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Making Sense of Schooling during COVID-19: Crisis as Opportunity in Korean Schools

TAEYEON KIM, SUNBIN LIM, MINSEOK YANG, AND SOO JUNG PARK

This article explores how policy actors in South Korea understand and make meaning of school-related policies responding to COVID-19. Using sensemaking and crisis theory as a framework and informed by literature on policy culture, we analyzed qualitative data collected from interviews with teachers, educational leaders, and parents. The findings show that our participants initially thought the crisis situation would “just pass,” but they experienced “fear” and “chaos” when online and hybrid classes were implemented. After adopting unexpected policy changes to cope with the spread of COVID-19, participants sought shared responsibility to overcome the crisis. In addition, our participants made meaning of the crisis as an opportunity to transform schools, suggesting that COVID-19 catalyzed democracy, innovation, and equity in Korean school education. We conclude this article with a discussion on the role of crisis in sensemaking and the importance of national policy culture and sociohistorical contexts in shaping policy actors’ meaning making, extending comparative perspectives in education.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified uncertainty in schooling (Campbell 2020). As schools respond to the diverse needs of students and families (Zhao 2020), extensive policy decisions are being made and implemented at multiple levels from the national government to local schools. This crisis environment led policy actors (i.e., teachers, administrators, parents, national/federal policy makers) to engage in *sensemaking*, an action-oriented cognitive process in which individuals interpret a situation and construct associated responses (Weick 1995, 2009). Although policy actors have struggled with the disruption of existing frames of reference by the crisis, they have also restored meaning via sensemaking (Gephart 2007; Ansell and Boin 2019).

Policy makers and educational leaders across countries are attending to comparative perspectives more than ever to make their decisions (Reimers

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and Schleicher 2020). In examining dynamic responses to COVID-19, the comparative education perspective offers critical insights for contextualizing policy decisions and practices. Studies have shown nation-states' responses to the pandemic vary depending on political and sociocultural contexts (see Capano et al. 2020; P. Kim 2020). These responses reveal underlying assumptions and implicit policy cultures that significantly impact education policy and school practices (e.g., Tobin et al. 2009; Anderson-Levitt 2012; Kim and Reichmuth 2021). For example, compared to countries like the United States, some Asian countries (e.g., China, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan) successfully slowed the spread of infection early on, enabling schools to offer relatively sustainable in-person or blended classes without long-term school closures (Melnick et al. 2020). Research argues these differences can be attributed to factors affecting the education system of each country—that is, political trust and policy compliance (Woo 2020), efficiency of policy operation across sectors (Capano et al. 2020), and governments' organizational learning (Lee et al. 2020).

In this article, we explore policy actors' perceptions of schooling in response to COVID-19 using the case of South Korea (from now on referred to as Korea), with a focus on the first semester of the 2020 school year (March to August). While recent research on COVID-19 has explored school-related policies at the country level, little is known about how individual policy actors on the ground—those who actually enact policy—made sense of schooling under COVID-19. We found the Korean context unique and informative, arguing that it can illustrate how schools can respond to unexpected crises by adopting timely changes, new norms, and routines to address risk.¹ Preparation for the 2020 school year in Korea was disrupted by COVID-19 earlier than in other countries. Policy actors had to replan and reorganize the entire school year in a short period to help schools offer online and hybrid classes without large-scale school closure (Ministry of Education 2020). One of the popular discourses emerging from Korean education under COVID-19 was the framing of the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to transform existing school values and systems for future education (see Ministry of Education 2020). Drawing on sensemaking (Weick 1995, 2009) and crisis theory (Caplan 1964), we explore how multiple policy actors understood and made meaning of school-related policies under the COVID-19 crisis in the Korean context.

Framing the Study

We use sensemaking (Weick 1995, 2009) as a framework to examine how individuals understood school-related policies impacted by COVID-19 (i.e., school re/opening, online classes, hybrid classes). We argue that policies are

¹ Korea has been viewed as a successful example for opening schools during the pandemic, with proactive responses, transparent risk communication, and voluntary citizen participation (P. Kim 2020; Lee et al. 2020).

constructed and recreated through processes in which policy actors make sense of policy intentions and environments in policy implementation (Spillane et al. 2002). We then explore literature on crisis theory (Caplan 1964; Gephart 2007), positing that COVID-19 triggers policy actors' extensive sensemaking for responding to new threats.

A Sensemaking Framework

Weick (1995, 2009) describes sensemaking as an action-oriented cognitive process where individuals understand and interpret circumstances. Sensemaking involves individuals' construction of a social world, interpretation of events, and associated responses (Gephart 1992; Weick 1995) to produce shared meanings of important phenomena (Gephart 2007). In policy implementation, policy actors are expected to understand what "the policy directive is asking them to do" (Spillane et al. 2002, 389), make meaning of policy intentions, and enact them in practice. Sensemaking entails individuals utilizing prior knowledge, values, and beliefs, reconstructing schema through learning, and applying knowledge structures to policy enactment (Weick 1995; Spillane et al. 2002; Coburn 2005).

Sensemaking can occur in both individual and collective forms due to its reliance on social interactions in which shared messages and understandings are generated and informed by organizations' political and social contexts (Coburn 2001). From the Ministry of Education (MOE) to local schools, sensegiving is a critical part of sensemaking that refers to efforts to "influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality" (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, 442). Policy makers at the state (national) level influence local actors' meaning making processes via signaling and energizing (Rom and Eyal 2019). District leaders make sense of policy initiatives and messages from state-level policy makers while inventing guidelines for practice at the local level and circulating messages to schools. These sensegiving approaches shape policy environment dynamics—organizational norms, cultures, and political contexts more broadly—that inform individual and collective sensemaking in schools. Thus, as multiple policy actors conduct constant sensegiving and meaning making, sensemaking is an interactive, reciprocal process (Maitlis 2005).

