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The Process of Overcoming Difficulties Faced by Novice Home Economics Teachers in Elementary Schools

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The purposes of this paper is to ascertain the difficulties faced by novice home economics teachers in elementary schools and the process for overcoming those difficulties. Our methodology uses the Trajectory Equifinality Model (TEM) to analyze interviews conducted with three newly hired home economics teachers at a public elementary school in H City in fiscal 2014.

When they first assumed their posts, the three teachers had not been uncomfortable teaching classes in home economics, but after gaining the support of other teachers, they reached the point where they were eager to teach home economics classes the following year based on what they learned during their first year. The teachers experienced various challenges during that time. Teacher A had problems mainly with practice classes; Teacher B had problems mainly with how to deal with the students; and Teacher C had problems with practice classes, lecture-type classes, and developing relationships with the students. Although the difficulties experienced by the three novice home economics teachers differed depending on their attitude toward home economics and conditions in the workplace, ways to overcome these difficulties consisted of the following three points: the building of a support system for discussions about home economics; the building of a system to facilitate a better understanding of students' actual lives; and the creation of a system that encourage participation in training.

Keywords: Elementary School, Novice Teachers, Home Economics Teachers, Process of Overcoming Difficulties, Trajectory Equifinality Model

1. Introduction

For a teacher, the first year is a crucial period for building the foundation for growth as a teacher. Sato (1997, p.304) described it as “a period of setting out to find one’s self-image as a teacher, of sketching out the basic composition of one’s life-long activities as a teacher, like a navigational chart.” Yoshizaki (1997, p.20) characterizes the first year as “the period of most rapid growth and development in a teacher’s life, as well as a period of survival where the greatest threats are faced.” A great deal of research has already been conducted on the problems experienced by first-time teachers during this period. For example, in analyzing class journals written by new teachers in their first semester, Asada (1998, p.177) categorized the challenges faced by novice teachers as challenges relating to the teachers themselves, challenges relating to the students, and challenges related to the home and parents. Challenges relating to the teachers themselves include those of workplace socialization (for example, the school administration’s restrictions, collection of school lunch fees, or handling of grades) and those related to class management and teaching plans. Using both quantitative and qualitative analysis, Ishihara (2010) points out the difficulties arising from discomfort with teaching and instructing students. Based on an interview survey, Sato & Maebara (2013, p.77) highlight the difficulties in relationships with fellow teachers, students, and parents and problems with teaching capability, and show that these issues can be overcome thanks to the existence of various other parties. Kihara (1998) points out that some problems are continuous throughout the first year, while others are concentrated in certain periods.

With these circumstances in mind, in its report, “Policy for Enhancing Overall Teacher Competence throughout the Teaching Career” (2012), the Central Council for Education emphasized that one issue that needs to be addressed is the establishment of an “ideal of the teacher as constantly learning” (p.3), and that “with the increasingly sophisticated and complex challenges in the schools themselves, teachers in the early stages of their

careers are experiencing difficulties that they cannot adequately deal with” (p.6), calling for such teachers to be “definitely trained not just in teaching skills, but also in how to deal with a variety of educational issues both correctly and flexibly” (p.20).

In the case of new teachers, home economics at elementary schools in particular is taught not by the homeroom teacher but by the home economics teacher, of which only one is deployed to each school, and virtually no other teachers at the school thus have experience in home economics. Therefore, full-time home economics instructors (hereinafter referred to as “novice home economics teachers”) most likely suffer from both the problem of being home economics teachers in such an environment and the problem of being a novice elementary school teacher. However, we find very little research on what kinds of problems these new home economics teachers face, how they are dealing with these problems, or what kind of support they are receiving during that process. Shedding light on this question will be helpful in developing ways to support new home economics teachers, as well as suggestions whereby the next-generation of novice home economics teachers will be able to solve these problems themselves when they face them.

As part of our research on how to support new home economics teachers, we will describe the difficulties they face and the process of overcoming those difficulties, with the objective of examining the factors involved in overcoming them. Although Yoshizaki (1998, p.168) considers teachers as “novices” until they have about three years of experience, in this paper we regard “novices” as being within the first year since being hired.

