

A narrative approach to understand Korean teacher agency in the context of the recent Innovation School model

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Abstract

Little effort has been made to understand the changes and issues faced by Korean teachers at the Innovation School, a type of public school with a progressive agenda. This qualitative research focuses on Korean teachers' lived experiences at their Innovation School sites. Narrative interviews were conducted with eight elementary school level Innovation School teachers to understand their thinking and practices, which revealed that teachers' thoughts and feelings shifted as they worked at the Innovation School. The teachers found that horizontal relationships and the administrative support of the Innovation School helped them to understand teacher agency in curriculum making. They also developed a sense of ownership of their curriculum by being involved in the collative culture of the school. However, most of them were concerned about whether they will keep their agency after leaving the Innovation School. Based on these findings, this research suggests several implications for policy and future research to sustain the Innovation School model to innovate Korean education.

Introduction

This research focuses on teachers' lived experiences at the Innovation School, a recent education reform model that empowers teachers to encourage students to be resilient, creative, and democratic citizens. Since its establishment in 1950, the Korean public-school system has been highly inclined to follow the National Curriculum developed and monitored by the Ministry of Education. Within such a national framework, prospective teachers must take the extremely competitive National Teacher Recruitment Test to become a public-school teacher. In order to successfully pass the test, all preservice

teachers need to be fully aware of the content and guidelines of the National Curriculum (Park, 2013). As the government controls nearly all aspects of the education system, Korean teachers have been forced to play the passive role of merely delivering textbook content (Jang & Kim, 2011). Realising that the standardised curriculum marginalises both teachers and students, many Korean teachers struggled for progressive educational movements and academic communities (So & Kang, 2014), thereby leading to an Innovation School movement in the early 2000s, which literally intends to *innovate* traditional schooling at the grassroots level (Sung and Lee, 2018).

In the late 2000s, the Ministry of Education responded to the movement by implementing the Innovation School model, a type of public school, which aims to improve practices by empowering teachers in three areas: curriculum and instruction, leadership and administration, and community partnership (Choi et al., 2015). Innovation School teachers have decision-making power regarding how to teach and what to teach in their classroom (Kim, 2009). Once a public school applies for the Innovation School model and gets accepted by the government, it receives Innovation School accreditation, thus lessening bureaucratic restrictions (Song, 2012). The model started with about ten schools in early 2000 and the leading teachers of the Innovation School movement voluntarily transferred to the newly accredited schools. The model soon received nationwide support, especially from elementary schools (Choi et al., 2015). The present number of public schools with Innovation School accreditation has reached a thousand, of which 70% are elementary schools (KICE, 2020).

Despite the radical increase in the number of Innovation Schools, there are concerns regarding the effectiveness and sustainability of this new school model among Korean scholars. Jung and Cho (2020) questioned whether they are truly differentiated from mainstream public schools in Korea. They also reported that teachers at Innovation Schools did not have any difference in teaching competency. Yang (2014) expressed doubts as to whether the Innovation School curriculum is different from the existing textbook-based curriculum in Korea. Concerning its sustainability, many Korean scholars fear that Innovation Schools might go back to mainstream-school patterns, especially following the transfer or retirement of the original members of the Innovation School movement (Song, 2012). All Korean public-school

teachers are transferred every 5 years and are randomly assigned to a school in the so-called “rotating system.” Since an increasing number of schools follow the Innovation School model and most of the original Innovation School teachers have left, most Innovation Schools are now managed by ordinary teachers who were not a part of the Innovation School movement and are not necessarily acquainted with innovation agendas, such as democratic practices and shared governance. To sustain the Innovation School model, it is necessary to encourage those who are randomly transferred to Innovation Schools to practice its agendas. If they fail to implement the agendas in everyday teaching and learning, the new education reform, in Cuban’s metaphor (1992), will have simply ruffled the surface. To avoid this failure, increased attention on these ordinary teachers is a key component of the reform. Despite the importance of their teaching experiences, there is still a lack of understanding regarding what teachers experience at Innovation Schools and whether they would change the ways of their earlier mainstream schools.

