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John P. Miller, Kelli Nigh, Marni J. Binder, Bruce Novak, Sam Crowell

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Bokyoung Kim
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The School Forest Movement in South Korea From a Holistic Perspective

Bokyoung Kim

Introduction

Holistic education and the ecology movement are closely linked through the concept of interdependence. Both share the principle that interconnectedness is a fundamental reality of nature and should guide our awareness and actions. Earth connections, then, can reawaken us to the natural processes of life. The wind, the sun, the trees, and grasses can help us come alive and awaken us from the treadmill we find ourselves on. As much as possible, students should have direct experiences with the earth through such activities as gardening, caring for the animals, and outdoor education. As much as possible, ecological education should arise from a love and reverence for the earth rather than from a sense of guilt (Miller, 2012).

David Orr (1994), a renowned environmentalist, outlined that “all education is environmental education” (p. 12). He believes that we should educate students for ecological literacy. In other words, students would be able to see the connections that are inherent in the environment. Orr also argues that when students learn about their surroundings, they gain a sense of place.

In this context, one of the most influential figures in Japan is a former principal, Giichiro Yamanouchi, who developed the idea of planting small forests on school grounds. Miller (2008) recollects that one of my first trips in Japan was to Niigata prefecture to see these schools. Niigata lies on the northwest coast of Honshu, the largest island in Japan. Yamanouchi’s vision has also spread to Korea. His vision is a powerful example of how holistic education and environmental education can be integrated into the school curriculum (Miller, 2008, p. 229).

In South Korea the Korean Society for Holistic Education was established in 1997 with the help of Dr. Hyunjae Kim, former professor of Kyeongin National University of Education and Dr. Minyoung Song who returned to her motherland after earning her doctorate in Japan. She introduced principal Yamanouchi’s ideas to members of the Korean society. At that time, the Korean edition of School with Forest and Meadow, authored by Ikue Tezuka and John P. Miller, was published in 1995 followed by the Korean translation of An Introduction to Holistic Education, published by the Japanese Association for Holistic Education in 1999. In the next year, The Holistic Curriculum, authored by John P. Miller, was translated into Korean.

Study Tours to Japanese School Forests

From June 24 to 28 in 1999, members of the Korean Society for Holistic Education visited schools at the elementary and secondary levels in Niigata prefecture. The schools were well known for
using school forests as curriculum content in Japan. The society members who visited the Japanese
schools were composed of education and landscape professors and principals. The following
describes the study tours to four Japanese schools. The description of these schools is based on short
essays in the study tours by Lee (1999) and Cho (1999).

Kawasaki Elementary School

Kawasaki Elementary School, with more than 600 students enrolled and 126 years of history, is
located in Nagaoka City in Niigata prefecture. This is a typical Japanese elementary school, but
what distinguishes it from other schools is its emphasis on developing students’ relationship
with nature. Important to the school is a forest at the right side of the school gate. The forest, composed
of deciduous and evergreen trees native to the area, was planted by students, teachers, parents, and
community members.

Much of what has happened at Kawasaki Elementary School is based on the dedication of a for-
mer principal, Giichiro Yamanouchi. Meeting our party in the school, he was willing to explain the
background philosophy of the forest and its integration into the school curriculum. Miller (2007,
pp. 170–171) claimed that Yamanouchi’s work is an excellent example of the subject–community
connection. Yamanouchi is one of the most interesting and passionate educators I have ever met.
Although retired, he is still very active and passionate. In a nutshell, he is a real game changer in
environmental and holistic education at home and abroad.

The Kawasaki Elementary School’s holistic approach to curriculum is characterized as follows:
Grade 1, taking care of animals, Grade 2, vegetable gardening, Grade 3, activities in the stream,
Grade 4, activities in the forest, Grade 5, learning welfare facilities, Grade 6, learning the history of
Nagaoka City. Each grade publishes literary works on the forest that inspires students to love nature
and revere life.

