THE CHALLENGES OF CREATING LEARNING COMMUNITY IN KOREAN SCHOOLS

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Introduction

• The role and identity of school education has been reconsidered and discussed since the latter half of the 1990s when Korea achieved social and political democracy

• Prominent issues of school education in Korea:
  -- the kind of place that a school should be
  -- how to guarantee the children’s right to learn
  -- the role that the teachers should undertake
  -- how to build schools based on democracy...

• Against this backdrop, “learning community” has been introduced in Korea in the early 200s.
Introduction

1. The necessity for creating a school culture based on democracy and public philosophy by pointing out the characteristics of the learners and teachers’ cultures in Korea.

2. The development of learning community in Korea 2001-present.

3. Stories of a school and teachers who undertake the creation of learning community.
1. Learners’ and teachers’ culture in Korea

(1) Learner’s culture

Bright side

• High level of academic achievement
  --Students’ excellence with continuous high scores in international academic assessments such as PISA and TIMMS
• High level of educational aspiration
(1) Learner’s culture

Dark side

- Korean students show the lowest intrinsic motivation for mathematics in PISA.
- Heavy pressure exerted by the university and college entrance exams, both the students and their parents are burdened physically, mentally, and economically.
(2) Teachers’ culture

Teachers’ high social standing and competence.

--Korean teachers rank in the top four in the world in the areas of social standing, what people think teachers should be paid, and whether parents would encourage their children to become teachers (The Varkey GEMS Foundation, 2013).

--One reason behind Korea’s strong and more equitable learning outcomes is that disadvantaged groups have better access to more qualified teachers (UNESCO, 2013).
(2) Teachers’ culture

Teachers’ low social reverence

--While Korean teachers rank high in social standing and quality, the level of children’s respect for teachers is considered low. Specifically, Korea has among the lowest rankings for whether students respect their teachers, as only 11% (compared to the average of 26%) of survey respondents agreed that students respect teachers (The Varkey GEMS Foundation, 2013).
(2) Teachers’ culture

Competitive and traditional learning style

--The OECD reported that Korean students tend to prefer a competitive learning style over cooperative learning. Korean classrooms implement individual learning and lectures more than cooperative learning. This finding implies that Korean teachers provide more opportunities for individual and competitive learning than for cooperative and collaborative learning (OECD, 2010).
Classroom with no communication between teacher and student
Classroom with no communication among students
(2) Teachers’ culture

Teachers’ isolation and Balkanization

-- Korean teachers tend to hesitate to open their classroom to colleagues or discuss their classroom lessons with other teachers, and similarly, they try not to interfere in their colleagues’ practice. This exclusive and conservative character of Korean teachers’ culture has brought about isolation and Balkanization among teachers.
• factors that prevent Korean schools from developing a democratic nature

--Korean school curriculums often overemphasize competitive learning environments, citing university and college entrance exams as the reason.

--Teachers hesitate to collaborate with each other because of the conservative and exclusive professional culture the curriculums foster.

“learning community”
Vision, Strategies and Philosophy for building learning community in schools

1) The school in the 21st century should be the learning community, where children, teachers, and parents learn together.

2) For establishing school as learning community, all the teachers have to open their classrooms.

3) In order to weave collaboration of learning at classroom and collegiality at staffroom, listening relation and dialogic communication should be constructed.

4) School as learning community is built on participation and solidarity of parents and citizens.

2. The development of learning community in Korea

Phase 1. introduction of the idea of learning community and practices by individual teachers/schools (2001-2005)

Phase 2. Learning community in alternative schools (2005-2008)

Phase 3. Coordination with provincial office of education and building a nationwide teachers’ network for learning community (2009-present)
Phase 3 Coordination with provincial office of education and building a nationwide teachers’ network for learning community (2009-present)

• Particularly from 2009, under the “innovative school” project promoted by progressive superintendents elected in 2009–2010, a type of school reform that involves the active participation of principals, teachers, and parents has been introduced.

• Local offices of education have taken the initiative to create democratic schools, and the idea and strategy of learning community have been employed as an important reference model for innovative school projects.
**Innovative school project promoted by local offices of education (2009~ )**

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“Innovative schools” in Korea as of September 2013
3. Stories of a school and teachers who undertake the creation of learning community

The school building story of Hueng-doek high school
(innovative school)

- Newly established public high school
- Designated an “innovative school” in Gyeonggi province.
- In its first year of operation, 146 students enrolled; most of them showed the lowest assessed level of academic achievement.
- Concerning academic achievement and career plans, most of them lack motivation and do not have specific career plans after graduation.
• Principal Lee recognizes that many students at the school have low levels of motivation and little sense of trust or security in their relationships with their teachers. Principal Lee wants to build the school into a place where these students are supported, secured, and respected, helping them enjoy learning and improve their prospects for their future.