2. Methodology

2.1. Survey Methodology

2.1.1. Teachers Surveyed

We surveyed three home economics teachers (Teacher A, Teacher B, and Teacher C) newly employed at a public elementary school in City H in 2014 school year. These three teachers had participated in the U Seminar run

The Process of Overcoming Difficulties Faced by Novice Home Economics Teachers in Elementary Schools

by Teacher U, who holds a major position on the H City Elementary School Home Economics Subcommittee. The U Seminar began when Teacher B had a discussion with Teacher U, who taught elementary school in City H for 24 years and had a long track record as a home economics teacher. Teacher U ran the seminar on a volunteer basis once a week for novice home economics teachers who were having problems in the classroom. Teachers A and C subsequently joined the seminar. U Seminar's activities included conveying, in a practical manner, the basic and fundamental knowledge and skills that Teacher U wanted novice home economics teachers to become familiar with, including how to store, arrange, and use the equipment and apparatus in the home economics classroom, presentation methods, how to prepare annual and semester teaching plans, rules for the classroom, ideas for writing on the blackboard, class design, educational materials, assessment methods, and how to deal with special-needs students. It also offered individual consultations to novice home economics teachers.

The attributes of the novice home economics teachers were as follows. Note that the three also teach music in addition to being home economics teachers. In City H, guidance counselors also provide periodic guidance to newly hired teachers.

① Teacher A (female)

Responsible for home economics classes for one fifth grade class (21 students) and one sixth grade class (16 students). She teaches music to the first through sixth grades, and in April, she was busy with school administration duties in the Life Training Department. She began attending the U Seminar in late April on the guidance counselor's recommendation.

② Teacher B (female)

Responsible for home economics classes for one fifth grade class (40 students) and two sixth grade classes (21 and 23 students). Her music teaching duties are the third through sixth grades. Her administrative duties are in the school's Administration Department, and she was busy preparing for the October music recital. Based on an

introduction from a college friend, she began attending the U Seminar in early April, initially in the form of individual consultations with Teacher U.

③ Teacher C (female)

Responsible for home economics classes for two fifth grade classes (25 and 26 students) and two sixth grade classes (23 and 24 students). She also teaches music to two classes each in grades three through six. She was assigned to the school's Administration Department, but her duties there did not take much time because novice teachers are not assigned much work. She began attending the U Seminar in June based on advice of the Principal and head teacher at the school where she works.

2.1.2. Survey Period and Survey Methodology

In the first phase, toward the end of July, we used two methods to inquire about difficulties experienced during the period from the beginning of employment from April through late July and how these difficulties were handled. The first method was an open discussion with the three teachers. We hoped that this preliminary step prior to requesting written descriptions of individual difficulties would broaden our awareness of the wide range of problems each subject faced. Second, following this discussion, we asked each teacher to provide us by mail by the end of July specific written descriptions in chronological order of things that confused them, things that caused them trouble, things they didn't understand, things they were anxious about, and things they wanted to ask someone about, and in each case from whom they received advice and how the problem was solved.

In the second phase, we conducted semi-structured individual interviews lasting about one hour. The interviews with Teachers A and B took place in late December, 2014, and that with Teacher C took place in mid-January 2015. Bearing in mind the data obtained in the first phase, the interviewers inquired about the annual curriculum, the difficulties experienced between April and the time of the interview, and how these difficulties were overcome.

2.2. Analysis Methodology

With the subjects’ consent, we recorded and transcribed the discussions and the interviews. We then applied the Trajectory Equifinality Model (TEM) to the statements made during the discussions, the responses to the written questionnaire, and the statements made during the interviews to analyze the difficulties faced by the novice home economics teachers and the process for overcoming them. TEM is a “cultural-psychological methodology that attempts to document individual transformation in its social context, without disregarding time” (Arakawa et al., 2012, p.1). It is distinguished by “its reliance on a systems methodology that views humans as open systems (von Bertalanffy, 1968/1973) and its emphasis on the flow of time as experienced by the individual, without ignoring time and treating it as an externality” (Arakawa et al., 2012, p.2). Using TEM reveals the chronological process whereby the teachers dealt with the problems they faced since assuming their posts in April, enabling us to interpret the situation in the context of their teaching careers.

The procedure for analysis with TEM is to 1) extract meaningful clusters from the statements made during the discussions and interviews and the responses to the written questionnaire, and 2) create cleanly-expressed labels for them. These labels are arranged in chronological order to create a TEM diagram. We draw the diagram, as shown in Arakawa et al. (2012, p.3), based on the principle that there “exist multiple” “paths for the behavior and choices of people living in an irreversible flow of time,” and that even if multiple paths are be traversed across multiple bifurcation points depending on the individual, there is a single equifinality point to be reached. In other words, creating a TEM diagram shows the four concepts of irreversible time, bifurcation point (BFP), equifinality point (EFP), and trajectory (Arakawa et al., 2013, p.3), as well as the obligatory passage point (OPP) (Sato, 2009, p.51). Table 1 gives a conceptual explanation of TEM and shows where it fits in our research.

