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The Impact of Critical Social Incidents on Teachers' Curriculum Implementation: Korean Elementary Teachers' Struggles for Student Learning

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Research Article

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Abstract

This study explores how recent social incidents publicly debated in South Korea have influenced elementary teachers' curriculum implementation. Korean teachers have long been practical agents of educational change, but incidents involving violations of educational activities, student safety, school responsibility, and classroom risks have led them to reconsider teaching in relation to risk. Based on a qualitative case study of ten elementary teachers, this study examined how curriculum implementation changed after such incidents and what conditions are needed to sustain meaningful education. The findings show a shift toward defensible curriculum implementation: teachers reduced unpredictable activities, weakened educational interventions, strengthened procedures and documentation, reconstructed difficult knowledge in safer ways, and reduced curriculum sharing with parents. These changes reflected teachers' reinterpretation of relational, emotional, situational, and experiential elements of teaching as potential risks. The study argues for a shift from Teaching-for-Learning to Teaching-as-Learning and for shared responsibility for teachers' educational judgment.

1. Introduction

In South Korea, teachers have been important actors in improving school education. From the New Education Movement after liberation, to the Open Education Movement in the 1990s, and to the Innovation School Movement after the 2000s, important movements for improving school education emerged in the process through which teachers attempted and expanded meaningful educational practices.[1] In this sense, Korean teachers can be understood as practical agents who improve school education in school settings, and as actors who lead students' learning and growth, as well as the future of the community. However, several recent social incidents in South Korean society related to teachers' educational activities, student safety, school responsibility, and relationships within classrooms are shaking the very meaning and role of teachers' existence.

Teachers' improvement of school education is concretized in the process through which teachers implement the curriculum in classrooms. In that curriculum implementation is a process in which subject matter, students, teachers, and environment interact and become intertwined (Schwab, 1973), teachers' curriculum implementation, that is, teaching, is a practical process in which teachers judge at every moment what to teach, how to interact, and which activities to select and adjust (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Ball et al., 2011). The environment referred to here is not limited only to conditions within the school, such as the physical conditions of classrooms or school organization. Elements outside the school, such as parents' expectations, the structure of school responsibility, legal and institutional demands, and the social atmosphere, are also environments that influence teachers' teaching (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2026; Kelchtermans, 2009). In this respect, social incidents do not remain as an external background to curriculum implementation, but constitute an environment that shapes teachers' judgment and adjustment.

Such changes in the environment have been concretely revealed through several recent social incidents that occurred in South Korean schools. In the history of Korean education, a representative incident that triggered social discussion around the protection of teachers' educational activities was the death of a teacher at Seoi Elementary School in 2023. This incident brought issues of teachers' student guidance, parental complaints, and protection of educational activities to the surface as national issues, and as a result left teachers with a strong awareness that their educational activities were situated in conditions in which they were not sufficiently protected. The death of an elementary school student during a field trip in Sokcho, Gangwon Province, in 2022, and the subsequent guilty judgment against the homeroom teacher, showed that out-of-school educational activities could be transformed into issues of individual legal responsibility for teachers when an accident occurs. In addition, the incident in which a teacher who was guiding a student's use of a mobile phone during class at a high school in Yangcheon-gu, Seoul, in 2025 was assaulted by the student formed the perception that applying rules and providing student guidance during class could lead to physical threats. Although these incidents occurred in different contexts, they commonly left teachers with the message that teaching could become the object of complaints, reports, legal responsibility, physical risk, and social criticism.

After these incidents, changes in actual school settings have also become noticeable. A representative example is the change in the number of schools operating field trips as out-of-school educational activities. According to data from the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education, as of 2026, only 407 out of 1,331 elementary, middle, and high schools in Seoul, or 31%, had operated or were planning to operate one-day field trips. This is a sharp decrease compared with 86%, or 1,150 schools, in 2023. In particular, the implementation rate of field trips in Seoul elementary schools sharply decreased from 99% in 2023 to 26% in 2026. This change is important evidence that social incidents are influencing teachers' curriculum implementation, that is, their teaching.

Curriculum implementation research has shown that teachers are subjects who make curriculum through their beliefs, experiences, knowledge, and school contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Priestley et al., 2021). Teacher agency research has also shown that teachers' practice emerges in an ecological process in which past experiences, present conditions, and future orientations are intertwined (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley et al., 2026). These studies have provided an important foundation for understanding teachers' curriculum implementation as a practice that is interpreted and adjusted under certain conditions.

