

Considering the *Hyukshin* School Policy and Education for Promoting Democracy in South Korea

Soo Bin Jang

Department of Educational Studies, St. Mary's College of Maryland, USA

School-based Initiatives and Empowering Student Political Subjectivities

Increasing students' academic performance has been one of the most popular goals of current educational reforms, particularly in the Anglosphere. However, public education has its own tradition of defining its goals in relation to the democratic ethos (Dewey, 1916; Gould, Jamieson, Levine, McConnell, & Smith, 2011). Public schools not only prepare individual citizens to make informed decisions but also can provide students with critical exposures to people with different perspectives at a young age. Students may practice the dispositions and values of democratic living as transformative agents in elementary and secondary schools (Banks, 2008; Fielding, 2001). However, one question to consider is how do we best empower student political subjectivities and foster education for democracy through educational reform?

A growing body of research has described students' roles in educational initiatives around the world. Opposed to dominant images of students as passive recipients of teaching, a number of educators and researchers have noted and problematized the exclusion of student voices in school reform efforts (Bahou, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2006). Scholarships have advocated for the reconfiguration of students' political positions and provided students with legitimate ways to share their insights on learning, teaching, and schooling as alternative methods to improve educational practices (Mitra, 2008; Fielding, 2001, 2004, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2006; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). Some scholars (Baroutsis, McGregor, & Mills, 2016; Jans, 2004; Ranson, 2000), from the aspect of citizenship education, have noted that changing the power dynamics between adults and students may enhance students' political capacities to speak up on their behalf, even beyond classrooms. For example, the empirical analysis by Baroutsis et al. (2016) suggested that equal partnerships between students and teachers can teach the former about *doing* democracy within the civic life of schools.

Research related to student voice initiatives define "student voice" as a student or group of students having the political power to influence decisions around the implementation of educational policies and practices (Holdsworth, 2000). Several typologies have been developed and applied to date to acknowledge the varying degrees of student participation in different initiatives (Hart, 1992; Fielding, 2004; Lodge, 2005; Mitra, 2001); the forms of student involvement vary from being sources of feedback on externally imposed initiatives to acting as an active partner with adults and jointly making the majority of decisions together. In the best sense of the term, "student voice" refers a *dialogue* that requires adults' sincere listening and actual responses to students (Cook-Sather, 2006). The emphasis on the importance of a teacher-student dialogue is also critical in a set of contemporary pedagogic trends including constructivist, critical, multicultural, and antiracist pedagogies (Cook-Sather, 2006).

The *Hyukshin* school program, one of the most effective, ongoing regional-level educational reforms in South Korea right now, aims to improve school practices via empowering students in the following three areas:

curriculum and instruction, leadership and administration, and community partnership (“School *Hyukshin* Support Center,” n.d.). Given that the Korean word *Hyukshin* (혁신) translates essentially as “initiatives” in English, the *Hyukshin* school program broadly refers to a group of similar city- or province-level policies that support a whole-school reform by assuring autonomy from the central offices for a certain period of time. The *Hyukshin* school program, which follows the tradition of progressive education, has been growing, with liberal leadership dominating central and regional educational offices. In this article, I briefly introduce the *Hyukshin* school program’s policy in South Korea and discuss its implications in relation to student voice initiatives and social studies education in Asia.

The Origin of the *Hyukshin* School Movement in South Korea

Although it was not until in 2009 when the *Hyukshin* school program was first adopted as an actual policy, ongoing sporadic but significant school- and classroom-level reform efforts were voluntarily generated and organized by teachers and/or local community members beginning in the late 1990s (Song, 2018a; Kim, 2018). According to Song (2018a) and others (Kim, 2018; Kang, 2013), many of those bottom-up initiatives were organized by members of the Korean Teachers and Educational Workers’ Union (KTU), who led the *Cham-Kyo-Yook* (참교육; literal translation is “true education”) movement, which was founded on three core values: people, democracy, and humanization (Song, 2018a; Kang, 2013). In addition, overseas alternative education experiments—for example, the Waldorf education approach, the Modern School Movement started by Celestin Freinet, and *Helene-Lange-Schule* in Germany—also inspired the policy entrepreneurs who led school-level initiatives (Song, 2018b; Choi, 2018; Kim, 2018a; Kim, 2018b). The shift from reformative efforts to actual *Hyukshin* school program policy was a function of the system of direct election of city and province superintendents that began in 2007. The first directly elected superintendent of Kyunggi Province, Kim Sang-gon, a liberal, immediately implemented the *Hyukshin* school program after he won his race in 2009. Following the model of the Gyeonggi Provincial Office of Education, liberal superintendents in other regions have implemented similar programs over the last 10 years; as of 2017, 14 superintendent offices with 1,174 schools have participated in the *Hyukshin* school program (Kim, 2018). While liberal superintendents have been the strongest advocates of the program, the Ministry of Education within the current democratic Moon administration recently announced that they plan to assume an official position regarding the *Hyukshin* school program (Kim, 2018).