This paper defines the OPP as joining the U Seminar and

the EFP as the desire to continue for a second year with confidence as a home economics teacher. These points were common to the three subject teachers. We define “polarized EFP” (Sato, 2009, p.48) as the loss of confidence in continuing as a home economics teacher.

Keeping in mind the diversity of trajectories toward these EFPs, we establish bifurcation points based on the statements made in the discussions and interviews and the written responses about difficulties and show them in Table 1. In this case, we do not base this on the data obtained in the interviews, etc., and we create labels for possible alternatives that could have been taken but were not. For those that could theoretically exist, we draw the trajectory with a dotted line. On the trajectory, we also show what support was obtained in the form of social guidance (SG) (Arakawa et al., 2012, p.104) and what

Table 1: Conceptual Explanation of TEM and Where It Fits in This Research

Basic concepts	Meaning	Where it fits in our research
Equifinality point (EFP)	The point arrived at no matter which multiple paths are traversed	Desire to continue with confidence as a home economics teacher for a second year
Polarized EFP (P-EFP)	Consider EFP to be a so-called complementary phenomenon consisting of a pair, and not a single point	Loss of confidence in continuing as a home economics teacher
Bifurcation point (BFP)	Point at which a trajectory is generated or bifurcates	Fork in the road for activities as home economics teacher
Obligatory passage point(OPP)	A point that must almost inevitably be passed in order to move to a certain location	Joining U Seminar
Social guide (SG)	Something working as a supportive force	Support for home economics teachers
Social direction (SD)	Something working as a constraining force	Inhibiting factors for home economics teachers

Prepared and revised by the authors based on excerpts from Sato (2009) and Arakawa et al. (2012).

The Process of Overcoming Difficulties Faced by Novice Home Economics Teachers in Elementary Schools