This study examines teachers’ experiences in the context of Innovation Schools. Korean students’ academic achievements have become an international centre of interest (OECD, 2014a). Simultaneously, however, Korean education has been criticised for its prescribed curriculum and rote learning (Park, 2013). Korea is currently exploring ways to decentralise the education system, enabling teacher autonomy in reconstructing National Curriculum for classroom teaching. Innovation Schools reflect these changes. This study shows the changing educational contexts and demands of teaching and learning to global audiences.

Although over a decade has passed since the initiation of the Innovation School model, classroom content at Innovation Schools and whether teaching methods are different from mainstream public schools are still unknown. More importantly, it is not clear how teachers, who were not necessarily a part of the early Innovation School movement, respond to Innovation School agendas, such as “a more participatory and democratic learning experience” and “a truly participatory decision-making process and shared governance” (Choi et al., 2015, p. 25).

The voices of teachers are important to better understand their teaching experiences. Thus, this study raises the three following research questions: 1) how the teachers understand the innovative features; 2) aspects and ways

in which innovations occurred if the teachers internalised the innovative features; and 3) whether the teachers' thoughts impacted innovation in the current situation of the Korean public education system as well as their own practices in schools.

To answer these questions, this study focuses on Innovation Elementary School (IES) teachers for the following reasons: the Innovation School model is primarily implemented at the elementary level (Yoon, 2016); most elementary schools in Korea are public and follow the teacher-rotation system (Kim & Lee, 2018); and the majority of teachers were not a part of the Innovation School movement (Yoon, 2016). These factors help to analyse the ways teachers experience, internalise, and challenge innovation education agendas in their classroom. The following section provides a review of the literature about teachers as key implementers of educational reforms, and Korean teachers' struggles to advance an innovation in a historically rigid, uniform education system.

Literature review

Teacher agency and Innovation

Many scholars highlight the leading role of teachers as an intrinsic and important key to school and classroom improvement (Durrant and Holden, 2005; Durrant, 2019; Harris, 2004). Durrant and Holden (2005) assert that teachers need to be encouraged to define themselves as active agents in improving schools and classroom teaching because they possess the ability to identify the needs, problems, concerns, skills, and subject-matter requirements of their students. Harris (2004) emphasise how teachers display emotional and moral commitment when they are empowered to lead developmental work that directly impacts the quality of teaching and learning.

Some research suggests that the success of reform efforts depends on the organisation's ability to sustain teachers' innovative practices over time (Boykin and Slavin, 2014; Smylie, 2009). For example, Law, Yuen, and Fox (2011) assert that teacher-led innovative practices often emerge and prosper only under particular favourable environmental conditions, such as the presence of committed leaders, less bureaucratic culture, and external support and funding. In this respect, it is important to understand that most innovative

reforms undergo life cycle phases. Even though they initiate new practices in a dynamic, innovative, and creative way, they often become ordinary or go back to previous practices (Fink, 2000; Gold and Miles, 1981; Huberman and Miles, 2013). As innovative schools evolve over time, incumbent staff teachers leave and new teachers are appointed, thus leading to the attrition of change (Fink, 2000). Hence, the school keeps searching for ways to retain a significant number of teachers who support the reform to sustain and promote the changed practices.

Korean teachers and the Innovation School

Innovation Schools are a public-school model fuelled by grassroots teacher movements that support a new culture focusing on equity, democratic rights and responsibilities, and the complete realisation of every student's potential (Korean Educational Research Network, 2014; Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education, 2011). The structure of Innovation Schools significantly differs from traditional Korean schools, with the perception of teachers being the biggest difference (Sung and Lee, 2018). Korean education has positioned teachers as deliverers of a curriculum developed at the national level. In traditional Korean education, teachers' professional judgements regarding curriculum and instruction are not considered crucial. They should rather follow the ready-made content that ignores their experience and skill in creating effective instructional learning strategies (Hur, 2012), thereby exposing teachers to constant monitoring or interference from the central government. Despite their professional knowledge and skills, they are neither a part of the decision-making process nor active agents (Kim, 2011). In the absence of agency for their teaching, Korean teachers are forced to work as passive implementers of a dictated curriculum.

