

# Teacher Research in South Korean Early Childhood Education: New Initiative as Professional Development

Mina Kim

San Francisco State University,  
San Francisco, USA

Bokyung Kang

Preschool Academy, Seoul,  
Republic of Korea

This study was designed to explore how Korean preschool and kindergarten teachers understand teacher research and utilize it in professional development. Two teachers, two site directors, and one district supervisor were interviewed in South Korea. Data were collected in multiple ways: (1) open-ended individual interviews; (2) participants' documentation (e.g., past or current teacher action research, reports, lesson plans, and journals); and (3) researcher's own experiences and memories in a teacher education program which highlighted the principle of teacher research. First, findings showed that Korean teachers, directors, and district supervisors were not familiar with the term "teacher research" due to diverse terms in Korean that refer to teacher action research; Second, Korean teachers did not consider their classroom-based experimental inquiry to be teacher research as it is not published; Third, Korean teachers conducted action research in their classrooms to develop their practice for other teachers' use, never used a self-study framework; Fourth, teacher action research competitions were centralized in the K-12 public schools; Fifth, despite that teacher action research was mandatory for public kindergarten teachers, Korean teachers encountered dilemmas teaching and doing research. Overall, this study contributes to early childhood educators and administrators in South Korea by introducing them about what is teacher research, and helping them comprehend teacher research as a form of self-initiated professional development.

*Keywords:* ECE (early childhood education), teacher research, professional development

## Introduction

What is missing from the knowledge base for teaching... are the voices of the teachers themselves (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992, p. 2)

For most of our ECE (early childhood education) graduate students in a state university in US, teacher research course in particular was a new learning experience. It introduced to them reflective practice and teacher research inquiry as a methodology, which focused on self-study through memories, poems, and narratives on personal and professional experiences. Especially, international students were very fascinated with this method and they often confessed that if they had learned about teacher research earlier in their teaching career, they might have handled classroom issues more smoothly. Thus, we believed that teacher research can help teachers find better solutions for their classroom issues through observing children, talking about issues with other teachers and parents, and keeping up with current research. This was a great

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Mina Kim, Ph.D., assistant professor, Graduate College of Education, San Francisco State University.  
Bokyung Kang, M. A., director, Preschool Academy.

professional development process and made us wonder whether other teachers in Asia, particularly, South Korean teachers perceived and utilized teacher research in a similar way as we did in this social context. This study aimed to explore how Korean preschool/kindergarten teachers understand teacher research and apply it into their practice. Two major questions for this study were developed as follow: First, what perspectives do South Korean preschool and kindergarten teachers have on teacher research? Second, how do South Korean preschool and kindergarten teachers utilize teacher research in their practice, if they have used?

### **What Is Teacher Research?**

Teacher research is a form of qualitative research where teachers research their own practice as a form of personal, professional, and political action (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Kincheloe, 2003; Loughran, I. Mitchell, & J. Mitchell, 2002; Meyers & Rust, 2003; Meier & Henderson, 2007). Teachers use their insider perspective in educational settings to improve teaching and learning, and typically these approaches have a social justice focus so that teachers shift their practice to increase access and equity to quality instruction. It may result in rethinking and reconstructing the meaning of teaching and the approach that teachers take to children (Stremmel, 2002). Hubbard and Power (2003) claimed that teacher research will result in changes to the teachers, not only in their methods, but also in their teaching philosophies and attitudes towards students. Teacher research in the US has been alternately called teacher action research, practitioner research, action research, and teacher-as-researcher.

In Northern American society, teacher research can play an important role regarding enhancing professional and personal growth through inquiry if teachers adapt their teaching. Meier and Henderson (2007) noted that conducting teacher research will open a new window for teachers:

When teachers undertake research, they deepen and improve their teaching relationships both with children and with one another as professionals. The process offers an innovative approach in strengthening the professional development of early childhood professionals. (p. 2)

Although Meier and Henderson (2007) defined teacher research as “self-regulating, meaning that it begins with teachers themselves”, we were still perplexed by the concept of self-study. How could personal stories, field notes, teacher journals and children’s work be the part of research and how would a teacher play an essential role in research? One of our graduate students who was also a teacher of young children noted that:

I see teacher research as a tool to look critically at my own teaching practice and as a first step to be able to make improvements in own teaching practice. As I see, teacher research may not have affected my relationship with parents, but it affected my perspective. It affected maybe my relationships to people around me at school. However I think I am more aware of what is going on since my first teacher research project started. (Teacher Journal Entry, April 22, 2009)

The researchers had a similar experience when we first conducted teacher research. Teacher research did not change our relationship with children or our teaching practice immediately, but it changed teaching philosophy and perspective on teaching or education in general as a new format of professional development. Teacher research is not only providing final conclusions, but also helping educators to see teaching as an on-going process. Through it, teachers can understand how children think and learn, and teachers also can learn from children about how to teach well (Ballenger, 1999).