Education policy research suggests that sensemaking may result in gaps in policy directions from top to bottom (Spillane et al. 2002) because individual actors' prior knowledge and practice influence their understanding of reform (Coburn 2005). When adopting new policies, educators tend to make surface-level connections to prior experience rather than engage in in-depth inquiry about new ideas (e.g., Spillane 2000), thus making fragmentary changes in existing practices that may not align with new policy directions (e.g., Hill 2001). Therefore, inconsistency between policy intentions and practices cannot be fully credited to lack of effort or reform denial (Spillane et al. 2002).

Responses to Crisis

Sensemaking becomes more active and necessary when environments show high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty (Weick 1995). As a crisis, the COVID-19 outbreak interrupted existing frames of reference and catalyzed sensemaking to restore meaning in policy implementation (Gephart 2007). According to Caplan (1964), crisis refers to a situation where individuals encounter problems without immediate solutions or resources. Research shows people strive to develop strategies to avoid spreading crisis and to return organizations to normal status and regular routines (Shrivastava et al. 2013; Ansell and Boin 2019). For example, Ansell and Boin (2019) enumerate four stages of crisis management. First, *sensemaking* is used as an initial strategy to understand evolving threats by collecting, analyzing, and sharing information. Organizations *make critical decisions* by incorporating both long- and short-term views. *Resource coordination* then facilitates individual actors in implementing decisions. Throughout the process, individuals engage in *meaning-making* to understand the situation and construct meaning by interpreting their experiences and lessons to move forward (Ansell and Boin 2019). Studies in education found policy decisions during crisis were closely associated with students' and educators' well-being and safety (Smith and Riley 2012; Stough et al. 2018). Research also suggested empathy, respect, and relationship building are critical to crisis recovery (Smith and Riley 2012; Mutch 2015).

Overall, crises lead policy actors to engage in situational sensemaking to continuously cope with existing and possible threats. As organizations accumulate knowledge about crises and develop strategies, individuals create meaning through reflective learning. A sensemaking framework thus helps us analyze comprehensive dynamics in policy implementation caused by COVID-19 by focusing on multiple stakeholders' cognitive perspectives.

Policy Culture in Korean Education: A Comparative Perspective

Comparative studies have suggested national policy culture shapes education policy and practices.² For example, Akiba (2017) argued that, while intergovernmental organizations (e.g., OECD) and international rankings (e.g., PISA) lead global discourses on teacher quality, nation-states employ different reform strategies. Such cross-national differences can be explained by the culture of nation-states' education policies (see Stein [2004] for the US context; see Koh [2011] and Lim and Apple [2016] for the Asian context). To situate our study in the culture of Korean education policy, we briefly outline the sociocultural and institutional backgrounds informing policy actors' sensemaking and enactment.

Historically, teachers in Korea are considered "the most intelligent and best moral exemplars" (Kim et al. 2011, 52) and have a long history of government

² Tobin et al. (2009); Koh (2011); Koyama (2013); Akiba (2017).

schooling (the first government school in historical record, Taehak, was established in 372 AD) impacted by the Confucius tradition, where “learning” is a key element of holistic human development and social cultivation (Han and Makino 2013). After the Korean War, education was framed as an engine for individuals’ success and the nation’s fast-developing economy (Sorensen 1994). This history explains characteristics of the teaching profession in Korea highlighted by comparative studies: a highly respected long-term career (Han 2018; Kim and Reichmuth 2021), access to qualified teachers (Park and Byun 2015), systemic investment in professional development (Kim and Lee 2020), and expectations that scholar-teachers have rigorous knowledge (Leung 2001).

Compared to other countries where market principles drive school systems, personnel and curriculum policies at the school- and district-level in Korea are controlled at the national level, while other areas of school operations have been decentralized for the last three decades (Kim and Yun 2019). The school system thus represents a highly developed bureaucracy governed by rules and codes set by national law (T. Kim 2020). For example, teacher candidates certified through university programs have to take the state-administered appointment examination to become public school teachers.³ As government employees, teachers, and administrators in public schools are professional bureaucrats required to rotate schools every 4–6 years until their retirement by law. With few exceptions for special high schools, the school system does not allow school choice programs like charter schools in the United States and the government supports teacher salaries in private schools. Given these cultural and institutional backgrounds, the MOE has played a critical role in setting nation-wide policy agendas (see T. Kim 2020).

Additionally, education policy in Korea often involves political debates impacting the whole society (Kang 2016; T. Kim 2020). For example, Kang (2016) showed that both Right and Left civil groups’ active engagement challenged the state-driven efforts to control official knowledge through history textbook policy. As a result, the government’s intended goals to prioritize Rightist inclined ideology were not successfully achieved throughout the policy implementation. T. Kim (2020) illustrated that, when accompanied by alliances with the media, political dynamics involving strong resistance from educators and civil groups led to significant changes in national assessment policy. This active engagement of multiple policy actors and media can be seen as a distinctive phenomenon in education policy in Korea compared to other Asian contexts.

Research Context: Responses to COVID-19 Outbreaks

As COVID-19 has been present in Korea since January 2020, the MOE responded by making unprecedented policy decisions, including delaying the

³ This competitive exam consists of essays on content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and skills, and teaching demonstrations.