In contrast with traditional Korean education, Innovation School teachers are expected to do more than simply follow the centrally developed textbooks and guidelines (Sung and Lee, 2018). They are bestowed with the freedom to decide on the content, methods, and goals of teaching. Unlike in traditional schools, teachers in Innovation Schools practice agency in designing and modifying the curriculum to meet the diverse needs of students (Song, 2012), and experience more freedom in determining the content topics and teaching methods (So and Kang, 2014).

In the wake of criticism of the top-down approach of school reform, the Innovation School movement was initiated by teachers who were enthusiastic about reforming school education with their knowledge and experience, in solidarity with the professional communities to which they belonged. This self-motivated, bottom-up approach resulted in innovative changes in school culture and management, as well as in curriculum and instruction methods. However, some scholars worried that this movement might not sustain (Kim, 2011). Yang (2014) suggests that a sustainable Innovation School model requires continuous involvement of a much larger group of ordinary teachers. In the early stages of this model, teachers who were passionate about the innovation agenda mostly constituted the school teaching staff (Jung and Cho, 2000). However, as the number of Innovation Schools increased, a large number of teachers was randomly assigned (Kim and Lee, 2018). The frequent and periodic rotation of teachers made teachers from the early stage leave (Chung and Hwang, 2011), meaning that the future success of Innovation Schools depends on whether ordinary teachers take new risks and new roles.

Hitherto, I have reviewed literature relevant to teacher-led school improvement and the cycle of innovative practices in schools. I have also examined important discourses on Innovation School features and teachers in the Korean context. The literature suggests that teachers encounter innovative features, have chances to reflect on their established practices, and have the task of furthering innovative agendas. Studies imply that the Innovation School in Korea faces the same cycle as other innovative schools. This implication is examined in this research through the narratives of Korean IES teachers.

Methodology

Despite the importance of teacher agency in education reform, it is under theorised. The ecological framework by Priestley et al. (2015) helps direct attention to teacher agency. The ecological framework refers to the different temporal dimensions of agency: the iterative dimension (past), the projective dimension (future), and the practical-evaluative dimension (present). According to the iterative dimension, teacher agency is affected by the teachers' past experiences, including both professional and personal experiences. The projective dimension of agency is influenced by a combination of short-term and long-term goals. Finally, the practical-evaluative dimension of agency

is always enacted in a concrete situation and is therefore constrained and supported by cultural, structural, and material resources available to actors. The ecological framework helps to understand how individual teachers assemble and apply their agentic orientation to their work within the multilayered iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective contexts.

Methods and data collection

In this narrative study in-depth interviews were used to gather participants' lived experiences (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). The narrative inquiry method set by Connelly and Clandinin (2006) was adopted, which consisted of the three dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place. Temporality draws attention to the relation between the past, present, and future. For temporality, I asked participants to reflect not only on their past, but on the current lived realities. Sociality refers to the dialectic between individual and society. For this dimension, I asked them to share their experiences with their students, parents, and colleagues. Spatiality denotes institutional and locations which shape a person's experiences. For spatiality, I asked participants to think about how places affected their teaching experiences. During each interview and throughout the interview process, attention was given to how the teachers' stories unfolded over these dimensions with recognition that individual stories are social constructs constantly revised over time.

Research participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed in this research. Maxwell (2012) explained that purposive sampling indicates an intentional plan with clear selection criteria to identify cases prior to data collection. As this research focuses on Innovation School teachers' lived experiences, the participants were limited to teachers who had worked in an Innovation School for more than 2 years. Yoon (2016) asserts that many teachers freshly placed at an Innovation School need time to adapt to the different culture. As this study emphasised how teachers understand innovative features that are different from mainstream schools, challenge their established routines, and possibly pursue innovation agendas in the future, the study participants were chosen from teachers who had worked in mainstream schools and were then placed at an IES through the teacher-rotation system at least two years ago.