### **Teacher Research in South Korea**

Meier and Henderson (2007) defined teacher research in ECE as a study of “the self, focused on teachers’ and caregiver’s daily interactions with children, families and teaching colleagues” (p. 7). Teacher research is a form of qualitative research, but the term and definition of teacher research are diverse in education. To some, teacher research comes up with images of studies conducted by teachers that focus on immediate solution or action and use the term “action research” (Johnson, 2003; Zeichner, 2003). To others, it refers to an on-going process in which practitioners adopt a reflective stance to their practice. In this perspective, teachers’ prior and present knowledge is the main resource and it does not necessarily change behaviors or create a plan of action (Ballenger, 1999; Meier & Henderson, 2007; Zeichner, 1996).

Using this definition, we searched for examples of teacher research in the Korean academic literature through journal articles, books, master thesis, and any doctoral dissertations related to teacher research. Yet, little information about teacher research in Korean academic literature was revealed. We did, however, find some research in the K-12 Korean educational field when the keyword “Action Research” (Choi, 1998; Hong, 1985; Kim, 2004, 2008) was used. Action research was introduced into Korean academia in the late 1980s, but most of them conducted in elementary and secondary school settings. In addition, teacher action research was translated into diverse terms, such as field study, action research, reflective action research, and field research.

According to Henderson and Kim (2009), some scholars introduced action research in ECE setting in Korean journals. The research claimed that teacher action research was necessary to improve teaching practice as well as to change in the culture of teaching and learning in ECE setting (Lee, 2004; Shon, Son, & Jung, 2008). Those studies introduced teacher action research as a new way of Master’s degree thesis methodology related to teacher-as-researcher concept in the graduate school of education program. These studies regarded action research as a bridge between research and teaching practice. Henderson and Kim (2009) noted that, however, “None of the Korean teachers or academic could imagine that teacher research could be the focus of their own ideas and thoughts on their teaching practice” (p. 15). It points out that Korean teachers and scholars have not highlighted self-awareness or self-learning process in this type of inquiry.

In sum, based on definition of “self-regulating”, there was little or no research that has been done in ECE setting in South Korea (Henderson & Kim, 2009). What we learned from this literature review was teacher action research as a newly rising research inquiry methodology in ECE. However, the term teacher research or the use of self-study in research was not introduced and it was still new in this ECE field.

### **Methodology**

As this study examined current preschool/kindergarten teachers’ conceptual understanding of teacher research as a professional development, we chose a methodology that would allow us access to their thoughts and ideas about this concept. Several scholars (Janesick, 1998; Popkewitz, 1984; Spradley, 1979) have described that qualitative methodology allows for a detailed account of an informant’s experiences and ideas. Particularly, the narrative analysis method was employed for this study as a means of understanding data. We selected methods of data collection and analysis by utilizing this tradition of interpretive, qualitative, ethnographic research by which we could explore how and why they developed the concepts of this inquiry method in their practice.

### **Participants**

The purposeful sampling method (Patton, 1980) was used in recruiting participants for this study. Due to the nature of the preschool and kindergarten system in Korea, various criteria were applied to contact possible informants: type of preschool, years of teaching experience, education background, etc.. Several preschool/kindergarten site directors, their teachers, and district supervisors in Korea were contacted by phone. Eventually, three preschool/kindergarten teachers and a district supervisor were employed in this study. One classroom teacher and a district supervisor earned a doctoral degree in ECE and the other two teachers also had a minimum of Bachelor's degree in ECE related fields in Korea. Their teaching experience ranges were varied from four to 15 years. Two teachers were working in private preschools and one in a public preschool/kindergarten.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected mainly in two different ways: (1) open-ended individual interviews; and (2) participant's journals or documented work (e.g., past or current teacher journals, reports, lesson plans, and/or any types of research). First, open-ended interview was the primary method for data collection for this study. Individual interview lasted for approximately one hour, and each informant was interviewed twice. Every interview was audio taped and field notes were taken. Extensive and detailed field notes had kept from interviews with participants. Second, we reviewed any work documents, such as Korean teachers' past and current teacher journals, lesson plans, class reports, and their any research related to teaching which had been done by teachers themselves.