On the basis of this foundation, it is necessary to examine the influence of socially publicized incidents on teachers' curriculum implementation. Empirically, it has been known that social incidents have a great influence on teachers' judgment and practice, but these incidents have tended to be dealt with mainly as administrative issues such as legal responsibility, administrative responses, and safety management. However, if incidents and education are viewed separately, it becomes difficult to fully understand how incidents change teachers' actual teaching and how those changes are connected to the quality of education experienced by students. Social incidents are problems that need to be resolved legally and

administratively, and at the same time they are also educational problems that influence teachers' teaching of students.

In particular, teachers are people who directly enact education. What teachers do is to help students learn ways of learning and living together, and to create conditions in which the next generation can grow as members of the community (Hargreaves, 1998; Kelchtermans,

2009). Therefore, exploring what social incidents teachers experience, how they change their teaching after such incidents, and what they come to perceive as risky practices is important in that it is a way of finding what conditions our community needs to establish so that teachers can continue meaningful education.

For this purpose, this study addressed the following three questions.

RQ1: How did elementary teachers' curriculum implementation change after social incidents?

RQ2: Why did these changes occur?

RQ3: What conditions are needed for teachers to sustain meaningful education?

To answer these questions, this study viewed major school incidents recently publicized in South Korean society as social incidents that change the conditions of teachers' curriculum implementation, and explored how elementary teachers' teaching changed after these incidents. Specifically, this study first examined major social incidents that occurred in South Korean schools in three categories: violations of teachers' educational activities, student safety and school responsibility, and physical risks in classrooms, and discussed what kinds of risks these incidents were transformed into in teachers' curriculum implementation. Next, through the experiences of elementary teachers, this study analyzed how curriculum implementation was adjusted, reduced, replaced, and supplemented after social incidents. Finally, as a condition for sustaining teachers' meaningful education, this study discussed a shift from Teaching-for-Learning to Teaching-as-Learning.

2. Korean Educational Incidents and the Changing Conditions of Curriculum Implementation

2.1. Critical social incidents in South Korean schools

Recent social incidents that occurred in South Korea arose in different contexts, but they commonly left teachers with one important message. It was that teachers' everyday educational activities and teaching were difficult to understand as professional acts performed in classrooms. The social incidents that occurred in South Korea were categorized into three broad types.

Table 1
Critical Social Incidents in South Korean Schools and Risk Perceptions Among Teachers

Incident category	Representative incident	Main content of the incident	Risk perception formed among teachers
Incidents involving the infringement of teachers' educational activities	Death of a teacher at Seoi Elementary School	This was an incident in which a teacher died at an elementary school in Seocho-gu, Seoul, in July 2023. Afterward, issues such as infringement of teachers' rights, parental complaints, and the absence of teacher protection emerged as national issues. Although the police closed the investigation, stating that they had found no criminal charges involving parents, this incident was publicized as an incident symbolizing teachers' vulnerability.	The perception that teachers' student guidance, communication with parents, intervention in student conflicts, and feedback could become the object of complaints or criticism
	Incidents involving the infringement of teachers' educational activities	Child abuse complaint against a special education teacher	This was an incident in which a special education teacher was tried on charges of child abuse for speech and guidance methods used during class in September 2022. Although there was a guilty judgment in the first trial, the teacher was acquitted in the appellate trial in 2025 on the grounds that the secretly recorded classroom audio could not be admitted as evidence, among other reasons.
Incidents concerning student safety, school responsibility, and crisis response	Death of an elementary school student in a traffic accident during a field trip in Sokcho	This was an incident in which an elementary school student was hit by a bus and died during a field trip in Sokcho, Gangwon Province, in November 2022. Afterward, the duty of care and criminal responsibility of the supervising teacher became issues, and a guilty judgment against the homeroom teacher followed.	The perception that educationally meaningful field trips and external activities could lead to individual legal and criminal responsibility for teachers when an accident occurs
Incidents involving	Assault of a high school teacher in	This was an incident in which a teacher who was guiding a student's use of a	The perception that teachers could be exposed to physical threats in the

Incident category	Representative incident	Main content of the incident	Risk perception formed among teachers
teachers' physical risk	Yangcheon-gu, Seoul	mobile phone during class at a high school in Yangcheon-gu, Seoul, in April 2025 was assaulted by the student.	process of applying rules, disciplining students, and providing student guidance during class

2.1.1. Incidents involving the infringement of teachers' educational activities

Incidents involving the infringement of teachers' educational activities formed the perception that teachers' educational judgments might not be sufficiently protected. The death of a teacher at Seoi Elementary School in 2023 became a symbolic incident through which teachers interpreted student guidance, communication with parents, conflict mediation, and feedback as practices that could be criticized or problematized. The child abuse complaint against a special education teacher also strengthened the perception that teachers' words and guidance could be separated from classroom context, recorded, and later reconstructed as objects of legal and moral judgment. These incidents made teachers more cautious about providing the guidance and support students needed, especially in areas where educational judgment depends heavily on context and relationships.