The ‘M’ metropolitan city was targeted to be the research site as the ‘M’ Metropolitan School District (MMSD) is one of the school districts to have actively participated in the Innovation School movement. Two elementary schools in MMSD were selected as IESs in 2011. Thirty-five out of 155 public elementary schools had achieved IES status as of 2019. The chief administrator of an Innovation School model team at MMSD was contacted to recruit IES teachers fitting the criteria.

The interviews were stopped once they reached the point of saturation, where additional data collection would become redundant. In total narrative interviews with eight teachers from three different IESs were conducted. The following table summarises the participants’ background information. The participants’ names and the school names are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1. Characteristics of research participants

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	School	Teaching (years experience)	Teaching in IES (years)	Grade
Ms Kim	Early 30s	F	WB	10	3	3
Ms Lee	Early 30s	F	WB	8	3	5
Ms Park	Early 40s	F	WB	14	3	3
Mr Choi	Middle 30s	M	ST	7	4	6
Ms Jang	Early 50s	F	ST	25	4	3
Ms Byun	Early 40s	F	HK	17	4	4
Mr Shim	Late 30s	M	HK	10	3	6
Ms Han	Late 30s	F	HK	12	3	5

Among the eight teachers, Mr Choi and Mr Shim were the only men. WB and ST Elementary School became IESs in 2014 and HK Elementary School became an IES in 2015. Before the interviews, the purpose of this study was explained to the participating teachers who were asked to sign consent forms. Teachers were assured that the information provided would be kept confidential. The interviews took place in the spring, summer, and fall of 2019. All interviews were conducted individually at a mutually agreeable location for the participant. A semistructured interview protocol provided the space for participants to share their experiences organically. The interviews were

guided by three research questions: how IES teachers understand innovative features? How did teachers change their established teaching practices? and To what extent did teachers challenge the current situation in the Korean public education system by furthering innovative agendas?

The average interview ranged between 60 and 100 minutes. After the interviews concluded, participants were contacted by email and phone to gather supplemental information and to clarify some points addressed in the interviews. The interviews were audio-taped with the participants' consent, transcribed in Korean and translated into English. The transcribed interviews were then provided to participants for a review of the accuracy of captured ideas and translation confirmation.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted with reference to key concepts drawn from the literature review (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is an inductive approach aimed at reducing the data into a number of themes that address the research questions (Creswell, 2012). The analytical process is similar to the constant comparison method outlined by Boeije (2002).

In the initial stage, individual transcripts were analysed using open coding that involved fragmenting the transcripts into meaningful segments and connecting them. Through the fragmentation process, the separate codes that emerged were identified and separated from the interview context. To connect the data, one coded segment was compared with another. If a similarity was detected, the criterion of convergence became the basis of developing a category, and similar coded fragments were connected by collectively labelling them under that category. Fragmenting and connecting the data captured the essential message of each interview.

If a code was associated with only one teacher but carried a significant meaning for that person, it was still included in the list to capture the distinctiveness of individual experiences. Table 1 lists all the codes that emerged from this cross-participant analysis. The codes were grouped into larger categories representing the three important aspects of the teachers' teaching experiences. Based on cross-participant analysis an argument suggesting the meaning of the teachers' teaching experiences, is elaborated in the findings and discussion. The analysis yielded three broad themes that answered the research questions discussed below.

Table 2. Key themes, subthemes, and categories of the interview data

Research questions	Themes	Subthemes
How do IES teachers understand innovative features?	Being impressed by innovative features	Horizontal relationship
		Democratic environment
	Being satisfied with innovative features	Simplified budget process
		Reduced administrative work
How do they challenge their established practices?	Being familiar with Innovation	Training session
		Becoming more committed professionals
	Being involved with Innovation	Building up professional knowledge
		Reconstructing the curriculum
Whether will they further innovative agendas?	Furthering innovation	Furthering innovation within IES
		Extending innovation to regular schools

The research was designed to examine what Korean teachers experienced at an IES. I wanted to know how they understand innovative features, which aspects and in what ways innovations occurred if they internalised the innovative features, and whether their thoughts impacted the innovation of the current situation of the Korean public education system, as well as their own practices in schools. The following sections provide some answers to these questions by presenting the research results.