### **Data Analysis**

We analyzed data using an "indexing" data analysis tool (Hubbard & Power, 2003). First, the semi-structured interview and all data gathered from the four interviewees (notes and audiotapes) were transcribed and reviewed. Next, we numbered each transcription, journal entry, data memo, participant's work piece, documentation, and photos. Lastly, we crystallized them to generate several themes and then categorized emerging themes into several different topics. Hubbard and Power (2003) described usage of multiple sources to support findings, which is called "triangulation" in qualitative research (p. 124). This research employed members checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing to establish the credibility and reliability of the findings and interpretation.

## **Discussion**

### **What Is Teacher Research: Similar, but not the Same**

All of the informants of this study expressed that they had never heard of a term "teacher research" before. After the researcher explained and presented the possible translated terms in Korean, teachers seemed like they heard of a couple of terms. In fact, the term "teacher research" could be used interchangeably with teacher action research, practitioner research, action research, collaborative oral inquiry, and teacher-as-researcher in the Northern American academia (Henderson & Kim, 2009). Yet, Korean teachers or educators were not aware of the various terms. That is why Korean teachers believed that they had never heard about teacher research. Song, a private school teacher, said,

You mean action research? I heard about action research, teacher journal writing and reflective practice. I learned a

little bit about journal writing and reflective practice when I was an undergraduate student. Action research is a qualitative research method, which I learned in my graduate program but I have never heard about teacher research.

Eunjoo, a public kindergarten teacher also explained,

Well... I have only heard about Field Study, and if you are asking me about field study done by in-service public school teachers, I can tell you about Individual Teaching Demonstration Competition.

As seen from the interviews, these teachers had heard and known an idea of classroom-based inquiry methods, such as action research, field study, self-supervision, reflective action research, reflective practice, and/or teacher journal writing. However, many teacher research scholars argued that teacher research is not quite the same as action research. Based on what researchers emphasized on action research (either teaching demonstration or reflection), their interpretations on this type of research were varied and this led to different understanding of action research for in-service and pre-service teachers (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 2008; Himley, 2000; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Some Korean scholars translated action research as “field study”, because it took place in a classroom and was conducted by practitioners to improve the quality of teaching instruction. They focused on teachers’ actions and problem solving skills in actual classroom settings. As a result, the term “field study” has been used most commonly among teachers and educators instead of saying action research or teacher research (Kim, 2008).

Another possible translated term “self-supervision” was equivalent to the idea of teacher research. The district supervisor, Moon said,

Well... I’m not sure about teacher research but Korean teachers spend a lot of time in their professional developments. Self-supervision is one way to improve their practice. For example, teachers using self-supervision first choose topics and prepare reports. Through watching a video-recording of their lesson, the teachers self-evaluate their strengths, weaknesses and make some suggestion for changes in teaching.

Even though the district supervisor made a connection between teacher research and self-supervision, the definition of self-supervision was too broad to be regarded as a teacher research. Choi (1996) saw self-supervision is a way of professional development and stressed self-regulation as well as self-motivation in the supervision process. Lee (2004) also defined that self-supervision as a self-supervised process of developing professionalism. In a self-supervision process, teachers usually focus more on self-achievements because teachers’ knowledge and practice are self-assessed and need to be self-evaluated and confirmed by district supervisor (Choi, 1996). Self-supervision is usually initiated and done by teachers, to review and assess their own teaching practice, therefore, self-supervision cannot be understood as a self-evaluation. However, this is a key difference between self-supervision and self-study. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) described teacher research as “a way of knowing process” as an insider (p. 151). It means that in this form of research, solutions are not to change a child or teaching practice itself, but to understand and have diverse perspectives on teaching practice (Brown & Jones, 2001; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Himley & Carini, 2000). Thus, teachers’ personal stories and children’s voices, which are significant elements in teacher research, were not highly valued in the form of Korean teachers’ self-supervision.