• To build such a school, teachers are trying to practice democratic education centered on what Principal Lee expresses as the goal of school reform: creating a “learning community of hope and trust based on participation and communication.”
The school has not taken up the idea of a learning community as its only vision for school reform, however, the principal regards the concepts as a guiding reference, and some teachers who are actively taking part in changing the school culture have practiced learning community in their classrooms.
• Even though learning community is not the only strategy for school reform being used at Heung-deok high school, it is accepted by the principal and teachers as an important guide to democratic school building. Principal Lee encourages teachers to refer to various kinds of school reform strategies according to the teachers’ individual interests and preference, with the ultimate goal of creating democratic school education.
• The reason Principal Lee hesitates to employ learning community as the school’s only vision and strategy for school reform is that he believes that learning community will partly contribute to building democratic culture within school, but he is not firmly convinced that practicing learning community will effectively assure students’ success in their university and college entrance exams.
Teacher Ko’s School Reform Story

• Teacher Ko has a 10-year career as a science teacher in Gyeonggi province.

• School Culture to Change: Students as Objects to be Controlled

  Throughout Teacher Ko’s career, she has believed that teachers should change the way they regard students. For example, in a previous school, screens were installed on classroom windows to prevent students from throwing garbage out to the playground. In other words, when behavioral problems occur, teachers tend to control and regulate students physically instead of educating and persuading them.
Classroom Teaching and Learning: Discontinuance of Communication between Teacher and Students

It was frustrating for Teacher Ko that she could not sufficiently communicate with her students when teaching. She had always been confident about her capacity to teach, as she was skillful at stimulating students’ interest and making them concentrate on what she was teaching. In fact, her colleagues appreciated her abilities of managing students and performance of classroom teaching. However, after she encountered the learning community concept, her view of teaching and learning, and her relationship with students and other teachers totally changed. After Teacher Ko observed classroom teaching and learning based on the learning community concept in Japan and Korea, she realized that her teaching performance was highly efficient, but meaningful interaction between teacher and students scarcely happened. The students wore the facial expressions of people who were watching a TV or Internet lecture. Communication between teacher and students did happen occasionally, but oftentimes, only students who performed well academically expressed their opinion. At this point, she was convinced that there was a problem with her teaching.
Teacher Ko reflected on how her attitude toward her teaching and learning has changed:

Last year I observed classes of a “learning community” in Japan for the first time, after which I continually asked myself, “What should I do if my students are failing to learn in spite of my teaching?” I have never thought about this topic seriously. (Before I knew learning community) I thought that if students failed to learn, it would be their fault. They fail to learn because they lack ability and are not diligent. Consequently, I have never seriously regarded the students who failed to learn.

Since March 2010, when I started applying the learning community concept — where students learn with each other — many things have changed in my class. In the past, I tried to rouse the students’ interest, make them laugh, and concentrate on my teaching, but now I care for and support them in individual and collaborative learning. And I have begun to pay more attention to students who are isolated from learning and to their relationship with other students. That makes me consider and support them more seriously.
During my first semester in Heung-doek high school, I asked myself every day, “What should I do?” Furthermore, I thought to myself, “It seems impossible to practice ‘learning community’ in this difficult school.” The students lacked basic academic competence, so I sometimes wanted to give up practicing collaborative learning in classes. Sometimes it seemed more effective to give up organizing collaborative learning and give a lecture instead.

In spite of those difficulties, I did not give up practicing the learning community in my class because I now knew that my teaching and lectures were not enough to ensure every student’s right to learn.

I realized that one of the most important things for guaranteeing students’ right to learn is the relationship between the teacher and students. Building a learning community in class requires a relationship based on trust and care. In my school, teachers make every effort to build a caring relationship with students. One day, a student said to me, “I have never studied hard like this!” Slowly but definitely, teachers and students in my school have learned how to learn with each other.
Implication from Heung-doek High School

• High school in Korea might be the place where democracy and the public character of school education are not fully functional. In the case of high school H, many students gave up looking at the prospects for their future and were frustrated about their school experience. The principal and teachers are making every effort to build a school where every student can participate. The learning community is not only an idea and strategy for school reform, but several teachers seriously practice it and try to create a learning community in their classrooms. The teachers have observed the gradual change in their relationship with the students, and the learning community has become a powerful way to create an environment where teachers and students communicate and learn with each other.
Conclusion

Challenges

• Sharing the idea and image of what is learning and how we learn with each other is difficult.
• Dichotomic thinking for example, practice versus theory, collaborative learning versus individual learning, teacher-initiative versus learner-centered is one of the most serious problems for realizing the relationships for learning collaboratively among children and teachers.
Conclusion

Possibilities

• political and social condition for the school reform as learning community has changed advantageously. (e.g. promotion of innovative school)
• Korean teachers’ enthusiasm for changing schools and creating democratic schools has been expressed through the school reform practices as learning community and more learners and teachers have tried to overcome competitive and authoritarian image of learning and discovered meaning of learning collaboratively.
Landscape of Learning Community in Korea (elementary school)
Landscape of learning community in Korea (elementary school)
Landscape of learning community in Korea (middle school)
Landscape of learning community in Korea (middle school)
Teachers’ Learning Community in Korea
Reference

OECD (2010) Mathematics Teaching and Learning Strategy in PISA
UNESCO (2013) Teaching and learning: Achieving quality for all
Varkey Gems Foundation (2013) Global Teacher Status Index
Thank you for your attention!
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