Findings

How do IES teachers understand innovative features?

Being impressed by and satisfied with innovative features

When teachers started to work at an IES, they noticed the distinctive features, which were different from their previous schools (Kim, 2009; Kim, 2011). Two features considerably affected teachers’ thoughts regarding teaching and

their job. First, the teachers were impressed that school members interacted in a more horizontal way than they expected. Ms Lee particularly highlighted the principal–teacher relationship which she thought was very different from that in her past school:

Most schools in Korea have top-down structures, with the principal and the vice-principal at the top. [Teachers] usually have a weekly meeting where the principal talks and the teachers listen. In that so-called meeting, nobody can imagine teachers discussing something freely and giving suggestions. When I was transferred to this school and attended the first meeting, I was literally surprised. “Can they say that kind of thing before the principal?” “Can they say that to such elderly people in that way?” The meetings were much more parallel than I expected.

Ms Kim also described how the principal–teacher relationship impressed her. She added her experience of being accustomed to the hierarchical way in which teachers interact in mainstream schools and how she challenged her own thoughts:

This is my second school. In the previous school where I was assigned after passing the national teacher qualification test, I expected teachers to make suggestions at the weekly morning meeting. However, I found that the meeting was not for that. Later, I asked another teacher about how I could suggest something. She told me that it was “normal” to speak to the head teacher first and then the head teacher spoke to the vice-principal and then the vice-principal spoke to the principal. But in this school, you can talk directly to the principal. You can have an easy access to the principal... There is literally no wall between teachers’ office and the principal’s office. I heard that I can simply go to his “space.”

During the interviews, she used the term *normal*. Typical schools in Korea utilise vertical structures where teachers are forced to encounter more direction, more control, and more commands from the ‘top’ (Lee and Lee, 2015). The teachers agreed that the two types of schools differed markedly in terms of hierarchical bureaucratic structure.

Other innovative features mentioned during the interviews included the simplified budget process and reduced administrative tasks (Yang, 2014). By mentioning these two specific features, the teachers emphasised that they

felt “comfortable” and “relieved” enough to employ various practices in their classrooms. Ms Byun and Ms Park explained how the budget process affects their own teaching in a positive way:

If I wanted to do something new [in the previous school], I had to go through a complicated, hierarchical budgeting process. In this school, I do not have to go through this process. There is a preapproved budget for activities. This saves me energy to pursue something new for kids. More importantly, it helps teachers to be more creative.

Since I could use the preapproved budget, I could improve my teaching in accordance to the needs and wants of my students. For instance, I invited a professor for the butterfly lifecycle session. I even brought my students to an indoor ski resort. They really loved it.

Ms Byun and Ms Park found that the simplified budget process gave them more time and energy to prepare and teach. Similarly, other teachers explained their satisfaction because they could focus solely on teaching. They felt that they practised the role of curriculum-maker, not deliverer. They believed that administrative support at the IES encouraged them to define themselves as agents capable of modifying the National Curriculum and its detailed guidelines. In many cases, the teacher support system, which reduces their non-teaching tasks, helps them to return to fundamental questions around their teaching challenges (Wong and Glass, 2009). The teachers in this study also reported that they could develop the ability to reflect on their practice and attain the confidence to try new ways of teaching.

How do they challenge their established practices?

Being acquainted with Innovation

The teachers in this study found that innovative features are executed collaboratively rather than individually. Ms Kim’s account particularly illustrates how IES teachers are involved in a collaborative inquiry:

We have greater opportunities to observe other teachers’ classrooms here at the IES, which we do almost every week. The observation always comes with a reflection session. When I worked at mainstream schools, I observed other teachers teaching just once or twice a [school] year. Here, my colleagues and I did that every week throughout the school year. This was really challenging at

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first. After finishing the year-long observation and reflection session, I found that I finally became an IES teacher.