### **Distinguished Criteria to Be Research**

When these teachers were asked about teacher research, they confessed that they pictured a long and complicated research paper, survey, or dissertation published in any authoritative journals, because the term

“research” referred to publication in academic sphere in general (Kim, 2008). Moreover, they explained that most of teacher action researches they have known were related to write their Master thesis or Doctoral dissertations to meet university requirements or submit them to the district supervisors for annual teaching evaluations etc.. It shows that these informants had a conservative idea of “research” in teaching and this played a significant role for these informants to acknowledge the concept of teacher research. Eunjoo explained,

It is not common to publish teacher action research in journals. Recently, more teachers in practice go to graduate school and those teachers who are taking graduate courses often publish their studies in journals but not classroom-based research like teacher action research. I’ve not seen or heard any cases of that so far.

All of my interviewees could not relate their classroom-based inquiry studies to a type of teacher research, as they were not able to think of publishing those types of research in any research journals or magazines. Thus, teachers like Eunjoo have not thought about her journal writings, classroom-based inquiry, and many reports, which she submitted to the district supervisor as research. Song also had a similar perspective on teacher research:

When teachers faced problems in the classroom, they consulted with other teachers and tried to find a solution together. For example, last year, a head teacher presented a research titled “How to enforce a safety education for the children”. This process was very informal and teachers shared with other teachers her case study and done. I mean, there was no obligation to produce a formal report or presentation to present in a district or conference, etc.. That is why we do not think it is a research: just a teacher sharing.

Jimin, a private kindergarten teacher, added an interesting situation regarding teacher as a researcher in the preschool and kindergarten settings in Korea. She explained,

If the district supervisor from the Ministry of Education asks for a formal presentation of a research for classroom teachers, the pressure is completely different. They select a team or members of the research: Usually some teachers, who work in university-affiliated preschool, will be chosen to do research. In that case, teachers usually focus on one research topic, such as the social or literacy development. These selected teachers plan and collect data for an academic year. Teachers will observe the children, videotape their interaction with children, instruction, and receive feedback from co-teachers or a head teacher. Teachers who have never conducted those kinds of research process will say they have never heard about teacher research.

Much research on teacher research illuminates that teacher research is the emphasis on practical application for the teachers themselves, rather than presenting or showing in public to share. Sharing in formal ways is not an essential part of teacher research. However, both Eunjoo’s and Song’s comments proved that these classroom-based inquiries were not considered as a type of teacher research due to this traditional interpretation of a term “research”. Frankly, this cultural influence impacted the process of introducing teacher action research in the Korean educational field. According to the study of Yoon, Y. I. Park, and S. Y. Park (1999), when Korean scholars brought the idea of teacher action research into Korean academia, they broke down the process of conducting teacher research and highlighted the process of action research (e.g., the first stage is to plan, and the second stage is to act, the third is to observe, ... at last, publication).

Sharing results or findings of research is also imperative in teacher research. Stenhouse (1981) emphasized teacher research as “systematic, critical inquiry made public” (as cited in Meier & Henderson, 2007, p. 7). However, the forms of sharing this information are not limited unlike traditional types of research. It can be published and presented anyway and anytime. Meier and Henderson (2007) claimed that school staff meeting, conversation with parents, and/or sharing of display panels can be a few examples of sharing teacher research with colleagues. More important point of this sharing is to support other teachers and colleagues to reflect their

practice with different perspectives to improve their own practice.

Another core element of TR is including children (or students) in their research and gaining some implications from them to learn about how to teach (Hubbard & Power, 2003). However, the purpose of teacher action research for Korean teachers was usually interpreted and implemented differently. Identifying issues and problems, seeking for solutions for fixing them, and finally, improving teaching instruction as well as skills are three major aims of the research. Nevertheless, the majority of the teacher action research topics were strongly tied to curriculum and instruction, not about children or issues created by learners in class (Lee, Kim, Kim, Lee, & Cho, 2004). Eunjoo highlighted this point with cultural perspectives:

If I point out the difference between American teachers' and that of Koreans', the concept of "we" are more important than "I" in my culture because teachers' research is supposed to contribute to all children in the classroom rather than one single child.