Incidents concerning student safety and school responsibility formed the perception that out-of-school educational activities could not be justified by their educational meaning alone. The death of an elementary school student during a field trip in Sokcho, Gangwon Province, showed teachers that field trips and external activities could become matters of individual legal responsibility when an accident occurred. As a result, teachers came to consider not only what students could learn from such activities, but also whether procedures, documents, safety measures, and responsibility boundaries were sufficiently prepared.

Incidents involving teachers' physical risk formed the perception that ordinary student guidance during class could lead to direct physical threats. The assault of a high school teacher in Yangcheon-gu, Seoul, in 2025 showed that applying rules, stopping student behavior, and disciplining students could expose teachers to physical resistance or violence. This perception weakened teachers' willingness to intervene immediately, even when students' behavior disrupted class or infringed on other students' right to learn. In this sense, classrooms could become superficially calm while moving toward a bystander form of teaching in which teachers hesitate to intervene at necessary moments.

2.2. From critical incidents to risks in curriculum implementation

The social incidents examined above raised questions for teachers about what is safe, what is defensible, and what can be problematized. After these incidents, teachers came to reconsider practices that they had previously regarded as educationally necessary, such as life guidance, conflict mediation,

field trips, and individualized support, in relation to complaints, reports, legal responsibility, physical risk, and social criticism. Social incidents therefore changed the conditions under which teachers selected, adjusted, or avoided particular curriculum activities.

Teacher agency emerges through the interaction of past experiences, present institutional, material, and relational conditions, and orientations toward the future (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2026). From this perspective, teachers' reduction or avoidance of particular activities after social incidents can be understood as a process of reconsidering what practices are possible under changed conditions. However, agency under conditions of risk does not always appear in expansive or creative forms. When school conditions become risk-sensitive, teacher agency may appear as attempts to reduce risk, avoid responsibility, and make defensible choices (Harris, 2021; Holloway & Brass, 2018).

Teachers' teaching is also vulnerable to external evaluation and criticism (Kelchtermans, 2009; Lasky, 2005). This vulnerability is especially significant for Korean elementary teachers, who are responsible not only for subject teaching but also for students' life, relationships, emotions, safety, and communication with parents. After social incidents, these areas of curriculum implementation were reinterpreted as practices that could easily become problematic. Concerns about legal responsibility, litigation, parental opposition, and safety can restrict teachers' judgments about discipline, life guidance, sensitive issues, and out-of-school activities (Holben et al., 2009; Pace, 2021; Lammert, 2023; Jerebine et al., 2022).

Taken together, social incidents led teachers to judge teaching through risk. Activities once regarded as educationally necessary came to be reconsidered in relation to legal responsibility, safety management, physical risk, and social criticism. Curriculum implementation therefore became not only a question of what learning an activity provides, but also whether it can be explained, recorded, and defended if problems arise. In this sense, social incidents became risk conditions that reorganized teachers' curriculum implementation in risk-sensitive ways.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

This study was designed as a qualitative case study to explore how elementary teachers' curriculum implementation changed after social incidents that have recently become publicly debated in South Korean society. Qualitative case study is suitable for understanding a particular phenomenon in depth within its actual context and for analyzing how participants interpret that phenomenon and connect it to practice (Stake, 1995; Tisdell et al., 2025). In this study, the case is the experience through which Korean elementary teachers reinterpreted and adjusted their teaching and curriculum implementation after major school incidents that had been socially publicized.

The reason this study was designed as a qualitative case study is that the influence of social incidents on teachers' curriculum implementation cannot be explained simply as an increase or decrease in particular activities. As teachers experienced incidents, they judged and adjusted classroom activities,

life guidance, field trips, communication with parents, and interactions with students differently from before. These changes may appear on the surface as the reduction of lessons, avoidance of activities, or strengthening of procedures, but within them are intertwined what teachers came to perceive as risky practices, what they tried to continue maintaining, and what alternative practices they constructed for students' learning. Considering these points, this study was designed as a process of understanding changes in teachers' curriculum implementation through teachers' experiences and actual cases.

3.2. Participants

In qualitative case study, participant selection is an important process for specifying the case to be studied. In order to explore how elementary teachers' curriculum implementation changed after social incidents, this study purposively sampled teachers who could specifically explain their teaching and curriculum implementation in relation to changes after social incidents. The specific criteria for participant selection were as follows. First, teachers who were interested in social incidents that had recently become publicly debated in school settings; second, teachers who perceived that their curriculum implementation as teaching had changed after social incidents; and third, teachers who could specifically describe what they came to do differently, what they reduced or stopped doing, and what they adjusted or replaced after social incidents.