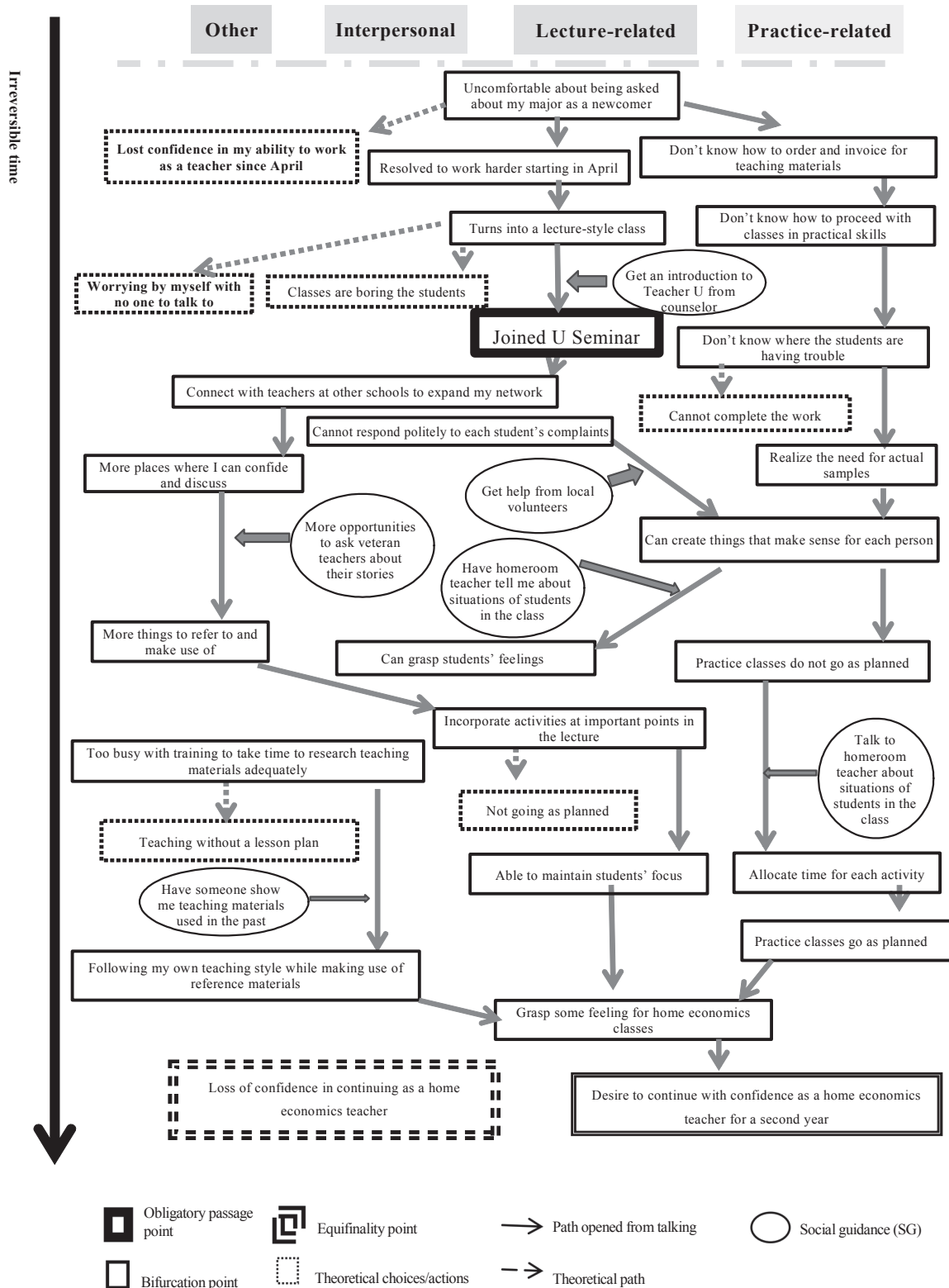


Figure 1: Difficulties Faced by Teacher A and the Process for Overcoming Them

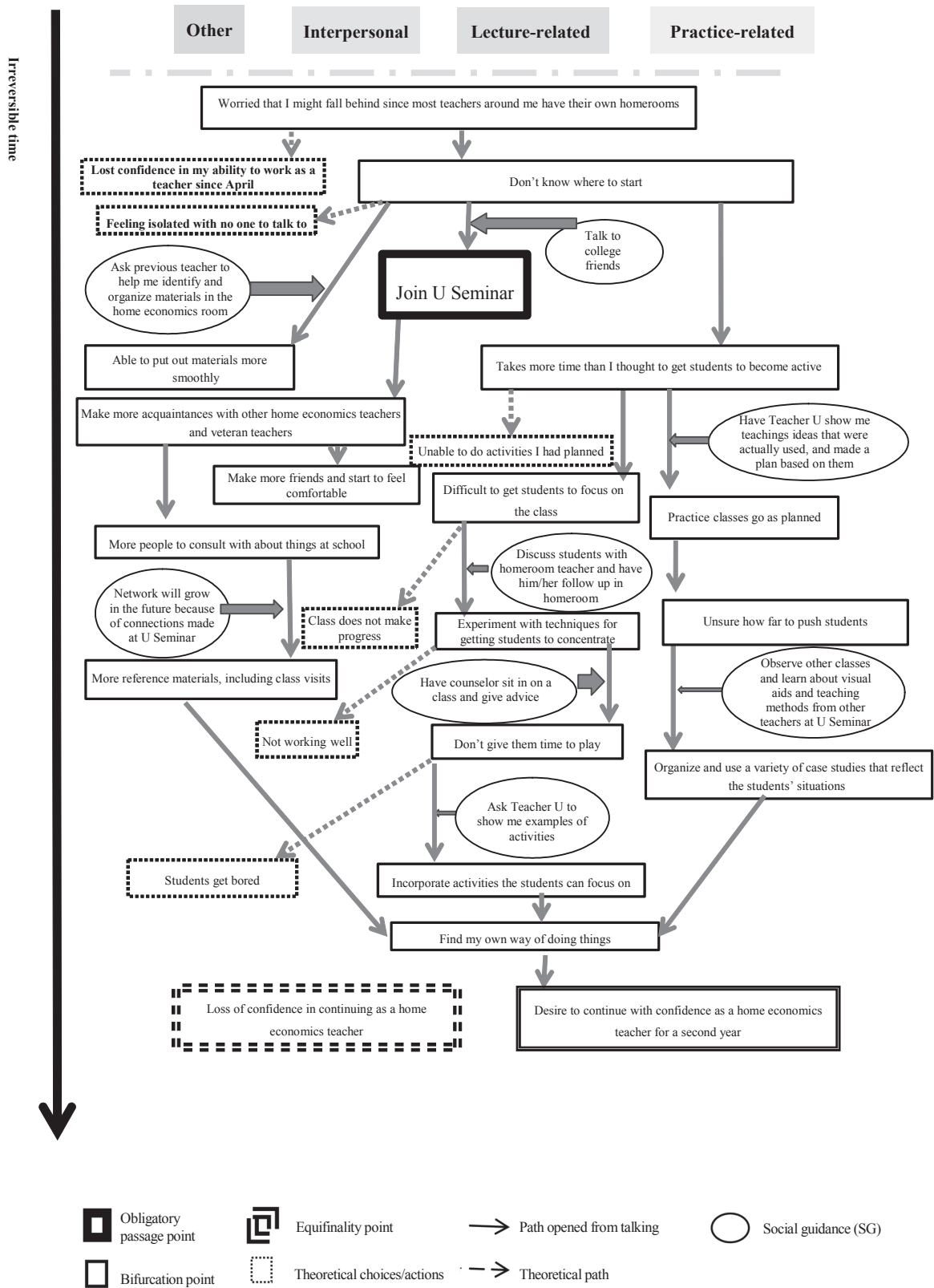


Figure 2: Difficulties Faced by Teacher B and the Process for Overcoming Them

inhibiting factors might be present in the form of social direction (SD) (Arakawa et al, 2012, p.104). Note that we arranged the labels spatially on the vertical columns of the TEM diagram in categories of practice-related, lecture-related, and interpersonal-related.

3. Results

3.1. Difficulties Faced by Teacher A and the Process for Overcoming Them

Figure 1 shows the difficulties faced by Teacher A and the process for overcoming them. At the beginning in April, Teacher A was beset with anxiety about teaching, but at the time of the interview in late December she was displaying motivation, telling us that she wanted to use what she had learned during the school year to become a better home economics teacher next year. The difficulties Teacher A faced were mostly related to practice classes, such as not knowing how to order and pay for class materials and not completing class sessions in the planned amount of time.

Although she did not have as many students in her classes as did Teachers B and C, she struggled with how to deal with “each student’s strong personality.” Even under these circumstances, she succeeded in overcoming these difficulties with the support of homeroom teachers and local volunteers, telling us, “Local people in the school district were very cooperative, so I was able to get help from them even in classes, and I took full advantage of their assistance in practice and other classes requiring extra help.”

In the interview, Teacher A stated, “Mostly guidance counselor helped me with my music classes and almost never directly discussed home economics classes with me.”