This notion explained a critical point to understand these teachers' limited understanding on the idea of teacher as researcher. Throughout the interviews, they presented although they were also engaged in many different kinds of classroom based inquires, they were not able to extend the ideas of these classroom inquires as teacher research or a way of professional development. It means, despite of the fact that Korean teachers were also involved in many different types of teacher research to some extent, they cannot or do not utilize this value of teacher research as a means of professional development in the practice.

#### **Real Issues: Large Class and Lack of Time**

In the interviews, these teachers were asked whether they would like to do this type of research, self-study or teacher research as a professional development to improve their teaching as well as to understand their students better and more. Even though they started matching the idea of teacher as researcher with some classroom-based research, which they have been doing on a regular basis, they hesitated to say yes. The first and major concern that these teachers had to come up with was the high ratio of teacher to child (1:32 in public preschool/kindergarten). Song mentioned:

I could have written any reports if I had a few children in my class. I have too many children in my class (1-32 for 4-5 years old). I cannot even arrange small group work for children because I cannot manage thirty children at once. It seems like TR is important for my professional development, but it is too demanding for me. For another work, I like the idea that teachers do a research, but it is actually impossible in my classroom setting. Before and after class, I have to ride a bus with children and drop them off in each child's home and it always takes more than an hour. After that, we have to do a lot of chores like cleaning the classroom, bathroom, filling out daily classroom management report, and preparing activities for the next day. Moreover, I have to collect children's work and had to comment on them for their portfolio. This is a heavy duty for teachers in this center, made me stay in the school until late night. Thus, it is impossible to observe children in the middle of class as American teachers do. I used try to observe children using many different methods such as field notes, post-its, check-list, and anecdotes, but I cannot find the most effective way to do as I have to care for 32 children in my class.

Unlike many social misconceptions, teachers in various levels are occupied with many different tasks after teaching classes or preparing classes. This is pretty common in educational fields and will not be unique or special. However, as Song stated, she, a preschool teacher, was involved in too many duties in her class: She even cleaned her classroom and children's bathroom on top of bussing children and developing curriculum for each day. In addition, she was required to fill out notes and comments on 32 students on an individual evaluation form called portfolio every day. More importantly, she was doing it by herself for 32 children in her

classroom. This high teacher to child ratio is major and chronic issue in Korean ECE and it becomes a major obstacle for teachers to feel adapting teacher research as a way of professional development.

As mentioned, Song had no break time during the day to do a class preparation unlike most American teachers who use naptime for their classroom preparation. That is why she had to stay late after the school for class preparation. Most of preschools do not arrange a naptime for 3–5 years old as preschool/kindergarten in Korea is regarded as an educational institution and expected to do more academic activities rather than “caring”. At the same time, co-teaching, teacher assistant, or parent teacher system is not fully developed yet, majority of kindergarten teachers have to have minimum of 32 children at 5–6 years old in their classes. This high teacher to child ratio is a major issue and needed to be seriously dealt with as many teachers see it as their major concerns in their field.

Another concern for teachers to face as obstacles for adapting teacher research is to develop hand-made educational materials for their classes. For a long time, Korean ECE field has encouraged teachers to develop their own teaching materials due to the shortage of budget and the lack of teaching resources in the classroom. And it is still taken for granted that teachers make their own teaching materials by hands. Eunjoo shared her teacher journal to show her daily schedule in her school and it is most of preschool/kindergarten teachers’ daily work schedule looked like:

I arrived at seven thirty this morning. Although the class starts at nine o’clock, children start coming at eight o’clock and if I’m late, there is no one to greet the children! As soon as the children arrive, I helped them settle into their classroom routines. They have many activities and centers to choose from while I reviewed the correspondence from home to see if there is any information I needed to know about each child. At nine o’clock I introduced new handmade educational materials for their individual activities. 32 five-year-old children were sitting on the floor and listening to how to play with the material. Groups of four to five children at a time played in the dramatic are, literacy area, art area, math and science area, and the block area. As I have no teacher assistant, I am usually busier during this free choice time to do many different tasks including monitoring children. After clean-up it is snack time! I made a storyboard last week and it seemed like children liked it.