In particular, this study first reviewed social incidents that had become publicly debated in Korean schools within the past three years and divided them into three categories: infringement of teachers' educational activities, student safety and school responsibility, and physical risks in classrooms. These incident categories were also used in participant selection. In order not to be biased toward a specific incident or a specific type of risk experience, this study sought to select in a balanced way teachers who had experienced changes related to each category or who could speak specifically about them. Based on these criteria, a total of ten elementary school teachers participated in the study.

Table 2
Characteristics and Contexts of Participating Teachers

Participant	Gender	Teaching experience	Grade/role at the time of interview	Participant context
A	Male	12 years	Grade 4	Class activities and play became more cautious due to concerns about complaints and safety.
B	Female	11 years	Grade 3	Emphasized documentation and clear parent communication to protect teaching.
C	Male	5 years	Grade 6	Replaced out-of-school experiential learning with safer in-school or digital alternatives.
D	Male	13 years	Grade 6	Became cautious about intervention, special education support, and physical activities.
E	Female	8 years	Grade 1	Experienced tension between student-centered curriculum-making and complaint-avoidant school culture.
F	Male	12 years	Grade 5	Became cautious about teaching politically and socially sensitive knowledge.
G	Male	18 years	Grade 6	Strengthened safety procedures, consent, and documentation in PE and field activities
H	Female	8 years	Grade 5	Reduced explanatory sharing with parents while using photos as protective evidence.
I	Female	15 years	Grade 1	Became cautious about lower-grade classroom management and parent communication.
J	Male	18 years	Grade 2	Recorded classroom teaching to defend curriculum content against possible complaints.

3.3. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and the collection of teaching materials and school contextual materials. The main data consisted of individual interviews with ten elementary school teachers. The interviews were designed to allow participants to explain specifically how they perceived social incidents and what they had come to do differently in their teaching and curriculum implementation after those incidents. The interview questions focused on participants' perceptions of

social incidents, changes in teaching after the incidents, and educational practices through which they nevertheless tried to maintain meaningful teaching.

The interviews were conducted from March to June 2025, and each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and then transcribed. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format in order to present common questions to all participants while adjusting follow-up questions according to the incidents each teacher had experienced and the school context. This study also used an incident-recall interview method. The researcher presented participants with major social incidents that had recently become publicly debated in school settings and asked them to recall, in relation to each incident, what they had come to do differently after the incident, what they had reduced, stopped, or newly begun doing, what practices they had replaced or supplemented, and what they had nevertheless tried to maintain for students' learning. Through this process, the study sought to understand how social incidents were connected to actual changes in curriculum implementation, rather than remaining at the level of teachers' general anxiety or opinions.

To complement the interview data, teaching materials and school contextual materials provided by participants were also reviewed. Teaching materials included lesson plans, worksheets, notices, and field trip-related materials, while school contextual materials included grade-level operation methods, parent communication methods, and school guidance and safety-related notices. These materials were used as supplementary data to confirm teachers' statements or to understand how the changes mentioned in the interviews appeared in actual curriculum implementation.

3.4. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted through repeated readings of interview transcripts, incident-recall records, teaching materials, and school contextual materials. First, statements referring to changes after social incidents were extracted from each participant's interview data. Particular attention was paid to expressions indicating changes in curriculum implementation, such as changed, reduced, no longer did, became cautious, replaced, newly did, or did differently from before. These statements were coded as actual actions or changes.

Table 3
Example of First-Cycle Coding of Teachers' Curriculum Implementation Changes

Code	Transcript excerpt	First-cycle coding: actual action/change	Second-cycle coding: categorisation	Generated / Maintained / Replaced / Deleted	Key contextual factors influencing the change
E-10	"In the past, I used to include outdoor activities or field trips as part of the curriculum when planning lessons. Recently, however, I have tended to exclude many of those active, outdoor elements and think more about what can be done inside the classroom. I think not only I but also my colleagues have been affected by this."	Excluded outdoor activities and field trips from curriculum planning and planned lessons around activities that could be conducted inside the classroom.	Reduction of out-of-school curriculum activities and replacement with classroom-based activities.	Deleted / Replaced	Possibility of safety accidents during field trips; burden of homeroom teacher responsibility in the event of an accident; shared risk perception among colleagues.

Second, the extracted statements were compared and grouped into broader categories of curriculum implementation. While first-cycle coding identified what teachers actually did differently, second-cycle coding interpreted what aspect of curriculum implementation each change represented. Four types of change—generated, maintained, replaced, and deleted—were also recorded to identify the direction of change. More than one type could appear in a single statement; for example, reducing field trips and changing them into classroom activities was coded as both deletion and replacement.