Sasaoka Elementary School

Sasaoka Elementary School is a small rural school located in Agano City in Niigata prefecture. Lee
(1999) and Cho (1999) explain that while construction work to build a gymnasium is in full swing
at the back of the school, a female teacher is gardening with 5th graders in a small plot. Also, an
entrance ceremony was being held in the playground for a sheep donated by a parent to help develop
a sense of community. As this sheep becomes a member of the school, students also learn to respect
life by taking care of the animal.

Second grade students in a classroom sit around a grandmother telling a story originated from
the local area. It is a good example of how oral tradition in the community can be integrated into
the school curriculum. In another classroom, fifth grade students make dango (rice cake), which is a
Japanese sweet dumpling made from mochiko (rice flour). This is also a good example of transmitting
their traditional life wisdom to the young. After that we moved to the multi-purpose classroom and
listened to a brief lecture on holistic curriculum by the principal. He explained that the Japanese
school curriculum comprises subject matter, ethics, extra-curricular activities, and integrated learn-
ing. Through integrated learning, this school develops a holistic curriculum.

Imegasaki Elementary School

Imegasaki Elementary School is also a small rural school located in Uonuma City in Niigata prefec-
ture. Because the Gosen River flows near the school, the school sits on marshes. Due to heavy snow
in winter, school buildings are built on raised cement foundations. A cluster of trees is growing in the
school forest. Unfortunately, there is no sign of utilizing the forest as a resource for the curriculum.
However, we learned that a manual for a school forest plan was there and literary works on the forest helped us in developing our school forest models in South Korea.

**Minami Junior High School**

Minami Junior High School is a co-ed school located in Tokamachi City in Niigata prefecture. Tokamachi is home to the Tokamachi Snow Festival, which takes place every February. Every winter, snow falls to an average depth of two meters. Important Indigenous products of this region are the kimono, the traditional Japanese garment, and rice. Because the school is located in the marshes like Imegasaki Elementary School, it is also built on a raised cement foundation. The principal presented the process of producing the forest through some slides. During the presentation, the presenter showed three principles: first, planting the forest together, second, enjoying each other in developing the forest, last, remembering ‘Homeland Forest’ indigenous to Tokamachi City.

Returning to South Korea, the Society members, with the help of the Forest for Life, one of the most important environmental associations, founded in 1998, produced the first school forest at Shingi Elementary School in Anyang near Seoul in 1999. The school is still recognized as a model for maintaining a holistic approach to teaching and learning. For instance, students enjoy hanging out, writing poems, and drawing pictures in the school forest, which leads to promoting students’ eco-friendly attitude.

**Expansion of the School Forest Movement**

As I mentioned above, the history of the school forest movement in South Korea was derived from the Korean Society for Holistic Education. In 1999, the School Forest Movement Project was jointly initiated by the Forest for Life, the Korea Forest Service, an independent agency specializing in forestry that is overseen by the Ministry for Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, and Yuhan–Kimberly, the joint venture between Korea’s Yuhan Corporation and U.S. based Kimberly-Clark. In the same year, the city of Seoul started the School Park Project. A few projects followed suit, such as the School Forest Project by Gyeonggi Province surrounding Seoul in 2003, the Green School Project by the Ministry of Education, and the Green School Project by the city of Incheon in 2006.

After producing the first forest at Shingi Elementary School, the society was not able to be directly involved in school forest projects. However, the society was instrumental in expanding the school forest movement, since it inspired the school forest committee associated with the Forest for Life. While the school forest movement spread under the general supervision of civil groups, the Green School Project, conducted as part of a movement to plant 10 million trees, was initiated under the general supervision of the city of Seoul. These movements played an important role as being a catalyst for change in diffusing to other local governments, even if the supporting funds were not sufficient (Kim, Choi, & Lee, 2000).

The school forest movement conducted by Forest for Life, the school forest movement undertaken by the city of Seoul, the Korean Society for Holistic Education, the Green School, financially supported by the Ministry of Education, and Floral Land Cultivation Project, financed by the LG Evergreen Foundation have resulted in generating 762 school forests in South Korea as of 2017.