At the same time, she told us, “Attending the U Seminar gave me the opportunity to discuss my concerns with other new home economics teachers having the same experiences. Also, I was able to meet Teacher U and other veteran home economics teachers, which increased the number of people I could talk about home economics with

and gave me more opportunities to get help.” With the help she got from veteran home economics teachers, she was able to increase the volume and breadth of her knowledge of home economics and find out many practical ways to teach home economics.

Internalizing the advice, support, and information that she received led Teacher A to improve her own skill levels. In the process of repeating this in practice, she overcame her difficulties by discussing the situation of students at her school with other teachers attending the U Seminar, then adapting them to suit her needs and creating her own home economic lessons.

3.2. Difficulties Faced by Teacher B and the Process for Overcoming Them

Figure 2 shows the difficulties faced by Teacher B and the process for overcoming them. In early April, Teacher B was worried that she might fall behind other teachers because she was not assigned as a homeroom teacher, as were most other teachers hired that year, and she lacked experience as a home economics teacher. In the interview in late December, however, her feelings had changed. She told us that she still had the desire to be a homeroom teacher, but wanted to take what she learned this year and make use of it again as a home economics teacher next year.

From Figure 2, we can see that the difficulties faced by Teacher B were mostly related to the students--concerns about it taking longer than she hoped to get the students moving, how hard it was to get them focused on what was being discussed, and not knowing how far to push them. Thanks to the approachability of the school’s administration (the principal and head teacher), homeroom teachers, and guidance counselors, Teacher B got advice tailored to the circumstances of the students in her classes. This was a factor in helping her overcome her