Finally, each change was interpreted in relation to the type of social incident, the risk perceived by teachers, school and grade-level culture, relationships with parents, and colleagues' responses. This process allowed the study to analyze changes in curriculum implementation as judgments constructed under particular risk conditions.

3.5. Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

To enhance trustworthiness, this study used expert review, repeated comparison, and participant checking. The analysis process and results were discussed with an expert in qualitative data analysis to examine whether the codes, categories, types of change, and major contexts were appropriately connected to the research questions. This helped prevent overinterpretation and avoid reducing teachers' changes simply to withdrawal or avoidance.

The change lists for each participant were also repeatedly compared in terms of related incidents, areas of curriculum implementation, and types of change. This comparison helped distinguish patterns that appeared repeatedly across teachers from those shaped by specific contexts. Participant checking was conducted by asking participants to review interview transcripts and selected summaries of major changes. For ethical considerations, all participants provided voluntary consent after being informed of the study purpose, interview procedures, data use, and anonymization principles. All identifiable information was removed during analysis and writing.

4. Findings: Shifting toward Defensible Curriculum Implementation

The analysis shows that after social incidents, elementary teachers reconstructed curriculum implementation in more defensible ways. Five patterns appeared across the data: reducing and replacing curriculum activities, weakening educational intervention, proceduralizing and documenting curriculum implementation, avoiding and reconstructing difficult knowledge, and reducing curriculum sharing. These changes show how teachers adjusted teaching in relation to students' learning, teacher responsibility, parental complaints, safety accidents, and social criticism.

4.1. Closing the World Outside: Reducing and Replacing Curriculum Activities

The first change was the reduction and replacement of curriculum activities. Teachers reduced or stopped field trips, outdoor activities, class events, and physical play that they had previously considered educationally meaningful. These activities had allowed students to encounter the world outside the classroom, learn through bodily experience, and interact with peers and teachers. However, after social incidents, they were reinterpreted as activities that could lead to safety accidents, parental complaints, legal responsibility, and school-level burden.

This change appeared most clearly in out-of-school activities. Teacher C explained that several external experiential activities, including disaster experience, software experience, education office programmes, and a school trip, had been cancelled:

Last year, we did a lot of experiential activities that involved going outside. This year, in fact, everything has stopped. Everything was canceled, and the things we had planned disappeared. I also feel a burden about safety and responsibility, but at the school level, there is also a strong will to unify things in that direction. (Teacher C, interview)

This shows that the reduction of curriculum activities was not only an individual teacher's decision, but also a collective adjustment shaped by school-level concerns about safety and responsibility. Even when activities were educationally meaningful, going outside the school itself became a condition that made implementation difficult.

Where possible, teachers replaced these activities with safer alternatives. For example, Teacher C reconstructed visits to places such as the National Assembly or a presidential memorial hall into classroom activities using tablets, VR, and AR materials. This was an attempt not to give up experiential learning entirely. Yet such replacements could not fully substitute for direct encounters with places, people, and situations. Students' learning opportunities were maintained in a limited form, but the unpredictability and bodily experience of the original activities were reduced.

The reduction of activities also appeared inside the classroom. Teacher A, who had previously enjoyed class events and play, explained that he avoided games with physical contact:

As I experienced various incidents, I came to avoid games with a lot of contact as much as possible. If someone gets hurt or a problem occurs because of this, it will not be good for me or for the school. (Teacher A, interview)

In this case, play was not completely eliminated, but was changed into safer forms with less contact, less competition, and fewer possibilities for injury or complaints. Taken together, "Closing the World Outside" refers to the process through which teachers reduced, replaced, and reorganized curriculum activities within a defensible range.

4.2. Holding Back at the Moment of Teaching: Weakening Educational Intervention

The second change was the weakening of educational intervention. Educational intervention refers to teachers' attempts to interpret students' behaviours, conflicts, difficulties, questions, and emotional responses as moments for learning. After social incidents, teachers became more cautious about intervening in scenes that they had previously understood as life guidance, conflict mediation, individualized support, or emotional care. They came to consider not only what students needed, but also how their intervention could be interpreted by parents, colleagues, schools, or legal authorities.

Teacher D explained that although he still recognized the need for guidance, he increasingly tolerated behaviours he would previously have addressed:

In the past, I had a mind to try to do something for this child without paying attention to the parents, but recently, I think there are cases where I somewhat tolerate behaviors that I think of as deviant. I think I am also implicitly worrying about what would happen if I tried this and it came back as harm to me. (Teacher D, interview)

The important point is not that the teacher no longer understood students' needs. Rather, he judged his intervention in relation to possible parental responses, complaints, or child abuse reports. In this way, educational judgment became intertwined with the risk that the teacher's action might later return as harm.