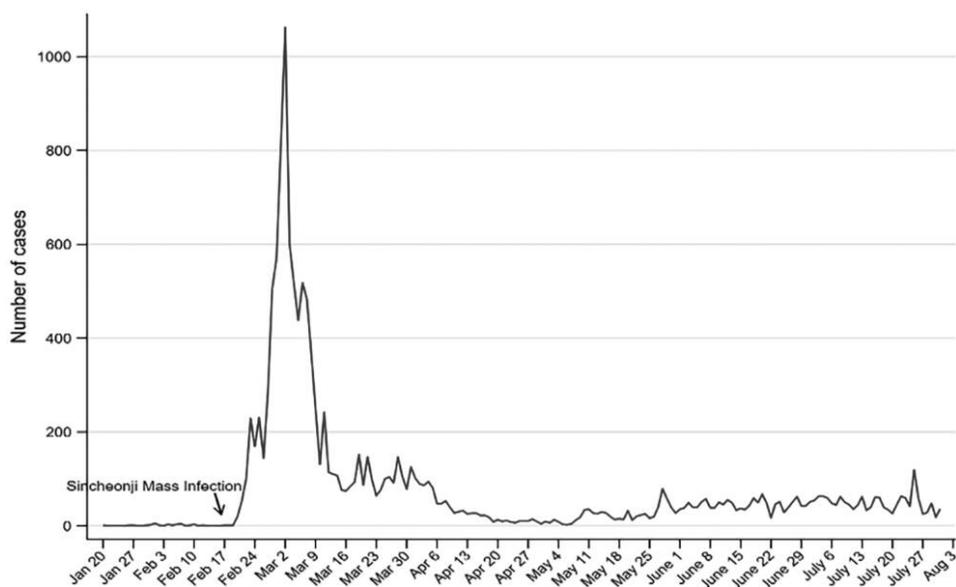


FIG. 1.—Number of COVID-19 infections in Korea. A color version of this figure is available online.

beginning of the school year and implementing online classes. When the first coronavirus case was reported on January 20, 2020, the MOE recommended delays in commencement ceremonies in K–12 schools.⁴ As shown in figure 1, the number of confirmed cases then was relatively small. The situation changed following a sudden rise in COVID-19 cases in Daegu, the fourth largest metropolitan city in Korea. The massive infection began with a person attending worship at Shincheonji Church.

In late February, the MOE postponed opening all K–12 schools by 1 week from March 2 to March 9 (first delay announced on February 23), as shown in figure 2. As confirmed cases increased, the MOE extended the delay another two weeks from March 9 to March 23 (second delay announced on March 2). After the World Health Organization’s official declaration of a pandemic, the MOE ordered the third and fourth delays of school openings, from March 23 to April 6 and then to April 9. These decisions were announced on March 17 and March 31, respectively, a week before each targeted date for school opening. During the delayed period, the MOE provided “voluntary online learning” classes to assist student learning (Ministry of Education 2020) and teachers

⁴ The Korean school year goes from the first week of March through February of the following year. Although schools can change the schedule of summer, winter, and other breaks, the beginning of the school year and number of school days per year are bounded by national law.

MAKING SENSE OF SCHOOLING DURING COVID-19

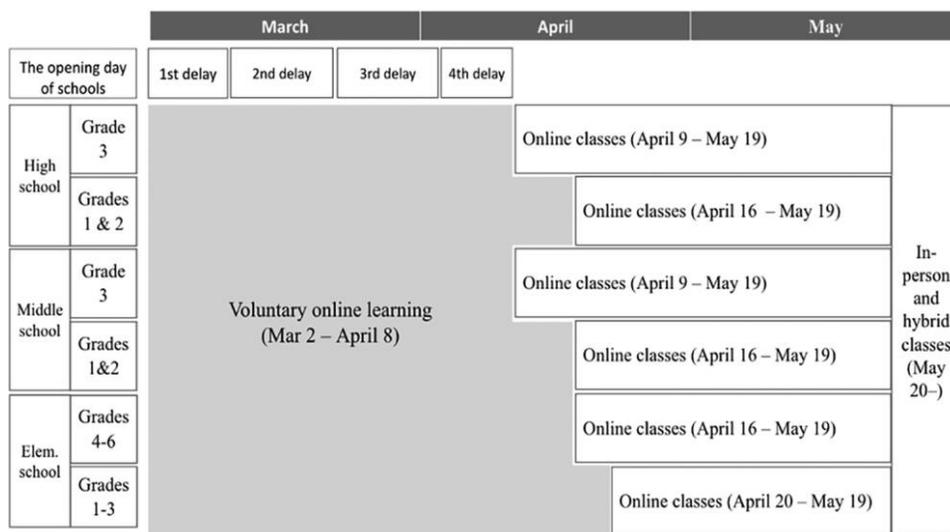


FIG. 2.—Opening day of Schools in Korea. A color version of this figure is available online.

and administrators distributed learning materials produced by e-Learning on broadcasting platforms (e.g., Education Broadcasting System) and monitored student progress online before the beginning of the school year.

The MOE began the 2020 school year with online classes, which proceeded sequentially from seniors in middle and high schools (ninth and twelfth grades in the US) on April 9 to first, second, and third grades on April 20. Finally, it announced schools would open for in-person classes from May 13 in consecutive order depending on grade level (see fig. 2). Although this plan was postponed for a week due to group infections in Seoul, students attended in-person classes from May 20, two and a half months later than the intended first day of school. The MOE provided schools with guidelines on COVID-19 control and prevention, including how to prepare schools to open, how to administer hybrid classes, and how to respond when suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases occurred in schools (Ministry of Education 2020). It is important to note that teachers and administrators worked at school and district offices throughout the school year regardless of instructional platforms, unless they had to comply with quarantine requirements.

Figure 2 shows the MOE’s series of policy decisions in response to COVID-19. In the Korean context, once policy ideas are introduced, political disputes from diverse stakeholders have tended to slow down the final policy decision (T. Kim 2020). However, the COVID-19 crisis prompted major policy decisions to be made quickly in collaboration with the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) and quarantine experts (Shin et al. 2020). The KCDC played a leading role in managing the pandemic through proactive

approaches,⁵ such as contact tracing, quarantine policies, warning text messages, and epidemiological investigations (Kealey 2020). Additionally, the MOE used the media to announce school policies first and to distribute official documents to districts and schools, whereas official documents used to be the first delivery method. The use of the media was viewed as an effective strategy for helping policy actors understand and prepare new policy guidelines, such as when and how schools would open. Teachers, however, had limited time to prepare for policy implementation at the local level (Lee 2020).

