense of vocation and calling in his profession as a teacher. By being more sensitive to spiritual meaning and presence in teaching and learning, Mr. Jang found his personal and profound meaning of education and teaching, which could not be reduced to exam preparation or rote memorization. These teachers’ changes to their understanding of teaching and being teachers echoes that of the teachers’ faith in Palmer’s terms (1983). Palmer (1983) described faith as an important spiritual virtue that teachers can develop when they cultivate the spiritual aspect of their lives and teaching. According to Palmer (1983), teachers’ faith empowers and enables them to listen to their inner wisdom and guidance, and speak and act based on what they truly believe in their hearts.

Humility also commonly appears in both teachers’ stories of their spiritual journeys. Their stories show what a teacher’s humility does for deeper understanding of others, including students and colleagues. Both teachers talked about the humbling experience of witnessing students make a transformative change after going through
many struggles with loving support from others, including teachers and friends. Mr. Jang pointed out that such transformative changes also happened to colleagues, which made him realize his arrogance in judging based on the surface without knowing the inner potential of someone. Both teachers valued the power of storytelling and listening to each other’s stories at Miso in terms of cultivating humility, respect, love, and compassion. Having rich opportunities to share and listen to other people’s life stories enables teachers (as well as students) to confront their own ignorance, prejudices, or preconceptions, and have better and deeper understanding about who individual students are and how their lives have led them to become who they are. Because of such understanding and knowledge about students, teachers’ capacity to understand and accept others as they are could be grown. They could humbly and attentively listen to their students’ feelings, thoughts, and opinions. They could also be more patient and compassionate in relating with and teaching their students in their everyday lives. Palmer (1983) also considered humility as a spiritual virtue that enables teachers to be sensitive and responsive to students’ needs and to welcome students’ voices and powers besides their own in their classrooms. Palmer (1983) believed that humility and faith together in balance can create good tension to help teachers know “when to listen and when to speak, when to accept and when to resist, when to yield to the tuggings of the communal bond and when to tug back” (p. 110).

According to Palmer (1983), not only humility and faith but also the capacity to live with paradox and uncertainty are considered important qualities that teachers can
develop and gain when cultivating spirituality. Mr. Park’s story especially addresses the increased capacity to live with paradox and uncertainty. As Mr. Park became a learner-teacher and pondered fundamental questions about education and schooling beyond teaching strategies, he found himself enjoying living with uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. As his capacity to live with uncertainty, paradox, and complexity grew, Mr. Park was able to find the beauty and meaning of living with them. It gave him more happiness and joy in his everyday school life. In his everyday teaching life at Miso, he was constantly challenged by students and explored the questions that students raised as important learning topics, which guided him to go deeper into his learning.

These two teachers’ stories also revealed that both found a growing inner happiness and satisfaction in their teaching and lives at Miso. Central sources of their happiness and satisfaction included their deeper understanding of and connections with students, increased autonomy in teaching, and increased integrity in their lives. Miller (1996) claimed that when teachers are spiritually sensitive, teachers’ everyday teaching with students becomes more pleasurable through the teachers’ responsiveness to, sensitivity about, and caring for students’ feelings, needs, and interests. In addition, teachers feel happier in their lives. Once he opened his heart more to students by being his true self in relationships with them, Mr. Park no longer felt a fear of being looked down on by his students. Instead, he could receive mutual respect from his students. As he better understood individual students and their lives, he was able to make even deeper connections with his students based on empathy, compassion, and love in his heart for his
students. Mr. Jang also found more happiness in his life as a teacher, especially through an increased autonomy in teaching. From cultural support at Miso for teachers’ autonomy in their teaching, he could rethink and reconstruct his teaching in ways that not only brought out who he is but also welcomed students to be who they are. Such teaching enabled him to connect deeply with students at the heart level and gave him great joy in his everyday life at the school.

These two teachers’ increased integrity also helped them feel more happiness and satisfaction about their lives and being teachers. Teachers’ integrity has been considered an important quality of teachers in spirituality in education. As Palmer (1998) stated, spirituality in education helps teachers to deeply connect with their hearts, reconcile with their divided and conflicted selves, and holistically live their lives with integrity. Both these teachers previously experienced conflicts and gaps between what they believed in their hearts and minds and what they actually did in their practice. Alternatively, to some extent, they were even unclear or forgot about what they really believed about education and what kind of teachers they wanted to become. As they explored their lives, work, and themselves critically and deeply, as well as the essence of education, they were able to make necessary changes and shifts. So, their inner conflicts also decreased while they strengthened their inner foundations of teaching and being teachers. They channeled their energies, which had been drained by distress or frustration due to inner conflicts, now more meaningfully for their work, growth, and change. They could find and continuously seek integrity in themselves and their lives. All of these experiences
contributed to these teachers’ inner satisfaction about their work, their lives, and themselves.