**Key Issues in Implementing the School Forest Movement**

Now is the time to reconsider the school forest movement from a holistic perspective. Previous studies suggest that we need to consider conducting a systematic review or meta-analysis (Hur et al., 2014; Kim, 2001). The key issues raised from the previous literature reviews can be articulated through the importance of focusing on process over product.
The School Forest Movement in South Korea

Most of the early forest projects were undertaken without the benefit of much planning and design, as the focus was on the process of involving students, parents, and community members in the creation of the school forest. In essence, one of the main processes of these forest projects can be viewed as community building (Hitchmough, 2001).

Community building is clearly a valuable dynamic to encourage in any school; however, it is also important to consider the outcomes resulting from the process, as it is unlikely that there will be sufficient time and energy available to engage every student cohort of every school in the creation of a forest. If the process does not lead to landscapes that can be seen as successful by the children, their parents, teachers, and education authorities, then the long-term future for the projects may be compromised. An alternative is to evaluate the projects in a holistic way.

**Connection to the Environmental and Holistic Education Curriculum**

The school forest movement emphasizes maximizing the potential of the space for environmental education by planting the trees on the playground and embracing a holistic perspective. The eco-friendly school-oriented policies adopted by the advanced countries, including the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries, suggest that the direction to move should be towards holistic education.

The European Environment and School Initiative Program (EESIP), one of the programs supported by the Center for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) under the OECD, is organized to develop a curriculum of environmental education. It reports that the sustainable strategies, related to the school environment and joined by 23 member countries, reinforce the teamwork between the local community and the school. Also a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem is enhanced if the students positively participate in the school forest project. For example, the School Biotope Program, as part of the eco-school program in Japan, has spread widely by being connected to an environmental and holistic curriculum and eco-friendly school-oriented projects such as EESIP and European eco-schools (Kim, 2001).

The school forest is the outdoor classroom where the teacher and students get together and study. It is the place where environmental and holistic education allow for a teachable moment. In summary, the utilization of the school forest as curriculum materials provides an excellent case for holistic education (Kim, 1999; Song, 2004).

**Challenges with Developing School Forests**

There has been considerable interest in generating the school forest in South Korea for environmental and holistic education. There is extensive published information available to schools on how to approach this project, and opportunities to develop partnerships at the civil and governmental levels. While this represents a positive step forward, there is still much to do and the problems of long-term projects are far from resolved. Many schools have developed wonderful school forests; however, many more have either not started the process or have made little progress.

The use of the school forest as curriculum content in environmental and holistic education is not always possible due to the transfer of principals in the public schools in South Korea and Japan. It depends on whether the educational philosophy of a new principal is congruent with the former principal’s vision. The teacher in charge of the school forest can also be transferred to other schools on a regular basis. Another problem is that a school is designated as a model for only a couple of years in South Korea. This is too short a time span for the forest to be fully developed.

The funds to create the school forest can be made available through a process of school-based funding applications. However, there are often no funds available for the care of the school forest after it has been created. Increasingly, the emphasis on school forest development is where schools
enter a partnership with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or governmental institutions to apply for funding to redevelop the school forest. This process requires the development of a master-plan for the whole school grounds, undertaken by professional designers with continuous input from teachers and students.

Another challenge is that the South Korean government, with large funding, has begun to dominate the forest school projects. It follows that ensuing school forests begin to be standardized and lose their diversity. Finally, the school forest is popular with elementary students rather than secondary school students because of the college entrance examination. Those are the tasks facing educators in the process of developing the school forest.

We live in a time when the fourth Industrial Revolution, described as a range of new technologies that are fusing the physical, digital, and biological worlds, and impacting all disciplines, economies, and industries, is around the corner. Despite these challenges, our aim in South Korea is to instill what French philosopher Henri Bergson (1983) called \textit{élan vital} translated as ‘vital impetus’ or ‘vital force’ that is continually developing and generating a new sense of awe and reverence for life.

References


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