Methodology

As the purpose of this study is to explore policy actors' experiences and meaning making under COVID-19, we draw on interpretative tradition (Erickson and Gutierrez 2002). We conducted individual interviews, focus groups with multiple policy actors and school stakeholders, and a document analysis. Our data sources contained 14 interviews (eight individual interviews and six focus groups) and 87 documents—40 newspaper articles, 32 policy reports from the MOE, and 15 press releases from the Korean Federation of Teachers' Associations (KFTA).

Participants and Context

We recruited 22 participants for interviews, including teachers (11), principals (5), district leaders (2), a teacher association representative, and parents (3) engaged in K–12 public school systems in Korea. We recruited information-rich participants attuned to school-related policy making and implementation (Patton 2015). Interview participation was first solicited from teachers and administrators studying education policy via graduate school programs. They then recommended other participants who might offer rich responses. Given this, teachers and administrators in our study can be seen as eager to learn and knowledgeable about educational policy processes.

In terms of region, we initially targeted Daejeon and Sejong, two metropolitan districts near the MOE office because they are known for being directly influenced by the MOE's policy decisions and for seeking instructional innovation through district-wide initiatives. To understand various regional contexts, participants were added from another metropolitan district, Daegu—the area in which the first mass infection happened in Korea—and from larger provincial districts, such as Gyeonggi and Jeonbuk (i.e., suburban and rural). We did not intend to make participants nationally representative; rather, we sought to maximize variations (Patton 2015) in school level, years of experiences, and

⁵ The Korean government has accumulated professional knowledge on managing epidemics through handling of SARS in 2003 and MERS in 2015. Recent studies found lessons learned from previous epidemics helped governments to have higher policy capacities and manage COVID-19 effectively, as shown in the examples of Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Woo 2020). The KCDC was established after the SARS crisis to handle disease outbreaks.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Participants ^a (Position and Family Name)	Gender	School Level ^b	Years of Teaching/ Administrative Experience ^c	PREWI ^d	Region (Municipal Level) ^e
Teacher Kyu	Male	Elementary	4	Yes	Gyeonggi
Teacher Seok	Female	Elementary	7	No	Daejeon
Teacher Woo	Male	Elementary	6	Yes	Daejeon
Teacher Tak	Female	Elementary	13	No	Daejeon
Teacher Joo (DH) ^f	Female	Elementary	14	No	Jeonbuk
Teacher Tae (DH) ^f	Male	Elementary	Not available	No	Daejeon
Teacher Seo (DH) ^f	Female	Middle	19	No	Daejeon
Teacher Hyun	Female	Middle	7	No	Sejong
Teacher Young (DH)	Female	High	10	Yes	Sejong
Teacher Min	Female	High	15	No	Daejeon
Teacher association representative Jung	Male	...	2 (23 years of teaching)
Principal Hong	Male	Middle	6 (25)	No	Daejeon
Principal Jo	Male	High	7 (25)	No	Daejeon
Principal Guem	Male	Elementary	7 (25)	Yes	Daegu
Principal Sook	Female	Middle	8 (27)	Yes	Daegu
School supervisor Kang	Female	...	6 (24)	...	Daejeon
School supervisor Choi	Female	...	4 (25)	...	Sejong
Parent Lee	Female	Elementary ^g	...	No	Sejong
Parent Kyung	Female	Elementary ^g	...	No	Sejong
Parent Han	Female	Elementary ^g	...	No	Sejong

^a All names are pseudonyms.

^b Elementary, middle, and high school in Korea correspond to US grades 1–6, 7–9, and 10–12, respectively.

^c For principal and school supervisors, years of experience as administrator are presented along with years of teaching in parentheses. In general, administrators are promoted from teachers who have more than 15–20 years of experience.

^d The Priority Region of Educational Welfare Investment (PREWI) program is adopted by selected schools across the country to provide equal education opportunities and promote educational welfare. We use the existence of PREWI as a proxy for the lower socioeconomic status of the school community.

^e Korean education system includes 17 municipal-level districts.

^f Formal teacher leaders who serve as department head in their schools.

^g For parent, school level is for their children.

socioeconomic status of student bodies when selecting teachers and principals. Table 1 provides a demographic description of participants and contexts.⁶

Data Collection

To better understand the policy context and develop interview questions, we first collected documents—newspapers, policy reports published by the MOE, and press releases from the KFTA. For newspapers, we searched articles published between January 2020 and July 2020 using the keyword “COVID-19” on the Korean Education Newspaper website, which collects and publishes education-related news across the country. Document analysis helped us map

⁶ In Korea, teachers and administrators are addressed by their position followed by their family name (or full name). We reflect this tendency in our findings.

COVID-19-related impacts in Korea and subsequent policies of the MOE since January 2020. We found three notable policy decisions in our analysis: multiple delays of the 2020 school year, online classes, and hybrid classes. We used these to develop an interview protocol focused on participants' perceptions of the MOE's policy decisions, policy implementation and decision making in schools, and the experience of schooling during the first semester under COVID-19.