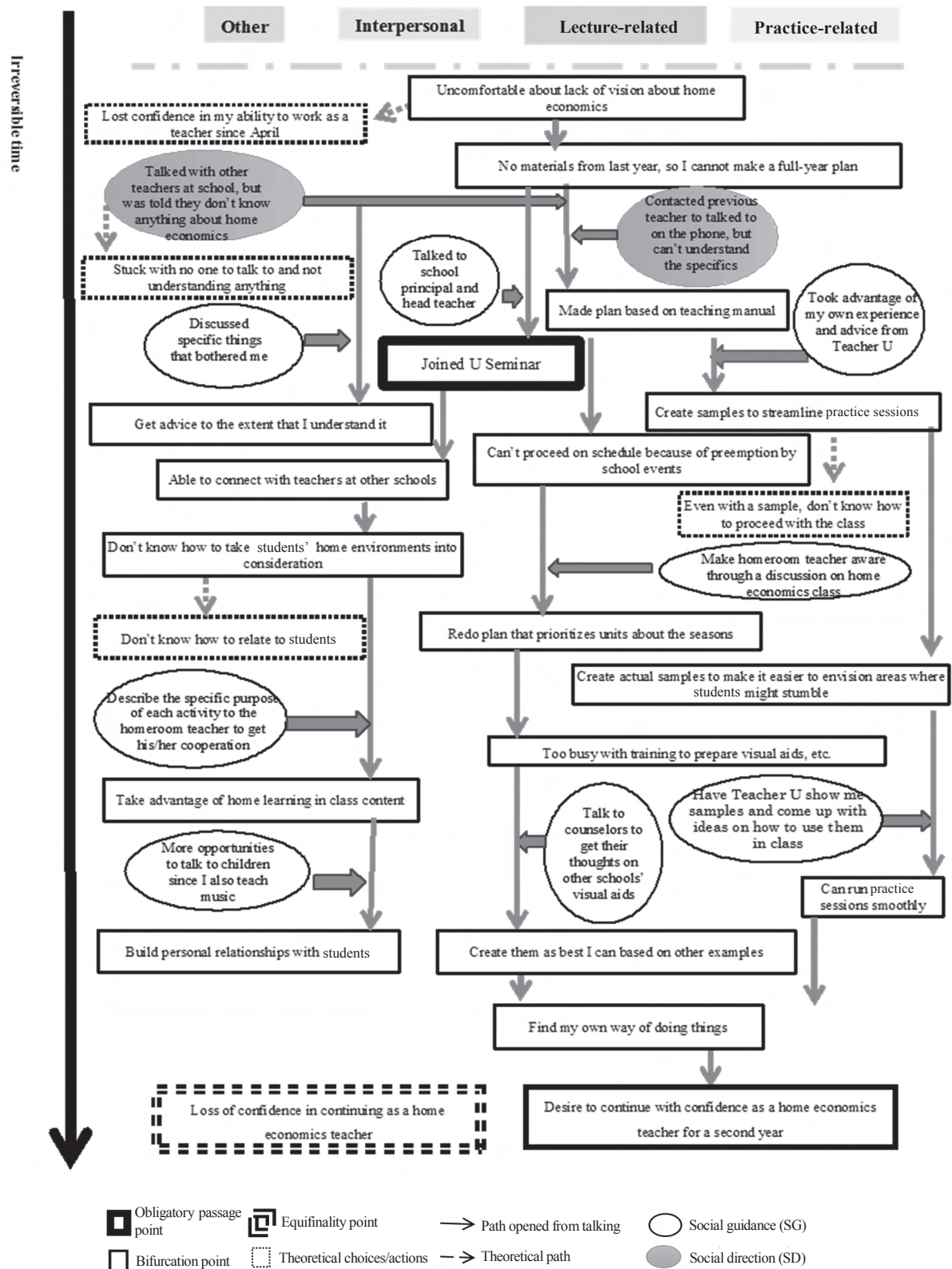


Figure 3: Problems Faced by Teacher C and the Process of Overcoming Them

The Process of Overcoming Difficulties Faced by Novice Home Economics Teachers in Elementary Schools

difficulties. Teacher B's counselor was able to provide guidance about how to respond to situations with the students, even though the counselor was not able to provide specialized guidance on home economics. In addition, being able to discuss home economics classes with veteran home economics teachers at U Seminar allowed her to surmount her problems. By going to U Seminar, Teacher B had the perfect venue for discussing specialized home economics teaching issues, acquired many useful practical examples, and had the opportunity to broaden her home economics network. In other words, U Seminar served as a psychological anchor, giving her the opportunity to get help and thus calm her worries.

3.3. Problems Faced by Teacher C and the Process for Overcoming Them

Figure 3 shows the difficulties faced by Teacher C and the process for overcoming them. Since Teacher C had wanted to be a homeroom teacher, when she found out that she was going to be a home economics teacher, she was "uneasy because home economics did not evoke the image of classroom learning," and her concerns were aggravated by such things as "there were no teaching materials (left over) from the previous year to give me an idea what the year would be like," and "being a home economics teacher gives you less time with the students, so it took me a long time before I understood all of their home situations." In the interview, she said, "For example, it was hard to take into consideration the home situation of each and every student, and it was difficult to gauge how deeply to go into a question." Looking at the columns in Figure 3, we see that Teacher C experienced many types of difficulties, including practice classes, lectures, and interpersonal relationships.

Teacher C went to other teachers at her school to discuss how to solve these problems, but none of them had any experience teaching home economics, so according to her interview, they usually told her they knew nothing about the topic. Teacher C nevertheless was proactive in talking to the teachers around her, even describing in detail

to the grade's homeroom teacher such things as the content, objectives, and problems of home economics classes and issues concerning special-needs students, so that she built an environment for getting help through discussions. She also got help solving her problems by describing the specific things that were bothering her to the counselor and finding out about other schools' classes and visual aids.

