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Owning educational change in Korean schools: Three driving forces behind sustainable change (Excerpt)

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Owning educational change in Korean schools: Three driving forces behind sustainable change (Excerpt)

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"Can the innovative educational changes imposed by the pandemic be sustained for the long-term?" That's the question that Taeyeon Kim, Minseok Yang, and Sunbin Lim ask in the third commentary in a series launched by Corrie Stone-Johnson and the Journal of Educational Change. This question builds on the first commentary in that series by Yong Zhao and Jim Watterston – "The changes we need post-Covid" and the second "What can change in schools after the pandemic?" by Thomas Hatch. This week's post provides an excerpt from the third commentary, highlighting they key lessons and implications from the pandemic experiences of educators in the Korean context. The full commentary can be found in the November issue of the Journal of Educational Change.

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered multiple aspects of everyday life, especially those requiring personal interactions and daily routines. As a result, the core practices of things like schooling and student learning have had to be fundamentally revised. Schools across the world have thus adopted policies and practices to facilitate virtual learning, which have forced educators to quickly learn how to design and enact online lessons with limited resources (United Nations, 2020). Schools have invented and established these routines as the "new normal," all while navigating a persistent level of uncertainty. Although COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated the digital divide as well as social inequalities like economic and racial injustice (United Nations, 2020), scholars and educators have argued that this disruption also presents an opportunity for the equitable redesign of school systems (Zhao, 2020).

With massive vaccination efforts, schools are now preparing to go back to "normalcy" for post-COVID-19 education (see Durston et al., 2021; Meckler & George, 2021). In reflecting on the many innovations schools have made during COVID-19 (e.g., online and blended learning, individualized support), it is important to consider Zhao and Watterston's (2021) argument that the educational changes imposed by the pandemic may be unsustainable for the long-term.

While superficial changes in schooling made during the pandemic may not be sustainable, this essay offers a counter-narrative from the Korean context, in which educators re-constructed policies and teaching practices to fill the educational vacuum caused by COVID-19. The lessons we address here build on 23 Zoom interviews (including 17 individual interviews and six focus groups) conducted throughout the 2020 school year with Korean teachers, school and district leaders, and parents across the country. As education researchers residing in the US during the pandemic who previously worked as Korean school teachers, we wanted to present stories of how Korean schools implemented online and hybrid classes without largescale school closures and how educators made meaning of the changes forced by COVID-19.

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What was most striking to us was the ownership of educational change reflected in the educators' narratives. This sense of ownership can be understood as a "mental or psychological state of feeling owner of an innovation" that enables educators to understand how changes are applied and their specific roles in initiating these changes (Ketelaar et al., 2012, p. 5). In navigating and reflecting on the pandemic's unexpected challenges, they placed themselves at the center of efforts to realize "future education." Teachers and leaders thereby perceived educational innovations as both a short-term reaction to the pandemic and as sustainable transformations to lead in the long run. This sentiment was apparent in their responses to the sudden onset of COVID-19, as well as in their approach to schooling a year into the pandemic. For the Korean educators we interviewed, "back to school" does not mean back to pre-pandemic schooling of the past. Although we do not generalize their responses as "the Korean case," our surveys of news articles, books, and online teacher communities in Korea indicate strong aspiration for changes stemming from critiques of pre-pandemic education.

*Image: *

Behind the ownership of sustainable changes: Three driving forces

Throughout the research process, we consistently asked what led the Korean educator participants to take ownership of school changes. As an irresistible force (Stone- Johnson, 2021), COVID-19 has imbued education communities with a sense of urgency and purpose to collectively revise school systems…Echoing the argument that COVID-19 catalyzed the realization of school reforms (Kim et al., in press), we identified three macro-level driving forces in participants' stories that enabled transformations in Korean schools:

- Policy discourse about "future education"
- Professional teaching cultures
- Using bureaucratic administration creatively

Lessons learned: Suggestions for back to school with COVID-19

- Offer a shared space for diverse policy actors
- Adopt hybrid governance to coordinate resources
- Balance commitments to others and self-care

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the structure and practices of education systems around the world. It forced schools to change their core activities from the bottom up and create new ideas and systems to support student learning. Schooling during the pandemic has thus necessarily revealed challenges that must be addressed (e.g., widening achievement gaps), but it also surfaced opportunities for challenging the "old grammar of schooling" in how Korean educators took ownership of educational changes to collectively envision better ways of schooling during and after COVID-19.

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