Similar changes appeared in conflict situations among students. Teacher E explained that when students had conflicts or minor injuries during group activities, she now thought first about informing parents rather than about what students could learn from the situation:

When students have conflicts with friends or get hurt while doing group activities during class, I used to try to resolve it right away and talk about it, but now it is difficult to intervene as I did in the past, and I often think that I should quickly inform the parents rather than what I should teach the students. (Teacher E, interview)

This shows how the educational meaning of conflict was weakened after social incidents. Conflict can be an important moment for learning relationships, reflection, and communal life. However, it was increasingly perceived as an incident to report, record, and manage as a possible risk. “Holding Back at the Moment of Teaching” therefore refers to teachers’ movement away from immediate educational intervention when such intervention could later become risky.

4.3. Teaching with Traces: Proceduralizing and Documenting Curriculum Implementation

The third change was the proceduralization and documentation of curriculum implementation. After social incidents, teachers became more aware that their teaching could later be questioned, and they began to leave traces through records, recordings, notices, consent forms, internal proposals, safety procedures, and grade-level consultations. Curriculum implementation thus became connected to the question of how teaching could be explained and defended afterward.

Teacher J explained that recording lessons had become a way to protect his teaching:

I have to record what I did during class. I did not record it in order to study my teaching, but in order to respond to complaints saying that the teacher taught something strange. Without this kind of thing, I cannot defend what I taught. (Teacher J, interview)

Here, recording was not primarily a tool for reflection or professional learning. It became evidence that could justify what had been taught. Teaching, therefore, had to leave visible traces that could protect the teacher if the lesson was later questioned.

This pattern was particularly clear in field trips and physical activities. Teacher G explained that he now moved students only after completing procedures such as prior plans, notices, and consent:

In the past, even without a written plan in advance, we went near the school and had lessons, but now we come to move only when all the procedures are satisfied, such as having a prior plan, giving notice, and receiving consent. (Teacher G, interview)

Procedures such as plans, principal approval, consent forms, safety guidance, and official documents are necessary for student safety. However, after social incidents, teachers also experienced them as

devices for protecting themselves. The possibility of implementing activities came to depend not only on their educational value, but also on whether the teacher could later prove that the activity had been properly planned and managed.

Proceduralization also appeared in lessons themselves. Teachers structured lessons more explicitly through warm-up, safety instructions, demonstration, activity, and wrap-up, especially in physical education or outdoor learning. Grade-level consultation also increased, as teachers sought to apply the same rules and procedures with colleagues. These practices stabilized curriculum implementation, but they also adjusted individual teachers' educational judgment within collective procedures. "Teaching with Traces" refers to this process through which teachers made curriculum implementation visible, explainable, and defensible.

4.4. Making Difficult Knowledge Safer: Avoiding and Reconstructing Difficult Knowledge

The fourth change concerned the treatment of difficult knowledge. Difficult knowledge refers to knowledge that can become connected to political interpretation, parental complaints, social criticism, legal responsibility, or the gaze of colleagues when it is addressed in classrooms (Pitt & Britzman, 2003). After social incidents, teachers did not simply delete such knowledge. Rather, they reconstructed it through avoidance, reduction, indirect questioning, student-led activities, or more neutral forms of presentation.

This appeared clearly in political and social knowledge. Teacher F described a complaint submitted through the National Sinmungo regarding a Sewol Ferry memorial event organized by the student council:

The student council was holding a Sewol Ferry memorial event, and this time a complaint came through the National Sinmungo. It said, "Absolutely prohibit the Sewol Ferry memorial," and a complaint came in like that, but I wrote a response saying that this was not a political act, but something that students wanted to do. (Teacher F, interview)

In this case, the topic was not completely excluded. Instead, it was made more defensible by being framed as a student-led activity rather than a teacher-led political act. The subject and form of implementation changed so that the school could maintain the educational activity while lowering the possibility of political responsibility.

Teachers also became cautious when addressing issues such as fake news. Teacher F explained that directly correcting students' politically influenced remarks could be interpreted as revealing his own political position. He therefore shifted from direct correction to indirect questioning:

Saying "That is fake news" somehow feels like I am revealing my political position, so I say indirectly to the children, "Everyone, what should we do so that we are not deceived by fake news?" (Teacher F, interview)

This case shows that difficult knowledge was not necessarily avoided, but reconstructed into safer pedagogical forms. The teacher still addressed the issue, but transformed it from a teacher's direct judgment into a question for students' inquiry. "Making Difficult Knowledge Safer" refers to this process through which teachers continued to deal with educationally important knowledge while adjusting its form so that it could be defended afterward.