We then conducted 14 semistructured interviews in Korean via Zoom between the end of July and early October 2020.⁷ Each interview lasted 60–100 minutes and focused on participants' experiences with the first semester of the 2020 school year. In July, we conducted multiple focus groups with nine teachers. Three focus groups were conducted with teachers working at the same school level from different schools—each with elementary, middle, and high school teachers—to explore their experiences specific to student age groups. Afterward, another focus group with all these teachers ($n = 9$) was conducted to understand common phenomena across schools. We expected that teachers, as “front-line policy actors,” would generate vivid, dynamic responses and that focus groups would allow them to articulate their perspectives based on common experience (Bogdan and Biklen 1997). To secure diverse perspectives from other policy actors, we conducted eight individual interviews (five school principals, a parent, a teacher, and a teacher association representative) and two additional focus groups (one with two parents, the other with two district leaders).⁸

Data Analysis

Our analysis focused on participants' sensemaking of school-related policies and meanings they created throughout the sensemaking process under COVID-19. While we found some differences in participants' individual responses, our analysis focused more on commonalities shared across participants, which aligns with the national policy culture. To analyze data, we used multiple cycles of coding (Saldaña 2015). First, we conducted open coding by reading transcriptions, memos, and documents line by line to understand participants' responses. We conceptually labeled notable perceptions, emotions, and meanings, and then grouped similar ones to generate categories. Second, once salient categories were determined for axial coding, we related categories based on common patterns, which generated six main categories: *just pass*, *fear*, *shared responsibility*, *democracy*, *innovation*, and *equity*. Finally, in selective coding, we extracted two major themes that became the headings of our findings presented

⁷ We collected data of 11 video recordings with transcriptions in Korean and three memos for participants who opted out of video recording. As all participants and authors of this study are native Korean, translation was not involved during data collection and analysis.

⁸ Participants opted for individual interviews or focus groups based on their preference.

in the following sections: (1) *making sense of schooling in the COVID-19 crisis* and (2) *creating meaning*, that is, *democracy, innovation, and equity*.

Researcher Positionality

We write this article as educational researchers who have previously worked as teachers in Korean K–12 schools. When collecting and analyzing data, three of the authors were working in academia, experiencing COVID-19, and relevant schooling policies in the United States. The fourth author, in contrast, was working in academia and was experiencing the pandemic in Korea directly. We acknowledge that our interactive communications during this study generated both insider and outsider perspectives, which also influenced the ways we collected, analyzed, and interpreted data. Our findings should be carefully interpreted with a transnational view informed by the authors' subjectivity and experiences, not monolithically as "the Korean way."

Making Sense of Schooling in COVID-19

Stage 1: "It Will Just Pass, Let's Wait"

All participants expressed that their initial responses to the delayed 2020 academic school year was a belief that it would "just pass." In February 2020, most staff members were "ready for the new school year with new students when the clock hits March." When the MOE announced "nation-wide school opening delays" at the end of February, participants expressed "shock" at the "big decision," saying "this never happened in the country's 70-year history of [modern] public schooling." While acknowledging a sense of urgency and a "focus on prevention," participants assumed the "coronavirus would just pass soon," recalling their previous experience with disease controls (MERS, SARS, novel influenza A), in which schools had to follow protocols for contagious diseases without heavy impacts across the country. These initial responses align with sensemaking of crisis (Shrivastava et al. 2013; Ansell and Boin 2019) in that participants utilized their previous experience about similar events as a frame of reference to make sense of a new threat. Even principals in Daegu (Principals Kwak, Geum, Sook), who experienced high number of COVID-19 cases after the Shincheonji Church outbreak, still believed "We would be able to make all cases to zero eventually and go back to normal in a few weeks." Principal Hong recalled in February: "We were saying, it [the delay of school beginning] just added 2 weeks to our vacation." This belief lasted until March as participants waited for information on the crisis (Smith and Riley 2010) because they felt "there's nothing we could do to control this virus situation" (School Supervisor Kang).

Stage 2: "It Was Fear, Chaos Itself"

The impacts of COVID-19 lasted longer than expected. With the MOE's announcement of "online schooling" in early April, school members expressed

feelings of “chaos.” Teachers had to implement “online classes,” a format that they had no previous experience with, and deal with the “unknown” and “unpredictable” virus. Teacher Young said, “We [teachers] never have experienced or imagined we would run online schooling in our entire career. How many teachers in Korea would have a clear understanding of online teaching?” The preparation for online classes added new “overwhelming” tasks for teachers, including developing online class curriculums, purchasing electronic equipment, and recording and editing online lessons. Teacher Hyun noted that “it was like a ping-pong game between departments, a dispute over an issue of which department takes what tasks.”

When the MOE announced the transition from online to hybrid classes in May—a certain percentage of students attending socially distanced, in-person sessions, while others taking online classes at home—participants’ “fear” centered on “safety issues” from the outbreak. Principal Geum stated, “Each school took responsibility for any new case of infection. . . . I was so nervous because COVID-19 was found to be highly contagious.” A parent of a first grader, Mrs. Han said, “I was worried at that time because the media continued reporting new cases every day. I checked the online Mom Café (an online community for parents with children in K–12) to attain timely information about virus cases and school-related policies.”

Most of the teacher participants echoed Teacher Young, who said, “We barely learned and adopted online classes within a month and transitioning to hybrid classes in the middle of our adjustment was another trial!” Teachers and administrators thus followed infection prevention guidelines while administering in-person classes. Principal Jo described several strategies his staff applied: marking every 2 meters from school entrance to classrooms, distributing face masks to students, and inventing a portable plastic barrier for students to carry in schools.⁹

Once participants detected risks (Gephart 2007), they seemed to engage in intensive sensemaking activities to implement policies, including making sense of the new environment, collecting information, searching resources available, and developing strategies for dealing with “chaos.” The feeling of “fear” resulting from the “unknown crisis” catalyzed participants’ cognitive and action-oriented sensemaking activities toward the rapid adoption of the MOE’s policy decisions in “actions” at the local level (Weick 1995; Spillane et al. 2002).