She also benefited from her participation in U Seminar, which connected her with home economics teachers at other schools and gave her more reference materials related to home economics teaching, which she revised based on the situation of the students at her school and put into practice.

In other words, Teacher C actively sought support from teachers around her and gradually created an environment where she could gain their help. Ultimately, she transformed her feelings in a way she expressed as "Next year, I want to take advantage of what I learned this year and try teaching home economics again."

4. Discussion

4.1. Difficulties Facing Novice New Home Economics Teachers

The three teachers we worked with had different experiences. Teacher A was concerned primarily with practice classes; Teacher B's problems mainly related to the students; and Teacher C's problems were diverse. We can attribute these differences to each teacher's view of home economics, view of teaching, and the personnel and physical environments at the schools where they worked. These difficulties, however, encompass both difficulties as home economics teachers and difficulties as novice elementary school teachers.

Let us point out three issues related to difficulties as home economics teachers. The first is caused by the fact that since home economics teachers interact with students only during home economics class, it is more difficult for them to get to know the students. Teacher C stated, "We were often told at university lectures and in research that since home economics is a subject connected to the home,

we should take the students' home environments into account, but I had a lot of trouble understanding how I could find out about which issues to take into account," and, "Since I don't know about the students' home environment, I don't know how deeply to go into the home economics learning content." The second is caused by the fact that since most elementary school teachers have no experience with home economics, there are no teachers at their school with whom they can consult about home economics. There is concern that the anxiety felt by novice home economics teachers will lead to mental stress. The third is caused by the fact that "school events interfere with home economics time, preventing us from making the progress we expected" (Teacher C). When home economics classes and school events overlap, home economics teachers will ask the grade's head teacher for make-up time for the home economics class that conflicted with the event, but that leaves the situation in which it is not known when the home economics class will be scheduled.

The difficulty that all three new elementary school teachers shared was relations with the students. This is the "gap that arises from the difference in the picture of the student you paint in your head and the reality of the student in a classroom setting" (Teacher C). The TEM figure also contains such entries as "don't know where students stumble" (Teacher A), "takes more time than I thought," and "hard to get the students to focus on what I'm talking about" (Teacher B).

4.2. Characteristics of the Process of Novice Home Economics Teachers Overcoming Difficulties

All three of the teachers we studied were concerned when they found out that they would be teaching home economics when they started their jobs, but by winter vacation, when we interviewed them in December and January, they had changed to being confident in wanting to teach home economics a second year. As mentioned above, each teacher encountered different difficulties, but the TEM diagrams in Figures 1,

2, and 3 show that all three had a common response with respect to factors (SGs) that help to overcome those difficulties. In other words, they got help for difficulties related to home economics classes from Teacher U, from more senior teachers they met at U Seminar, and from fellow novice teachers who started the same year. It was college friends, guidance counselors, and school administrators who recommended that these teachers go to the U Seminar. On the other hand, such school administrators as the principal or head teacher, fellow teachers, counselors, and local volunteers were consulted to obtain appropriate advice and support regarding actual students' circumstances and difficulties in interacting with the students. This support was not conceptual advice, but information, practical suggestions, and personal discussions about the students in the class, in response to the specific difficulties being experienced by the novice home economics teachers.

Taking an overview of process in our study, two problems need to be considered with respect to overcoming difficulties faced by novice home economics teachers. The first is that these difficulties were overcome because of efforts made by the teachers in this study. As the TEM figures show, before participating in the U Seminar, all three teachers were in situations they characterized as "not knowing how to proceed in teaching practical skills" (Teacher A), "no idea where to start" (Teacher B), and "with no materials from the previous year, I can't build a yearlong teaching plan" (Teacher C). However, attending the U Seminar led them to consult with local teachers and seek their advice. As Shimahara & Sakai (1991, p. 91) argue, it is fair to say that "a teacher's career socialization process takes the form of an apprenticeship." If no supporters had recommended participation in the U Seminar, as they did in this process, the period during which a novice home economics teacher "had no idea where to begin" might have been longer, and they might not have found themselves able to ask for help. The second is that the supporters in this process were people with whom the survey subjects had an informal

The Process of Overcoming Difficulties Faced by Novice Home Economics Teachers in Elementary Schools

relationship through the teachers' network. In their survey research, Yamazaki et al. (2011, p.211) point out that "the overwhelmingly dominant factors supporting teaching careers in their initial stages are daily and informal, such as advice from more senior teachers and experience interacting with students." Because this informal support is coming from nearby teachers, it not only provides practical and suitable advice for dealing with problems, but also promises to provide support that involves other teachers and volunteers. However, given the small number of elementary school teachers with experience in home economics, meeting with veteran home economics teachers, such as Teacher U, for a consultation is not easy.