At noon, the children lined up and I took them to the school cafeteria for lunch. After lunch, morning group children go home with the letter of the new weekly lesson plans. I have put it in their binders while they had lunch so that parents were informed about the new curriculum. After they went home, a senior volunteer (usually the 4th or 5th graders from elementary school) came and I finally could have a thirty-minute break. Yet, I was still working on writing up official reports for the principle about classroom management, facility, and the field trip schedule. After the short break, I had a large group game for the afternoon group children. Even though this afternoon group went home, my work was not done yet: I had to clean the bathroom, the classroom, and arranged teaching materials in each area every day. Even tomorrow I have to change display on classroom walls so that I can put children’s work on them. Wish I had a teacher assistant who can work together... (Teacher Journal Entry, November 14, 2012)

Eunjoo’s daily schedule showed how they played a role as a teacher in classroom and this made teachers not to even think about doing a research in class. Jimin also mentioned her heavy duty as a teacher in class and did not have any desire to do an extra work like teacher research:

If my director or supervisor ask me to do teacher research, I would do it because I should follow what my supervisor or director ask for. But I will consider it as another time-consuming work I have to do which will make me simply busier, rather than my own professional development process. All the documents or reports for director or supervisor should be typed neatly which will bother me a lot, but I might do it for my director, not for me.

When Jimin was asked whether she would use teacher research for professional development means, this was her answer: She did not see it as a tool for her professional development. For her doing teacher research in



class would be an additional work, which she could not be willing to do. An interesting point is that Jimin confessed that she would do it if she was demanded by authority, which cannot be met with the purpose of self-study elements in teacher research.

Through these interviews, these teachers mentioned a lot of their heavy working loads, such as high teacher to child ratio, unreasonable daily schedule including cleaning bathrooms and bussing with children, as well as the lack of teaching resources, as obstacles for doing teacher research. However, interestingly, we found out that even though they were not aware of it as going to teacher research path, they have been engaged in various types of teacher action research or field study, depending on their circumstances or situations. Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos (2009) noted,

In South Korea, for example, only about 35 percent of the teacher's working time is spent on classroom instruction. There, and in other nearby countries, teachers devote non-classroom time to collaborative planning, lesson study, peer observation, and action research. (p. 15)

Her statement is not particularly applied to the ECE field, but to a public preschool in our informants which briefly shared types of research public preschool teachers could be able to access in the system. In the following, succinct explanations of research opportunities for pre/kindergarten teachers in Korea will be described.

### **Classroom-Based Teacher Inquiry: Possible Teacher Research?**

Although preschool and kindergarten education is not mandated for Koreans, most of public elementary schools include kindergarten classes or preschool classes if the school has the capacity to do so (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2006). Thus, those public preschools and kindergartens are governed and managed by the Ministry of Education like every elementary school, which is compulsory. In addition, the South Korean Ministry of Education has provided the National Standardized Kindergarten Curriculum and every public kindergarten has to implement the curriculum in their classrooms (Moon, 2006). In this situation, the teacher management system is also controlled by the school district. This creates a whole different picture of the teacher evaluation system in terms of public preschool/kindergarten (not for private preschool teachers) in Korea. Teacher action research is utilized as a form of evaluations in public school system.

We noticed in our interview that public preschool/kindergarten teachers had to conduct numerous research studies annually and submitted the research reports to the school district for review and evaluation of their teaching and curriculum. They emphasized that they had conducted research in their classroom or within the school, sometimes presented the findings in front of audiences, developed a report or article, and submitted these reports to the school district as one of their teacher evaluation materials. This means that, at the beginning of every academic year, public kindergarten teachers are summoned and gathered with their school district supervisors to be informed of the annual educational curriculum plans, to have their classroom supervision schedules and the teacher evaluation plan designated, as well as schedules for conducting experimental research.

This experimental research schedule is regarded and considered as teacher action research as they "conduct" research without any academic researchers' help or support. However, the school district supervisors usually give the research topic or title, and they usually examine teaching instruction strategies to see the effectiveness of it. For example, when ECE scholars insisted the importance of portfolio as a new and effective way to assess children's learning, some public kindergarten teachers were assigned by the school district to

assess their children with this method for one academic year and then submit a report (similar to a research paper format) at the end of the year, followed by an open house. In this open house, the teachers presented the collection of portfolios of each child's work and progress. Moreover, other teachers in the same school district are required to attend this open house as a part of their professional developments.