4.5. Making the Classroom Less Visible": Reducing Curriculum Sharing

The fifth change was the reduction of curriculum sharing. Curriculum sharing refers to practices through which teachers communicate with parents about lessons, class activities, students' participation, and the meaning of curriculum activities. In the past, teachers shared photos, videos, class notices, and explanations to help parents understand students' school life and to build trust. After social incidents, however, such sharing was reinterpreted as a possible source of misunderstanding and complaints.

Teacher E explained that she had previously uploaded photos and videos of student activities every Friday, but stopped doing so after social incidents:

I used to upload photos and videos through Schoolbell every Friday. I thought it was important because student activities were my curriculum activities and also a process of sharing them with parents. But I thought these things could cause small misunderstandings, so I am not sharing photos and videos with parents. (Teacher E, interview)

This shows that the same materials that had once built trust could later become sources of misunderstanding. A student's facial expression, position, or momentary participation in a photo could be interpreted differently from the teacher's intention. As a result, not showing became safer than showing. What was reduced was not merely photo sharing, but a pathway through which parents could understand curriculum implementation.

Teacher E also explained that she felt more comfortable after stopping such sharing:

I thought sharing with parents was important, so I sent photos and videos, but I am not doing it for the time being. But when I stopped doing it, it was comfortable. There were no misunderstandings. I thought that just staying quiet without saying anything might be good for the children, for me, and for the parents. (Teacher E, interview)

Here, "staying quiet" was a defensive choice to reduce possible misunderstanding and complaints. The classroom continued to operate, but its processes became less visible to parents.

Other teachers did not stop sharing entirely, but changed its meaning. Teacher H still uploaded many photos, but reduced detailed explanations:

I upload photos quite often, and in the past I really used to write a lot of detailed explanations, but now I cannot do that anymore. Still, once a month, I upload about 200 photos. In a way, that is also a means of protecting myself, showing that I am doing this much. (Teacher H, interview)

In this case, sharing shifted from rich communication about classroom life to evidence that the teacher was faithfully operating the curriculum. “Making the Classroom Less Visible” therefore does not mean that teachers hid curriculum implementation. Rather, it means that they reconsidered how much, in what way, and in what language they would show their teaching to parents. As curriculum sharing was reduced or adjusted, teachers protected themselves from misunderstanding, but parents had fewer opportunities to understand students’ learning and teachers’ educational intentions.

5. Discussion

5.1. Why do critical social incidents reshape teachers’ curriculum implementation?

From Schwab’s (1973) perspective, curriculum implementation is a process of practical judgment in which subject matter, students, teachers, and environment are intertwined. Teachers connect subject matter content with students’ experiences, adjust teaching according to students’ situations, and create learning relationships and atmospheres. In other words, teachers’ curriculum implementation and teaching involve subject knowledge, understanding of students, relationship formation, and culture together (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Priestley et al., 2026).

However, after social incidents, this entanglement began to be perceived by teachers as both an educational possibility and a risk factor. For example, individual conversations with students can be part of the process of teaching, but after the incidents, teachers began to perceive them as situations in which their words and actions could be problematized or become the object of reports. This suggests that social incidents problematize the causes, consequences, relationships, and contexts included in teachers’ curriculum implementation (Kelchtermans, 2009; Lasky, 2005).

Therefore, teachers came to judge not only whether an activity was educationally meaningful, but also what problems the activity could produce, whose responsibility the results could become, and what words and actions in the process could become evidence or the object of criticism. Teachers came to see even what they had considered meaningful educational actions in their teaching as elements that could become causes of problems, and chose directions that minimized them, avoided activities that could produce unpredictable consequences, and adjusted interactions that could be misunderstood or recorded (Harris, 2021; Holloway & Brass, 2018). In other words, from social incidents, teachers tried to cope with this situation by excluding elements that could be problematized in their teaching, and this way of coping led to changes in curriculum implementation.

As a result, teachers' curriculum implementation was gradually becoming defensible implementation. Expanding a lesson from a student's unexpected question, transforming conflicts among students into educational dialogue, and bringing experiences outside the classroom into the curriculum are all important elements that constitute teachers' teaching. However, as these elements came to be perceived as increasing the possibility of problems, teachers came to delete or replace them. In this process, the relational, emotional, situational, and experiential elements attached to teaching were weakened, and only the relatively safe and explainable transmission of subject knowledge remained. In other words, only the transmission of subject knowledge remained as the minimum role teachers had to perform. Ultimately, the reason teachers' teaching changed after social incidents should be understood as that the various elements intertwined with teaching were reinterpreted as risks.