U Seminar is thus significant for novice home economics teachers in the following ways. First, it provides support for practical education in home economics. These novices did not know about work tasks, planning, advance preparation, and negotiations, which would have been routine if we had surveyed experienced teachers for our study. The novices were able to obtain from Teacher U and more experienced home economics teachers immediately usable teaching materials, as well as practical knowledge and skills in the form of specific advice on such things as teaching techniques and helpful hints. Second is the broadening of personal networks. Over time, U Seminar, which began with a discussion between Teacher B and Teacher U, added other novice home economics teachers who started at the same time, as well as home economics teachers with several years of experience. Participants could interact with teachers outside their own school and go to see and make use of visual aids at each other's school. Third, besides providing help related to home economic classes, the Seminar was a psychological anchor for the subjects, an opportunity for them to feel secure. For novice home economics teachers, U Seminar became a forum for meeting, consulting with, and checking up on progress with other home economics teachers who had started at the same time and more experienced teachers.

4.3. Challenges for Novice Home Economics Teachers in Overcoming Difficulties

While the three teachers we studied differed in the problems they faced, they shared the following three challenges in overcoming their difficulties. The first was building a support system for talking about home economics; the second was building a system to facilitate their understanding of students' actual living situations; and the third was developing a system to promote participation in training.

4.3.1. Building a Support System for Talking about Home Economics

Although City H had an Elementary School Home Economics Study Group, its members varied in age, so that the topics it addressed as a study group did not leave time to deal with the personal difficulties of novice teachers. Teacher U, who led of this study group, provided individual guidance to novice home economics teachers on a volunteer basis.

Teacher U was a nearby presence for the three subject teachers to go to when they wanted to discuss the difficulties they faced in home economics classes. However, teaching is such a busy lifestyle that few veteran teachers like Teacher U volunteer to coach novice home economics teachers so that they can grow. As Yamazaki (2012, p.49) points out, "The places in daily life for nurturing teachers and human relationships have become sparser, and the functions for nurturing teachers that were used in pre-institutional circumstances have been gutted. We can call this the diminution and gutting of developmental support functions resulting from institutionalization." We need to build a system that provides ongoing support to novice home economics teachers with respect to their individual difficulties, instead of having them bear this burden on their own.

4.3.2. Building a System to Facilitate Understanding of the Students' Actual Living Situations

It is extremely important to understand students' actual living conditions when teaching home economics, which is the study of how we live. From the standpoint of

rational thought, it is also crucial to have in-depth knowledge of certain students' lives when teaching them. As Teacher C told us, "When I was looking after almost 200 students as I was in the first school where I taught home economics, it was all I could do just to remember their names and faces, and it was hard to think about each student's home situation, so when they asked me something, it was hard for me to know how deeply I should delve into the matter." Home economics teachers face the same problems as Teacher C, because it is easy for a homeroom teacher to obtain information about the students in his or her class through daily conversation and observation, while a home economics teacher is responsible for many students and has little time to interact with them outside class. Resolving these difficulties requires building a system that can facilitate understanding of students' actual living conditions.

4.3.3. Developing a System to Promote Participation in Training

Shimahara & Sakai (1991, p.86) point out that some more experienced teachers believe that "the only way for new teachers to improve their teaching skills is to be worried," where "worry" refers to the internal conflict that is indispensable to acquiring teaching skills and is a process of integrating the lessons learned through "practice."

It is certainly the case that in some situations teaching skills must be developed through agonized trial and error, but in the case of novice home economics teachers, since home economics is a subject that entails a lot of practical learning, it is necessary to create a system that promotes participation in training as a forum for early practical learning about such things as basic safety, teaching dos and don'ts, and ways to configure and maintain equipment. Such practical knowledge and skills need to be learned before the teacher fails.

5. Conclusion

Our study focused on three teachers and asked them about the difficulties they faced and the process for overcoming these difficulties. We gathered information in two stages using the three methods of discussions, written questionnaires, and interviews. However, the information we obtained from the teachers was limited. If it were possible, we think a more detailed analysis of information from participant observation at the schools where the teachers work would have allowed us a deeper understanding of the process of overcoming the multi-layered and diverse difficulties the teachers faced. In addition, since in this study we wanted to examine the process for overcoming difficulties, we primarily asked the teachers about support they received as social guides (SGs) in the context of the basic concept of TEM, but getting information about social direction (SD) as an inhibiting factor is crucial as well.

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