Stage 3: “Seeking Shared Responsibility to Overcome the Crisis”

Reflecting on the semester in which they adopted the new changes, participants emphasized “seeking shared responsibility” instead of “blaming

⁹ These strategies were introduced through national and international news coverage: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/05/26/pictures-say-it-all-how-south-korean-schools-are-reopening/>; http://nwcable.net/news/read/category/asia/article/the_associated_press-south_koreans_return_to_school_amid_virus_outbreak-ap.

others” or “pointing out who failed to do what for the crisis.” While some addressed their dissatisfaction with the MOE’s responses to COVID-19, most seemed to reach a consensus that “This is the time to understand others and support each other to overcome the crisis.” Mrs. Kyung, a parent, mentioned: “Because we were in a sensitive time, most parents tended to comply with schools’ decisions and be cooperative.” Similarly, School Supervisor Choi emphasized “shared responsibility” to overcome the pandemic: “Nobody experienced this situation in the past. We all are in the same boat in this crisis. . . . The MOE, Offices of Education, local districts, and schools will fix the problem together.”

In seeking “shared responsibility,” we found participants placed teachers at the center of crisis management, describing them as “those working the hardest in the front line.” They emphasized that school leaders and policy makers should support teachers in overcoming the crisis. Behind this “shared responsibility” in supporting teachers, participants pointed out a shared sentiment in Korean policy discourses: “Teachers would make anything [mandated from policy decisions] happen in schools.” Indeed, teachers in our study commonly expressed pride in their collective efficacy and competence in the implementation of online and hybrid classes. Teacher Tae reflected: “At the end of the day, I think Korean teachers showed high levels of competence in dealing with the situation. Teachers tried and implemented various new methods to cope with the COVID-19 crisis. This helped all of us [all members of school communities] settle down in this chaotic situation.” At the same time, teachers expressed sarcasm regarding the message “the highly qualified teaching profession,” noting, “MOE put heavy pressures on our shoulders, expecting us to successfully run the ‘unstable policies’ they made and to be responsible for the results.”

This stage highlights reciprocal and interactive processes of sensemaking (Giola and Chittipeddi 1991; Coburn 2001) during Korea’s crisis-driven policy implementation. Multiple stakeholders calling for “shared responsibility” seemed influenced by active sensegiving among different policy actors—exchanging policy messages to deal with conflicts and problems, which in turn created shared understandings. As such, the discourse of the “qualified teaching force” embedded in policy culture (Kim and Reichmuth 2021) implied that teachers must accomplish “haphazard policies” made from the top during the crisis.

Creating Meaning: “Enforced but Actualized Reforms” toward “Democracy,” “Innovation,” and “Equity”

Individuals create meaning through crisis management as a learning process (Gephart 2007; Ansell and Boin 2019). Participants often commented that the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed the realization of reform initiatives that had been introduced and implemented for a long time but not necessarily

achieved in schools before. When asked how and why the education system under COVID-19 facilitated “transformation” in schools, Teacher Association Representative Jung commented: “Korean schools have prioritized a bureaucratic culture over teaching. Looking back at the previous semester, I find it changing. The workload coming from official documents has dramatically dropped in schools. All school events were canceled. Model school policies were stopped. This environment led teachers to focus only on teaching and lessons. Teachers were able to experience democratic decision-making and self-governing schools.”

Accordingly, this section presents three themes linked to coronavirus school reforms. Participants interpreted the first two—“democracy” and “innovation”—as achievements, while the third theme of “equity” was framed as an agenda for future reform.

“Democratic Decision Making Achieved Accidentally”

Participants expressed that “the coronavirus ironically catalyzed democratic decision-making” in schools and in the larger bureaucratic system. Teacher participants seemed to enjoy autonomy regarding decisions over classroom lessons and student evaluation methods that had to be re-built after the MOE’s announcement of online and hybrid classes. For instance, high school English Teacher Min explained: “Since the corona situation, the district was like, ‘You can choose what works for your school among these options.’ So we used different models depending on the subject. Math teachers recorded lessons to show problem solving and let students view them in advance, followed by synchronous sessions where they offered feedback for students. In my English department, we offered 100 percent online synchronous lessons. . . . We also reduced [the frequency of] a formative, process-based assessment districts prioritized in the past but added other options like a written assessment. I personally found having flexibility in teaching was great.”

While most teachers like Min welcomed democratic decision-making processes, Teacher Kyu, who had the least experience teaching among the participants, expressed feelings of “fatigue” from pressures to work with other teachers in making grade- and school-level decisions. He said, “Personally I like working by myself, but in that crisis situation, I was under pressure that we had to work together, reflecting other teachers’ opinions.” Despite such discrepancy found in individual preferences, these responses together suggest that more opportunities to make collective decisions over curriculum were given to teachers, compared to the prepandemic.

Some participants also recognized “bottom-up” policy changes in the vertical decision-making structure. They felt the MOE made efforts to “listen to voices from the field,” such as local districts and teacher associations. School Supervisor Kang reflected: “Recently, we did the 30th video meeting with all

deputy superintendents (municipal level) and the MOE. . . . Once the agenda from the deputy superintendent meetings came down asking for our opinions, we would send them feedback based on our division meetings and survey results from all schools. So all guidelines from the MOE actually got through the process of collecting feedback from 17 Offices of Education across the country.”

School Supervisor Choi also pointed out the deferment of teacher evaluations as a representative example of “bottom-up decision making.” Reflecting on feedback from local districts that the COVID-19 situation makes evaluation difficult, the MOE did not require teacher evaluations this year. This comment from Teacher Association Representative Jung, who directly communicated with MOE officials, supported this: “The MOE was not able to stick to top-down approaches since the situation was urgent. They created group chat rooms [on a smartphone messenger app] to have frequent and timely communications with teacher associations and teachers across the country.”