Actually, there are two different types of experimental research to be done for the district: (1) a group project that teachers in one kindergarten school can conduct together; and (2) the individual teaching instruction competition, in which a single teacher applies for the competition, organizes the research, creates a research topic, and conducts the research for a year. The rest of process is the same: The teacher will have a presentation and submit the report paper to get evaluated by the school district. Eunjoo explained these two types of experimental research respectfully:

It takes a year to plan to participate in the individual teaching instruction competition. You should present three times in front of parents, other teachers, and the district supervisors. The final step is demonstrating one's lesson in front of the district supervisors and education specialist and they will evaluate the lesson and rank them in order to decide first or the second prizes. A good classroom demonstration means sharing teaching techniques and skills with other teachers through books or CD-ROM. Yet, the participation in this competition is voluntary, not required. In Korea, public school teachers including kindergartens teachers, have a group research lesson community and teachers in the same district are supposed to meet once a month. Each community is assigned on different topics and teachers in the same community work and share information monthly. For example, the topic of my group is "our culture and our community". My group does an experimental research related to my city, then will share the results with other teachers at the end of academic year. The presentation will be held in an open house.

As this public kindergarten teacher explained, they "do" a lot research throughout the year. In reality, they are "doing" teacher action research as it is defined as research done by teachers. Needless to say, the culture creates different dimensions and usages of teacher action research in the South Korean educational system. However, these studies are not published in any research journals or in academic paper format. Instead, they are assessed and evaluated internally in school districts, after which they are bound as a book and uploaded into the school district's website to be shared among teachers.

Unlike public kindergarten teachers, submitting journal writings, or doing teacher action research is not required for private kindergarten teachers. Yet, they collect children's work and materials as a portfolio and share with parents at parent conferences. Jimin said,

I make portfolio for each child and use it when I have parent conferences because parents want to know about their children's development in details. Unlike public schools, private schools depend on tuition from parents and I as a teacher have to fulfill the parents' expectations. The portfolios help me communicate better with parents, better understand each child, and help me evaluate myself outside the classroom.

Jimin's experience is noteworthy as reflective practice is a key point in teacher research, and documenting children's work is also a main part of data set in teacher research in general. Thus, portfolio or documentation can be interpreted and implemented as a possible way to engage teachers in reflective practice teacher research in reality. However, based on a definition of teacher research with a self-study focus, these Korean research opportunities examples are not teacher research: The research is not initiated and developed by teachers; they do not include personal stories and/or struggles to improve their own teaching practice; they do not involve any deepening self-awareness or self-understanding about the topic upon which they inquired. Rather, it is more like research where teachers are relegated to a third person position and designated to look at different

instructional strategies as decided by the district. While the researcher reviewed teacher action research related articles and empirical studies, the researcher found a set of interesting studies that promoted self-supervision in ECE teacher evaluation management system (Jo & Beak, 2002; Jung, 2005; Kwon, 2005; We & Lee, 1998). These articles advocated the needs of reforming the teacher evaluation system and suggested a self-supervision system. Literally, self-supervision is a method by which a teacher will supervise and evaluate one's own teaching practice. However, this approach mainly focuses on teaching practices and improving instructional strategies (Jo & Beak, 2002; Jung, 2005; Kwan, 2005; Lee, 1996; We & Lee, 1998). Overall, there is little of this kind of research done by Korean ECE teachers.

### **Conclusions: Teacher Research as Reflection Process**

Action research provides rich opportunities and a wealth of tools for doing this and for looking deeply at ourselves, our settings, and our practices—the heart of good teaching and place where we can make a difference for the children in our care. (Rust, 2006, p. 106)

At the end of interview, we strongly believed that Korean early childhood educators and administrators can reconsider using research as a way of professional development as they were involved in many different types of research to improve their teaching and instruction. One important element they have to highlight is to reflect their own practice to get improved through research. As presented previously, most Korean teachers thought it was challenging to understand how getting involved in research can be a different type of professional development. Because Korean in-service teacher educational system is relatively centralized and school culture is hierarchical, administrators assume controlling teachers' professional development is necessary, rather than let them initiate their own professional development through reflective practice. Nevertheless, we found out Korean teachers were willing to use teacher research for professional development. Eunjoo stated,