After being exposed to the new culture, Ms Kim learnt how to work with other teachers and started defining teaching as a collective effort. Ms Park considered the observation and reflection session as a “training session,” especially for the new IES teachers. She also agreed that by attending this “training session,” she understood that teachers need to forge meaningful associations with their colleagues rather than remaining isolated in their classrooms.

Making individual teaching more public challenges teachers to reflect on their identity. Teachers said that the more they practice in a collaborative culture, the more they are willing to build up their content knowledge and teaching skills as an autonomous professional. Mr Shim explained that the collaborative culture drove him to be more committed to become an autonomous professional:

As I become involved in the collaborative meetings, I find myself becoming more committed and more energetic... For instance, there are many teachers who are full of ideas for improving our teaching practices. They are eager to share these ideas. At first, I was impressed. However, I found that I have become one of them. The observation and reflection session made me become more professional.

Consequent to the meetings, the teachers felt that they became more committed to their profession through the roles they played in the classroom. Mr Shim said that he became more energetic and committed. Most teachers spend their time in an individualised classroom without interacting with colleagues (Hargreaves, 1993; Lortie, 1975). This isolation makes teachers in secluded classrooms follow the externally developed curriculum (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2004). The Innovation School has a collaborative culture at its heart (Jang and Kim, 2011). When teachers collaboratively design the curriculum, they present the image of agents of change (Pieters et al., 2019). Within a collaborative relationship, teachers felt that they had developed agency to facilitate teaching and learning.

Being involved with Innovation

The teachers stated that they immediately became a part of the collaborative culture of the IES. It was observed during the interviews that the teachers made

greater efforts to build up their professional knowledge and skills. Mr Shim said, “If you simply follow the fixed sequence of the textbook, it is easy. If you want to capture students’ teaching moments, you have to study a lot.” Ms Han also agreed that teaching at an IES requires more professional knowledge and skills:

After observing other teachers’ classes, I found that I will also be *observed*. In mainstream schools, teachers usually prepared a special lesson plan specified for open classroom teaching. However, teachers in this school simply show what they used to do. There are no special lesson plans. This made me study outside mere textbook contents. There is a practical joke: “IES teachers study more than the students.” I think that I am also one of those teachers. In addition, the more I study, the happier I am.

Teachers believed that innovative features promoted teaching practices to be more public and collaborative. As they worked together, they found that they devoted more time and energy to develop their own knowledge and expertise.

IES teachers are provided time and space to improve their own teaching. In such a supportive atmosphere, teachers have more opportunities to construct and reconstruct the curriculum. Even though the autonomy to modify the curriculum is officially allowed, teachers are forced to use the limited autonomy to select teaching methods (So & Kang, 2014). However, IES teachers were certain that they had modified the uniform, prescribed curriculum. Mr Choi explained how IES teachers are involved in reconstructing the curriculum.

Before reconstructing the curriculum, we studied the National Curriculum. We [6th grade teachers] divided its sections and then gathered again for discussing our findings. We discussed common themes over different subjects and developed interdisciplinary unit plans, focusing around a common theme.

Mr Choi emphasised that they made decisions together as a group, exemplified in the comments, “nothing is top-down” and “everything is from the [same grade] team.” By being involved in reconstructing the curriculum, the teachers form a central feature of curriculum development and are not marginalised (Wallace and Loughran, 2003). Through such reconstruction process, they learnt that many issues, such as curriculum development and selection of course books and teaching materials, are in their control, and not the prerogative of the Ministry of Education.

Whether they further innovative agendas?