Both Mr. Jang and Mr. Park acknowledged and appreciated that this school’s educational climate and culture, as those of an alternative school, had a positive and significant impact on them to rethink education, schooling, teaching, and learning. The two teachers’ transformative changes would not have been made in the mainstream public school settings, with the latter’s emphasis on standardization, efficiency, and measurement both for teachers and students. This is echoed by Sunley’s (2009) criticism that when an educational climate puts emphasis on effectiveness and efficiency, education becomes “a statistical exercise” (p. 794). This is problematic because it makes it difficult for teachers to have self-worth, critical insight, and self-authority about their teaching, and to bring their personal qualities from within with a vision. Mr. Jang and Mr. Park’s stories about their previous teaching experiences indicate that it is not just students but also teachers who struggle and suffer from disconnection from themselves (their passions, visions, etc.) as well as from emotional distress, oppression, and powerlessness when the school overemphasizes standardized academic performances.

In contrast, Miso High School not only aimed to educate students as lifelong learners but also hoped for teachers to become lifelong learners constantly looking for a better way to serve students. In addition, Miso students’ strong resistance to the dominant schooling culture in South Korea and their different expectations about their learning experiences provided an urgent need for Mr. Jang and Mr. Park to rethink
education, teaching, and learning. Because of this school’s strong political position against educating students for college entrance exam preparation and its students’ resistance to traditional and teacher-led classroom learning, these two teachers were able to feel free from the pressure of teaching for effectively producing students’ good test scores. This was especially significant for Mr. Jang. He finally had an opportunity to transform his teaching (including content, format, style, etc.) more appropriately for his students and with greater autonomy based on his educational beliefs and values that were well connected with this school’s educational direction and aims.

It is evident that both teachers’ changes had a positive impact on their students’ lives. Their students acknowledged, valued, and appreciated both teachers’ ways of treating their teaching and students’ learning with commitment, passion, compassion, and love. Students considered Mr. Jang’s classroom learning as their critical and special learning experiences at Miso. The students’ perception of learning became broader and deeper as they felt a genuine joy through deep engagement in their learning and gained in-depth understanding of themselves and others through classroom learning. The three focal student participants in this study who dreamed of becoming teachers identified Mr. Jang as their role model for their future. Also, students recognized Mr. Park’s accessibility and availability. Students appreciated the fact that they had an adult or teacher like Mr. Park who would listen to them with emphatic and compassionate understanding. Students also recognized his attitude toward his teaching subject and his continuous efforts to improve his teaching with passion, sincerity, and creativity. Sunley
(2009) stated that “teachers who are still learning about themselves, asking questions about life, seeking meaning in their relationships, not only with others, but also the relationship between different aspects of their whole lives, can provide role models for young people” (p. 798). In addition, Hansen (1995) stated that students have a sense and knowledge of whether their teachers are spiritually present as whole people with commitment to their teaching or not. Teachers’ commitment positively affects students’ learning no matter what grade or subject they teach (Hansen, 1995).

**Limitations of the Study**

There are limitations to be addressed when considering the results of this narrative case study. This study focused on just three students and two teachers with a particular set of characteristics. These participants’ data were collected from one school located in the southern area of South Korea. This school had a special emphasis on alternative educational values (such as self-understanding, close and democratic relationships, experience-focused learning, collaborative learning, etc.) with an exceptional allowance of curriculum flexibility (43%) from the provincial educational office, although this school was under the public school system. The variability of both student and teacher participants was not considered in the current study. Rather, I selected them by specific criteria: For example, I selected the two teacher participants because of their voluntary choices to become teachers at this school, their in-depth understanding about this school and students’ lives, and the congruency between how they perceived themselves and their teaching and how they and their teaching were perceived by others (such as their students
and colleagues). It is possible that other teachers who only had a few years of teaching experience, or who were transferred to this school by the provincial office requirement, might share different stories than these two teachers. Similarly, I selected the three student participants because of their voluntary choices to become students of this school, their strong values in specific relation to their desire for self-understanding and willingness to gain understanding about themselves and their lives, and their specific interest area of education as people who dreamed of being teachers. It is possible that other students with different backgrounds and interests might tell different stories about their experiences in this school.

**Implications for Educational Practice and Future Study**

The current study provides insight into how schools can contribute to cultivating spirituality. In this study, I found multiple aspects of students’ experiences that encouraged their increased connections with and understanding of themselves and others. Also, in the current study, I investigated how students become spiritually connected to themselves and others through experiences of learning from schooling, and how teachers can experience remarkable changes by having better spiritual understanding about themselves and their work.

While findings from the current study offer some knowledge about how schools can be places to nurture spirituality for teachers and adolescent students, there are many questions that remain to be answered by future research. Longitudinal studies across different periods of lives can be further investigated: how Miso graduates live their lives
and understand who they are, how students who proceed to preservice teacher programs further experience and understand themselves in their journeys of becoming teachers, and how teachers experience and understand who they are in the mainstream public schools after leaving Miso. These longitudinal studies will demonstrate the influences of these individuals’ developed and deepened understanding about themselves and their lives. Studies about teachers’ further experiences and students’ journeys of becoming teachers will especially be valuable to study for teacher education. In terms of teacher education, studies can also be conducted on the ways in which teacher educators can provide professional support to deepen other teachers’ spiritual understanding as they help preservice teachers and in-service teachers. Furthermore, there might be a need to study further how educational policy makers and school administrators can make traditional and mainstream educational settings become places where both students and teachers’ spiritual connections and understanding are better supported.
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