The “uncertainty” and “lack of information” in the crisis seemed to force individuals to actively communicate to collect available information and create new knowledge (Weick 1995; Ansell and Boin 2019). Messenger apps like Kakao Talk popularly used for individuals’ daily communication in Korea were utilized more frequently in professional work settings, both horizontally and vertically when face-to-face meetings were not viable (Song 2020). We also found informal and formal networks through smartphone messenger apps beneficial in the Korean context. For example, in Sejong, high school department head Teacher Young confirmed that there were individual group chats for teacher directors, assistant principals, and principals across the city and that they constantly consulted with one another on COVID-19-related decisions. School Supervisor Kang said her district in Daejeon launched open Kakao Talk chats for teachers where the district could “listen to local needs and teacher voices directly” and where teachers could “send complaints to the MOE immediately.” Teachers used Kakao Talk to check in students and parents when schools ran remotely, instead of making phone calls or sending emails. This way, parents participated in multiple surveys, which they described as “handy” and “speedy” compared to paper- or computer-based communication. While online video calls were used in formal settings, Kakao appeared to be the most popular platform for policy actors to communicate “timely” and “free-hearted,” which accelerated democratic decision making.

Innovation through Online Teaching: “Teachers Cannot Avoid Unlearning and Undoing”

Although teachers had to “get through agony” in preparing online classes, at the time of data collection, participants expressed schools collectively accomplished “innovation” for the “future of education.” This “innovation” included *online platforms for teaching* and *active professional learning communities*.

When asked about possibilities identified during the hybrid semester, Teacher Association Representative Jung said “the concept of ‘future education,’ like being online, just came true because of COVID-19.” School and district leaders admitted there had long been efforts to promote online learning, along with the MOE’s policy agenda of “blended learning” or “smart education.” However, these policies did not permeate to daily classroom settings due to resistance from teachers and the lack of technology support. Paradoxically, online classes following COVID-19 “made innovation happen in the classroom across the country.” Teacher Hyun explained how this change occurred in her school: “There were always some teachers adhering to traditional ways of teaching and others adopting innovative ways . . . but with this opportunity, teachers in general had to teach themselves and implement an online classroom. . . . We were plunged into this online school situation. Regardless of experience, all teachers were in the same boat with the passion to get through the difficulties together.” Echoing Teacher Hyun’s comment, Principal Jo acknowledged such change, saying “Teachers have now developed the capacity to create quality content for online learning. Teachers need to keep utilizing those skills through blended learning, even in the post COVID-19 era.”

Furthermore, our data show professional learning communities were critical to creating collective knowledge and sharing online teaching resources. Teachers agreed that the COVID-19 crisis got rid of the burdens from administrative tasks and let teachers focus on lessons. Teacher Seo pointed out that online teaching resulted in the “openness of teaching,” in contrast to the conventional idea of teaching “just teachers’ own things within the classroom.” These two factors—less administrative tasks and “openness of teaching”—seemed to promote learning communities in schools. Principal Hong recalled the role of teacher learning communities in his school: “We developed stronger solidarity because you can’t do something alone. Teachers had to work together when developing course content. Veteran teachers may not be familiar with online teaching and platforms, but they have accumulated wisdom about pedagogy and content knowledge versus younger teachers, who are tech-savvy, having not enough teaching experience. So, they learned from each other.” Teacher learning communities, which are prevalent in Korean schools (Kim and Lee 2020; Kim and Reichmuth 2021), appeared to successfully contribute to narrowing teachers’ learning gaps in online teaching and creating collective intelligence across generations of teachers. Collective norms around “professionalism” embedded in teacher communities helped them take pride in being part of a “successful teaching profession that could achieve innovation despite crisis.”

Meanwhile, districts strengthened “infrastructures” and collective networks to better support blended teaching and learning. School Supervisor Choi working in Sejong, a newly designed Smart Education City, said “Sejong-si has well-established infrastructures. Teachers used to adopt tablet PCs or

smartphones in their lessons. During COVID-19, we offered tablet PCs for students with needs.” School Supervisor Kang also emphasized the district’s role as a “hub” that “strengthens links between online lessons and in-person lessons” to narrow achievement gaps. For example, the Office of Daejeon Education created “online teaching support groups”—composed of 68 elementary school teachers who recorded 404 online lessons—and had a “task force team” develop online teaching content for the district to share.

Equity as Unfulfilled Promise

While participants offered positive comments on their accomplishments, they also pointed out inequalities that stood out during COVID-19. Teachers and principals serving lower-income families were more attuned to equity issues, saying “the dead zone of welfare in education became more apparent.” Teacher Kyu, an elementary school homeroom teacher, expressed concerns about “learning gaps” in online settings: “My [fourth grade] students work on a mathematics workbook at home for their assignment. But they could do only if there is care and love from parents, which facilitates self-directed learning. However, in online learning settings, those who cannot get support from families showed unsatisfactory progress. Learning gaps get larger.”

Moreover, Principal Sook expressed concern about the social-emotional needs of middle school students: “My biggest hope is having all students in school every day, even if it’s a short stay per day . . . [unlike having half of students in person]. . . . What sticks out to me most are the students experiencing heavy burdens and trauma who come from economically disadvantaged homes. Working closely with a social worker, I arranged individualized programs like tutoring and mentoring for them. . . . I always say to teachers that we really need to prioritize individualized care and support, especially in this time.”

Raising concerns regarding student welfare, participants commented that schools cannot solve all problems and called for equity-focused policy support to coordinate community resources outside schools. For example, all elementary schools were required to run “all day emergency childcare” regardless of the number of COVID-19 cases and teachers called on local government and community networks to support childcare, saying “not to just place all responsibilities on schools.” Teacher Association Representative Jung also pointed out the importance of teachers’ mindset toward equity: “We are launching a campaign next week suggesting teachers take more time to check on students individually online. We also allocate 1:1 tutoring time for students with additional academic and emotional support beyond their regular online classes. . . . We just opened a Kakao Talk group for teachers with invited experts from multiple backgrounds, such as mental health. I hope teachers are motivated and engaged to individualize support for student learning beyond making wake-up phone calls.”

Supporting news outlets highlighting inequalities in online and hybrid classes (e.g., H. Kim 2020), our participants argued “Equity issues need to be on the table” more frequently in policy and practice as COVID-19 continues to impact schooling. Teacher Association Representative Jung later added, “I don’t think equity was intentionally overlooked by the MOE. They just had to take care of safety first, but now we have to move on, centering issues of equity.” This shows participants evaluated their previous experiences with the first semester under COVID-19 and generated shared meanings for future strategies based on lessons learned (Gephart 2007; Ansell and Boin 2019).