Furthering innovations within and outside the IES

Teachers reported feeling “professional (Ms Kim),” “trusted (Mr Park),” and “confident (Ms Han)” at the IES. The issue is that their agency is practiced only within Innovation Schools. Owing to the teacher-rotation system, public-school teachers in Korea periodically transfer among schools. The teachers in this study would transfer in the near future to non-Innovation Schools, i.e., mainstream public schools. Thus, the question of whether they would be willing to sustain their innovative practices at other schools is critical to provide a peek into the possibility of extending the innovative agenda to non-innovation schools. Most of the teachers responded negatively to the question. Ms Park explained, “As far as I know, teachers just cannot do the same things at other schools.” From her experiences, she provided reasons behind the inability of teachers to sustain innovative practices after transferring to mainstream schools:

As you know, school textbooks [which are developed by the government] are something that all Koreans have to follow. When I worked at another school, parents made an official complaint if they found that the teachers did not cover every single page of the textbook. They believed that all the contents of the textbook needed to be taught. However, even the government policy shows that teachers can redesign the National Curriculum. It is really hard to persuade parents about this issue. Innovation Schools periodically hold seminars with parents to challenge their perceptions of the textbooks. They also encourage teachers to redesign the curriculum preferably in a thematic and integrated way over several subjects. In this context, teachers neither have to cover every single page of the textbook nor do they have to worry about parents’ complaints.

As seen in the above quote, IES provides an environment where teachers use agency for curriculum development. Under such favourable conditions, the sequence and scope of the National Curriculum are modified. However, once teachers transfer to mainstream schools, which do not encourage curriculum redesigning by teachers, they might have very limited agency because they cannot reconstruct curriculum or choose materials.

However, Mr Shim argues against IES teachers who are “afraid of being transferred to other schools.” He emphasised that IES teachers need to go beyond the IES than try to remain in their “comfort zone.” Ms Jang agreed:

The next year will be my last year at the IES. I will be placed at a mainstream school. I am not afraid. Many teachers are worried about me. However, this is not what teachers in the early Innovation School movement struggled for. We need to go out and transfer our innovative practices to other schools. If we are afraid of leaving the school, we will fail to bring changes.

Although innovative reforms are expected to bring a fundamental change in schooling, it has been revised over time to become only a modest addition to established norms, routines, and curriculum (Cuban, 1992). As the interview results revealed, the teachers recorded different responses on the issue of extending the innovation to other schools. Some of them assumed a lack of reform infrastructure to support innovation. However, teachers such as Ms Jang and Mr Shim, who were once trained at the IES, need to keep implementing innovative agendas.

Discussion

This study examined teachers' teaching experiences at the IES, a recent school reform model which empowers teachers to identify themselves as a curriculum-maker rather than a curriculum-implementer. According to the findings, teachers' experiences evolved over time since they were transferred from a mainstream school to an Innovation School. Their experiences were roughly grouped into three patterns. For the first research question, which examined the teachers' initial experiences at the IES, the findings showed teachers commonly noticing the differences between the IES and traditional schools. The following two innovative features were instantly perceived in the new school setting: the horizontal, democratic relationship, especially between the principal and teachers; and supportive administrative systems. The teachers agreed that Korean teachers spend a great deal of time and energy on non-teaching duties. This study describes how teachers respond to such a different culture. The teachers (Ms Lee) who used to work at mainstream schools were surprised even by the "normal" way of communication at school (Ms Kim). The teachers reported willingness to improve, and satisfaction from self-improvement. This result is similar to previous research from Singapore that found teachers who are unprecedentedly situated in a reform context which decentralises its education system feel surprised and confused (Tan, 2016). The teachers also experienced that the horizontal relation and the administrative support of the new school helped them to understand teacher

agency in curriculum making. This result echoes Yang (2015)'s research from China asserting the importance of a teaching support system to facilitate teacher agency.

Regarding the second research question, which looked into their changed practices, the findings showed that the teachers were merged into the collaborative culture of the IES. The teachers in this study started their training by observing other teachers' classes. While this is a special event at other schools, it is almost a weekly activity for IES teachers. Some teachers (Ms Kim and Mr Shim) admitted that they were initially reluctant about the observation and reflection sessions. However, they found that these sessions pushed them to be actively involved in new practices, such as developing their professional knowledge and skills, and reconstructing the National Curriculum. This result is similar to previous Korean research on an innovative school reform project which supports and enhances teachers individually as well as collaboratively as they improve their teaching practices (Jang & Kim, 2011; Kang, 2015). However, the teachers in this research vividly reported how teachers get involved into a collaborative culture in a new school which eventually see ownership of their curriculum.