The core idea of the *Hyukshin* school program is simple: empower every entity within a school to create a more participatory and democratic learning experience and living community (“School *Hyukshin* Support Center,” n.d.). The program seeks to implement a truly participatory and egalitarian decision-making model and shared governance (“School *Hyukshin* Support Center,” n.d.). Advocates of the *Hyukshin* school program have suggested an authoritative and bureaucratic school culture to be one of the main problems of the current South Korean education system, which includes strictly a hierarchical administrative structure and a rigid nature of the relationships between administrators, teachers, and students (Song, 2018a; KEN, 2014). At the simplest level, the *Hyukshin* school program is an educational reform that primarily focuses on the reconfiguration of power dynamics within the realm of educational practices.

Student Involvement in *Hyukshin* Schools

Many schools participating in the *Hyukshin* school program have already reported noticeable progress made in the realm of student participation. One of the most prevalent student voice strategies that many *Hyukshin* schools are trying is to redesign the existing student council structure to give students greater responsibilities for planning activities and making decisions. For example, in Kuksabong Middle School, one of the well-known successful *Hyukshin* School cases, students, with teachers' assistance, decided on a collective agreement that would replace the existing conventional discipline system (Yoon, 2018). Their collective agreement covers eight different areas of school life, as follows: (1) classtime manners, (2) hairstyle, (3) language use, (4) attire, (5) phone usage, (6) cleanness and indoor shoes, (7) safe school life, and (8) peaceful school life. Kuksabong Middle School students came up with very specific expectations such as that "students can decide their own hairstyle. However, they should control themselves and try not to use too extreme colors; [having a] perm (wave) is forbidden" (Kuksabong Middle School 2016 Student Council, 2017, p. 122). Students also developed a complex and rigorous system to regularly revisit their shared agreement including a self-assessment check-list, a collective agreement committee, a whole-school community survey, and systematic revision procedures (Kuksabong Middle School 2016 Student Council, 2017).

Among many other strengths of Kuksabong Middle School's approach, their collective decision-making experience regarding a phone-use policy applied during the 2016 academic year demonstrates how the *Hyukshin* school program empowers student voices and teaches about *doing* democracy. Toward the end of the first semester, the student council surveyed all members of the school (e.g., students, parents, and teachers) to reassess their shared agreement; almost 70% of students wanted to amend their phone policy ("Students should not use their phone during a school day. They should submit their phone during a morning meeting and get it back after school. If a student uses his/her phone during a school day, [the] phone will be taken away for a week"). As the student council prepared a whole-school deliberation on this policy, they recruited three student discussion facilitators from each class and provided 10 practicing sessions on different discussion strategies during the break. As soon as the break was over, every class in Kuksabong Middle School had a roundtable discussion about the phone-use policy. In the following week, there was the last public hearing with 15 panels (five representatives from the student, parent, and teacher groups each), where attendees discussed the results of the roundtable discussions. At the end of this meeting, 15 participants anonymously voted on how they would like to implement the final poll, and decided that every member will cast one vote (406 students, 406 parents, and 34 teachers). Out of 846 people, 69.39% of members participated, and 54.7% of those who participated were opposed to amendment; as a result, the phone policy remained (Kuksabong Middle School 2016 Student Council, 2017). How Kuksabong Middle School teachers were able to develop and implement a cross-disciplinary, project-based curriculum—which includes a series of inquiries and a careful scaffolding of decision-making procedures and discussion skills—demonstrates the ways in which the *Hyukshin* school program contributes to education for democracy (Yoon, 2018).

Student clubs represent another common platform for students to participate in *Hyukshin* schools. Students can organize clubs around their common interests, which often yields a great opportunity for students to find an area in which they want to develop and practice their voices. The case of *The Lighthouse for Rights*, a feminist and human rights student club at Samgaksan High School, is a great example of how the *Hyukshin* school program can support such development of student voices. The club started from a literature circle; after

reading *Egalia's Daughters: A Satire of the Sexes* by Gerd Brantenberg, a feminist novel, students voluntarily started to study feminism theories together. They expanded their concerns and interests beyond sexism to heteronormativity, ableism, and ageism. Throughout the year, students in this club initiated a number of interesting activities to share their knowledge and learning about feminism theories with other citizens from both inside and outside Samgaksan High School. Based on their activities and experiences within a school, they participated and spoke as student representatives at the 119th anniversary ceremony of the Declaration of Women's Rights in the National Assembly. The account of one of the active members of *The Lighthouse for Rights*, below, shows that she took the student club as her way to find and develop her voice.

There [were] a number of difficulties in our activities. But, we had a good mentor teacher, friends with common interests, and a *Hyukshin* supervisor teacher who connected us with a number of great opportunities. As we made the best out of those opportunities, we were very proud of ourselves and had many rewarding moments. Although there [is] still a lot of work to be done, we could not have [taken] our first step without Samgaksan High School.

Recently, [a] few people suggested that our work is a bit too radical and expressed their concerns. We took those concerns very seriously and discussed a lot. Finally, we have arrived at a conclusion. Although *The Lighthouse for Rights* is a student club, we want to be seen as a small human rights organization within a school. 'Be kind' doesn't fit with what we pursue. We will not stand neutral, nor will [we ever] negotiate with hate and discrimination (Yoon, 2017).