5.2. What conditions sustain teachers' meaningful teaching?

What, then, is needed to sustain teachers' meaningful teaching after social incidents? This study shows that teachers were already being highly cautious. They were aware of how their words and actions might be interpreted, which activities might lead to safety accidents or complaints, and which judgments might return as individual responsibility. The central problem, therefore, is not that teachers lack caution. Rather, it is that teachers are left to bear the risks of teaching alone under conditions in which teaching itself is increasingly perceived as risky.

For this reason, protecting teachers cannot be reduced to requiring more caution, more records, more procedures, and more individual responsibility. Such measures may make teaching more defensible, but they may also further weaken teachers' educational judgment. As a result, teaching can be narrowed to delivering prescribed content and managing classrooms so that problems do not occur, rather than remaining a complex practice that creates students' learning (Harris, 2021; Biesta, 2017).

This tendency is related to a narrow understanding of teaching as the transmission of subject knowledge. If teaching is understood only as delivering subject content, then life guidance, relationship formation, conflict mediation, experiential activities, parent communication, and emotional support appear to be outside curriculum implementation. After social incidents, these elements are easily classified as risks. However, teachers' teaching is not limited to knowledge transmission. Teachers read students' responses, form relationships, mediate conflicts, create classroom atmospheres, and connect students' experiences to learning. Students learn through these relationships, interactions, atmospheres, and experiences (Dewey, 1938; Lampert, 2001; Noddings, 2013; van Manen, 1991).

In this context, what is needed is a shift from Teaching-for-Learning to Teaching-as-Learning. Teaching-for-Learning understands teaching as existing for students' learning, but learning is often treated as a result that appears after teaching. From this view, the teacher's role can easily be narrowed to transmitting content, operating lessons stably, and preventing problems. By contrast, Teaching-as-Learning understands teachers' teaching itself as part of students' learning. Teachers' words, waiting, responses to conflict, creation of classroom atmosphere, communication with parents, and efforts to

understand students are not outside learning; they are scenes through which students learn how to live, relate, judge, and make meaning.

From this perspective, protecting teachers means protecting the relational, emotional, situational, and experiential elements of teaching as conditions of students' learning. Schools and policies should not leave individual teachers to bear the risks of teaching alone, but should establish shared responsibility for meaningful curriculum implementation. Teacher education should also help teachers interpret and justify teaching in relation to students' learning, rather than reducing teaching to safe delivery or procedural correctness. The key question should therefore shift from whether teachers delivered content safely to how teachers' words, actions, relationships, judgments, and organization of experience support students' learning.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how recent social incidents publicly debated in South Korea influenced elementary teachers' curriculum implementation. The findings show that teachers' curriculum implementation shifted from practices intended to expand students' learning and growth toward defensible curriculum implementation. Teachers became more cautious, kept more records, chose safer methods, reduced unpredictable activities, weakened educational interventions, and reconstructed teaching in ways that could be explained and defended afterward.

The consequences of this shift should not be understood as affecting teachers alone. When the relational, emotional, situational, and experiential elements of teaching are weakened, students' opportunities to learn through relationships, classroom atmosphere, conflict, experience, and participation are also reduced. In this sense, protecting teachers after social incidents is also a matter of protecting students' learning and preserving the educational function of schools as spaces where the next generation learns how to live together.

This study argues that school education, education policy, and teacher education should move toward protecting teachers' teaching as a shared responsibility. Teachers should not be left alone to bear the risks created by social incidents. What is needed is a shift toward Teaching-as-Learning, which understands teachers' teaching itself as part of students' learning. Protecting teachers means protecting students' learning, and protecting students' learning means protecting the future of the community.

Declarations

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Compliance of ethical standard statement

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with ethical standards for educational research. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the interview procedures, the use of data, and the principles of anonymization. All identifiable information, including participants' names, school names, regional names, and specific student information, was removed during the analysis and writing process.

Consent to participate

All participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study after being informed of the purpose of the study, the interview procedures, the use of data, and the principles of anonymization.

Consent for publication

All authors have agreed to the publication of this work.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

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Author Contribution

C.H.L. conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, conducted the data collection and analysis, and wrote the original draft of the manuscript. I.Y.L. contributed to the conceptualization of the study, interpretation of the findings, and critical revision of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available because they contain interview data and contextual materials that could compromise the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

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Footnotes

1. The New Education Movement refers to a movement that sought new forms of school education beyond the existing authoritarian and rote-learning-oriented education by emphasizing democracy, child-centered education, and life-centered education after liberation. The Open Education Movement refers to a movement for educational improvement that emphasized student-centeredness, individualization, self-directed learning, and flexible classroom operation in Korean school settings in the 1990s. The Innovation School Movement refers to a school improvement movement that pursued democratic school culture, professional learning communities, student-centered instruction, and school curriculum innovation as teachers' voluntary practices and education office policies were combined after the 2000s (Jeong, 2020).