The third research question, whether teachers would further innovation agendas, is crucial as it explores sustenance issues. Some teachers complained that there were teachers who just enjoyed the merits of the IES rather than actively engaging in various collective tasks, arguing that their reluctance negatively affected the collaborative community. In addition, the study findings showed divergent teachers' responses about their will to pursue innovative agendas after transferring to other schools. Except for Mr Shim and Ms Jang, the teachers admitted their uncertainty regarding this aspect. Ms Kim and Ms Lee said that they were worried even about leaving the IES. Both of them started their teaching careers at typical elementary schools and then came to the IES, where they felt like professionals. Meanwhile, Mr Shim argued that teachers need to make a bold move instead of staying safe at the IES.

The lived experiences of the teachers reflected the scene where they encountered the critical moment of the innovation cycle, referred to by Fink (2000). All innovative reforms face the uncertainty between sustenance and regression (Fink, 2000; Huberman & Miles, 2013). The innovative agendas are practiced by committed teachers. However, their energy and willingness in the early

stage are often later diminished by internal and external problems (Boykin& Slavin, 2014; Smylie, 2009). The sustainability of the Innovation School is a critical issue for Korean teachers who want to reform Korean education, which has been bound to tests and bureaucracy. To further the current innovative practices, it is time to ensure a reform infrastructure where teachers can maintain their values and beliefs regarding innovative agendas.

Conclusion

This study illustrated the different experiences of teachers who were not a part of the Innovation School movement but were assigned to the IES by the rotation system. Elementary school teachers usually stay at a school for up to 5 years before being transferred to another school. The teachers in this study who spent more than 2 years at the IES influenced their early experiences at the IES, their current practices, and their expectations after leaving the IES. Several implications for policy making and professional development emerged from the valuable experiences of these teachers in this study.

First, all the participants supported the innovative agendas of the IES. Most top-down reforms encounter criticism and resistance from teachers. Teachers' resistance is one of the major factors in the failure of such reforms (Epler, 2015). Meanwhile, the Innovation School model is the result of unprecedented initiatives started from a grassroots teacher movement, the Innovation School movement (Sung and Lee, 2018). The original members of the Innovation School movement were enthusiastically committed to reform Korean schools where standardised curriculum and testing, and undemocratic culture prevail (Cho, 2012). This fact means that the IES started with teachers' support, not resistance. It is necessary for policy makers to remember that the reforms started by teachers can effectively mobilise support from their colleagues. They also need to build up support national and local networks in which teachers share ideas and resources to improve their own teaching.

Secondly, it is necessary to encourage teachers to collaborate with other teachers. Teachers in this study reported that they were invited to other teachers' classes and also requested colleagues to observe their own daily teaching. By opening up their classrooms, the teachers experienced stronger professional identities. Policy makers need to pay more attention to the synergistic effects of collegial collaboration among teachers. Teachers in this study especially mentioned

that once they were newly transferred to the school, the collaborative culture helped them to act on their individual sensibilities and personal knowledge as a curriculum-maker. Policy makers will therefore benefit from the collative work within the school so that teachers can receive guidance and training as curriculum-makers.

Thirdly, more than 10 years have passed since the Innovation School movement was initiated in 2000, meaning that it is time to raise the question of whether teachers sustain their innovative practices, particular when teaching at other schools. Unfortunately, teachers in this study did not have a positive outlook about their potential to modify the National Curriculum at mainstream schools. It gives a new task to policy makers in furthering the innovative practices for the whole education system. This suggest that policy makers need to support teachers who leave innovation schools to sustain their teacher agency so that they can design personalised curriculum for all students. Otherwise, innovations will just remain only within Innovation Schools.

This study is timely and important because the Korean government is pursuing fundamental changes in the education system by empowering schools and teachers, and by reducing the government's control over local schools. The Innovation Movement has led to deep changes in curriculum, pedagogical activities, and the role of teachers. Innovation Schools have radically increased in number. They face a major problem of scaling up and sustaining the innovations that Korean teachers have struggled for so far.

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