With teachers' effortful scaffolding, students can be empowered to find the right platform from which they can practice their voices. Upon having small successes within a school, students become able to explore different modes of participation outside the school as well. As the Samgaksan High School case shows, the format of a voluntarily organized student club created around students' genuine interests may provide an effective opportunity to develop necessary knowledge and skills to lead them to have their own voice.

Student Voice Initiatives and Social Studies Education in Asia

Hyukshin schools can evidently create opportunities for students to develop and practice their voices. The reconfiguration of power dynamics within a teacher-student partnership model results in the availability of great learning opportunities for students to practice being a citizen. Also, it creates a good momentum to be mindful about relationships in a learning community, which naturally creates better environment for collaboration. This could be a particularly meaningful outcome for an extensively competitive Asian academic context.

However, echoing prior student voice initiative literature (Cook-Sather, 2006), the student council approach of many *Hyukshin* schools may reinforce existing hierarchy and privilege among students. Students who already have political capacities to be a part of leadership may thus obtain more opportunities to exercise their voices. For the majority of students who are not part of a student council, more carefully designed scaffolding and extensive interventions to find, develop, and practice their political agency are required. This necessitates that educators and researchers pay more attention to those students who are not in current leadership roles and focus on designing and implementing adequate and sufficient intervention programs.

One of the commonly shared images of learning in the East Asian cultural context is that students passively listen to teachers' knowledge delivery. In this model, students are not expected to use their own voice;

among extremely authoritative educators, students having a voice was viewed as a sign of being rude, which requires punishment. The fact that the majority of people are not familiar with the concept of student voice in the learning setting implies that there needs to be tremendous scaffolding efforts invested along the way. Until a good number of educators and students counter the image of passive learning, the implementers of the *Hyukshin* school program need to handhold students.

In addition to the traditional image of passive learning, the issue of how to conceptualize childhood is another critical contextual element that must be paid attention to by advocates of the program. Student voice initiatives identify students as equal counterparts of adults and sufficient citizens of our community (as opposed to “citizens-to-be”). Such an understanding of childhood is vastly different from the perspective that associates childhood with innocence, vulnerability, and a need for protection (Jans, 2004). As the implementation of the *Hyukshin* school program progresses, more thoughts should be paid toward how we might reconcile the traditional Confucius understanding of childhood with the notion of student voice and thus send out a coherent message throughout the educational system.

Future Trajectory

The Gyeonggi Provincial Office of Education was the first to start the *Hyukshin* school program in 2009; since then, similar policies have been implemented in 14 other regions with progressive superintendents including Seoul, Gangwon-do, Jeollabuk-do, Gwangju, and Jeju. Furthermore, the number of participating schools is continually growing nationwide (Song, 2018a).

On the issue of the *Hyukshin* school program, views are deeply polarized. Conservatives have labeled the *Hyukshin* school program as a “left-wing” educational policy and have claimed that the schools that participate in the program significantly perform worse on standardized achievement tests than those that do not (Kim, 2018; Yoo & Kwon, 2016). One of the factors that contributed to this polarization is the fact that the core principles of the *Hyukshin* school program originated from the work of the KTU teachers’ union, an organization that receives criticism for being “too” far left, particularly from the last two conservative administrations. Another factor that could potentially contribute to mobilizing different factions who share conservative ideology is symbolism; the *Hyukshin* school program, along with other education policies such as the free lunch policy and the Students’ Human Rights Ordinance, became a political symbol to signify a superintendent’s liberal and progressive political stance. The polarization was also evident in the media, as Yoo and Kwon (2016) found that a conservative (*Chosun Ilbo*) and a liberal (*Hankyoreh*) newspaper not only had a difference in tones but also in assumptions and expectations: while the aforementioned liberal media source assumed that public schools should serve the education for democracy, the conservative newspaper surmised that schools should focus predominantly on academic achievement. In response to the conservatives’ consistent questioning of student achievements, Bae and Kim (2016) determined that students’ academic performance in the *Hyukshin* schools was not, in fact, inferior as compared with students’ abilities in other public schools with similar conditions; moreover, they confirmed that, in the *Hyukshin* schools, the percentage of academically struggling students was actually gradually lessened in the long-term.

In 2017, President Moon, who holds a Democratic Party affiliation, appointed Kim Sang-gon, a former superintendent of Gyeonggi Province and a strong advocate of the *Hyukshin* school program, as his first Minister

of Education. The *Hyukshin* school program was included in the president's agenda management; this could mean that the Ministry of Education and regional education offices may work together to accelerate the implementation of the program or even to take the policy into another phase entirely (Kim, 2018). On the other hand, there is a chance that the *Hyukshin* school program may lose its voluntary or experimental aspects as the Ministry of Education begins to add regulations and guidelines based on bureaucracy. Either way, it is an undeniable truth that the *Hyukshin* school program has contributed beneficially to South Korean citizenship education by actually committing to the common goal of a democratic ideal.

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