Discussion

Our findings suggest policy actors had to understand, interpret, and implement fast-changing school policies during COVID-19 under high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity. Participants initially understood threats as eradicable, but as the impact of the virus continued, they found the situation chaotic and experienced fear in enacting policy changes. Reflecting on these experiences, participants sought a shared responsibility for overcoming the crisis. Our analysis also revealed meanings constructed throughout the sense-making process: school reforms around democracy, innovation, and equity. Based on these findings, we discuss several important points to conclude this article.

First is the role of crisis in policy actors’ sensemaking. Our findings revealed the unexpected threat of COVID-19 forced changes to be adopted in daily school practices in a short time period, intensifying sensemaking dynamics. Participants initially relied on their previous experiences with other epidemics (e.g., MERS) to understand their new environment (Weick 1995; Spillane et al. 2002). However, once the situation went beyond their existing frames of reference, participants as policy actors navigated and digested a large amount of new information in a short period of time and enacted multiple top-down policy decisions (Gephart 2007; Mutch 2015). Sensegiving (i.e., the diffusion of policy messages, information exchange, and collective decision making) in this study was most salient in creating collective intelligence and building shared responsibility to manage the crisis (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Rom and Eyal 2019), compared to other “ordinary” policy contexts. Our findings therefore imply that the sensemaking framework can be extended to crisis situations.

From the view of comparative education, we argue that understanding the sociohistorical and institutional contexts that shape national policy cultures is important to interpreting our findings.¹⁰ For example, participants seeking collective responsibility and community can be explained by Korea’s historical

¹⁰ Stein (2004); Tobin et al. (2009); Koyama (2013); Lim and Apple (2016).

background regarding the overcoming of national crises through collective national efforts (i.e., rapid economic growth after the Korean war and recovery from the IMF economic crisis, see Kalinowski 2008). The bureaucratic school system added efficiency in sensegiving and vertical and horizontal communication, which helped the MOE share timely epidemic information and rapidly spread policy decisions to the public. This bureaucratic efficiency combined with a Korean cultural sense of urgency in collectively overcoming the crisis aided the MOE in controlling policy messages as a strong state (see Lim and Apple 2016) and in creating a shared sense of community in policy implementation. Interestingly, the MOE's real-time policy announcement seemed to increase transparency between the MOE and the public, thereby avoiding major political disputes. However, teachers felt disregarded by the MOE's "big decisions," whereas in the past, they were informed and/or invited to offer feedback on policies through official documents before announcements to the public.

The policy culture promoting "highly qualified teachers" in Korea is another important aspect to consider. Compared to other countries, teachers in Korea are regarded as high-quality human resources with major demand for continuous professional development (Park and Byun 2015; Kim and Lee 2020; Kim and Reichmuth 2021). Our findings suggest that policy discourses and initiatives during COVID-19 leaned on the "highly qualified" teaching profession, expecting teachers to be responsible for successfully implementing sudden, unpredictable policy changes. While teachers in our study struggled with adopting new initiatives in daily practice within a short period, they exemplified collective efficacy in enacting multiple policies to manage crisis, whether or not they wanted to. Other participants too highlighted teachers' competence as "frontline" agents. The notion of professionalism in teaching also explains participants' framing the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to successfully transform schools (Reimers and Schleicher 2020; Zhao 2020) and teachers' feeling of "not being respected" by the MOE's media use. This contrasts with the market-driven teaching forces in countries like the US that have shown teacher shortages and school layoffs in the COVID-19 crisis (Erwin 2020).

We also want to point out that the discourse of "opportunity" and "accomplishments" under the crisis did not occur in a vacuum but in areas where infrastructure and resources were invested in by long-term policy efforts. For instance, for more than 2 decades, there have been top-down nationwide policy initiatives to promote technology in teaching and professional teacher learning communities (Ministry of Education 2020; Kim and Reichmuth 2021). While variations exist across the local level, we assume these reform initiatives were widely shared and adopted to a certain degree, establishing professional norms and logics at the national level that were eventually actualized in schools because of COVID-19. The MOE appeared to utilize the crisis as an opportunity to promote reform agendas and accelerate their adoption in schools.

Thus, professional capacity and policy efforts leading systemic change from the top could have influenced policy capacity of Korea's education system.

While useful for sensemaking in Korean policy culture, this study has limitations that future research should take care to address. First, we focused on policy actors' sensemaking during the school semester when COVID-19 emerged. As the pandemic has continued, the MOE has modified school policies in response. Future research should examine policy actors' sensemaking and negotiation across multiple policies under the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, using other lenses like Kingdon's multiple-streams framework can reveal complicated dynamics in policy decisions during COVID-19. Second, given Korea's unique policy culture, future scholars would benefit from examining how country-level policy cultures interact with local contexts in policy sensemaking. Finally, we want to point out the need for comparative studies on equity resulting from the pandemic. While much of the prior research has addressed unequal learning opportunities and achievement gaps under COVID-19 (Kraft et al. 2020), such concerns were not markedly revealed in our study. This may be due to well-established IT infrastructure and equity-focused educational policies in Korea (Ministry of Education 2020). However, this may also be (as participants mentioned) because the MOE and schools did not put such equity issues at the forefront. Thus, exploring how equity is understood in different education systems can further nuance our results.

Nevertheless, this study contributes to deeper understandings of policy sensemaking under the COVID-19 crisis by exploring multiple policy actors' perceptions. Our analyses uncovered feelings, beliefs, and values in the policy process that are shared and embedded in the policy culture of the Korean context. These findings extend scholarship on comparative education that have highlighted the importance of context in education policy and reform.

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