How can I continue to do my personal research in this environment? Well, once I did my first research, which was my dissertation research, becomes a useful tool as I learned something new from that. Back in the past, I heavily relied on what I learned from books and journals published by famous scholars. At that time, I learned that teachers should not have physical contacts with children. I did not have any kind of physical touch. As time went by, I felt something was missing in my practice. When I patted the children's back, I felt that we connected much more quickly. I realized that knowledge from books and others opinions cannot make my classroom better. Now, I strongly believe that I need to apply what I learned from my own experience and the children's personalities to my teaching practice. Doing a research requires a lot of effort and time, but it actually does not take tremendous time to do it. Although it is recommended to use the National Standardized Curriculum, it is like a guide-book, not a set of curriculum. I do not need to do all the activities in my practice. I'd rather do a research.

Even though Eunjoo was confused with the term "teacher research" at the beginning of the interview, she actually knew the critical point of teacher research. Doing a research provided a new perspective of teaching practice, philosophy, and belief for teachers and it led a professional development (Ryu & Lee, 2006). It seems that current classroom teachers are well aware of the implication of teacher research and we saw it was hopeful and promising that these teachers can choose teacher research as one of the options for professional development in their career. Even though the National Standardized Kindergarten Curriculum is strongly recommended to be used in each classroom, especially in public preschool/kindergarten classroom, preschool and kindergarten teachers are relatively free from implementing the standard curriculum and have more freedom and flexibility to develop lesson plans for their classrooms compared to elementary and secondary

schools. This means that as Eunjoo stated teacher research is another possibility for teachers for their professional development to become a better teacher for their students in the specific class.

Many scholars highlighted that conducting a research in a classroom is an essential part of professional development (Johnson, 2003; Rommerman, 2003). This type of research emphasizes a teacher as a researcher, and Campbell (2003) noted that it is a critical perspective in future continuing professional development policy. Many teacher researchers commented that they tried to seek out solutions from outside of resources, such as books, and professional research publications, rather than inside of their own classroom whenever they faced a problem or issue related to children, curriculum, or even teaching in their classes. Now, they strongly believed that teacher research could develop their own lens through which to look for solutions for improving their teaching and learning. They began to look into teaching practice deeply and listened to children in the classroom to answer their classroom issues (Huang, 2008; Telahun, 2007; Yuen, 2007). As there is little research done by Korean teachers, the concept of teacher as researcher is still new to them. However, it is obvious that teacher research could be a great tool for teachers to reflect their own practice and rethink their teaching instruction as well as curriculum.

### **Suggestion: Teacher Research in Korean ECE**

Throughout conducting this study in Korea, we had deep impression on how much Korean teachers worked hard to become good teachers and wanted more professional guidance to help them to be better teachers. And we believe that a little bit of attention to teacher research will provide a different insight for them to understand teacher research as a great professional development tool. We suggested how teacher research could be an essential tool in professional development for both pre-service and in-service teachers in Korea.

First, administrators and education policy makers should consider teacher research as one of the criteria in teacher evaluations, self-supervision, and promotion procedure. If teacher research became one of criteria for teacher evaluation process, Korean teachers would be willing to do a teacher research, because it would be more beneficial and satisfactory for teachers rather than just participating in mandatory teacher workshops or official reports requirements.

Second, Korean ECE educators should introduce the variety of inquiry methods such as narratives, descriptive review, and documentation of Reggio Emilia approach. Many Korean educators stressed quantitative research methods, which valued a certain types of research questions, and stages of conducting a research, etc.. Moreover, few Korean educators emphasized the purpose of self-awareness in their teaching and instruction and were interested in “better” teaching instruction for all other teachers. In this trendy, teachers cannot reflect their own teaching practice and have to rely on external evaluations to see their own teaching practice. Yet, this new inquiry will help teachers see their own teaching from different perspectives.

Lastly, teacher education program should offer this qualitative type of inquiry class and courses so that prospective teachers are aware of this idea and knowledgeable about conducting research. In this study, all these informants agreed that their lack of understanding and knowledge on the subject hindered them from conducting “research” in general. For example, these two private preschool teachers wanted to do a research, they often felt that they did not have any clues about how to do a research project and how they would even start from. If they were exposed to this self-reflective research in their teacher education process, they would be able to design their own research whenever they confronted some issues and problems in their classes, and they

could enrich their practices through the research.

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