

[OECD Initial Teacher Preparation Study

Promising practices

Professional learning communities and master teacher networks: Building collective responsibility for the profession and for supporting new teachers

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*Teacher education pathway category(ies): **Supporting beginning teachers***

*Stakeholder category(ies): **policy makers; new teachers; teacher educators***

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This case study describes a “promising practice” drawn from an OECD review of initial teacher preparation in Korea on 4-8 December 2017.

The OECD Review Team identified a number of “promising practices” in each country. These practices may not be widespread or representative, but seen in the context of other challenges, they represent a strength or opportunity to improve the country’s initial teacher preparation system – and for other countries to learn from them.

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Context

Whilst new teachers in Korea have deep and wide knowledge of their subject and pedagogy and about the curriculum – e.g. their knowledge and critique of text books - their experience of learning in classrooms and of managing classroom behaviour is less extensive, particularly for secondary education (Research Institute for Teacher Policy and Ministry of Education, 2016^[1]).

As reported by stakeholders to the OECD review team, in order to address this need, regional teacher employers are responsible for providing induction support to new teachers before they take up appointment and at the end of the first year of teaching ([see promising practice 5](#)). In Seoul and Sejong, the system aims at providing this help through the figure of master teachers, who are experienced teachers with a specific training from the Korean National University of Education to fulfil this role. Although these programmes are welcomed and appreciated by new teachers, they face two main challenges:

- The tight timeframe imposed by the compulsory examination and recruitment cycle, there is very limited time for training between the appointment of new teachers and their arrival in school.
- Master teachers are sometimes designated with no training and then vice-principals and department leaders have to take responsibility for supporting new teachers. This was particularly the case of very new and expanding regions such as Sejong.

District officials stated that, sometimes, the support from master teachers are complemented with other teacher mentors. For example, in Seoul mentoring relationships often develop naturally between new teachers and experienced teachers that work in the same area: “mentors and students are matched based on the subjects they teach and their majors so they can exchange notes and ideas about similar grades and subjects” (interview with mentor in a vocational school).

Since there is always the need to sustain systemic approaches to help new teachers, systematic arrangements for inducting new teachers into professional learning communities like the one in Gyeonggi province have much to offer to other regions in South Korea.

The role of professional learning communities and teachers study groups in Gyeonggi

In addition to the one-off initiatives represented by the master teachers, in Gyeonggi province new teachers are inducted into teacher study groups that aim at aligning the professional learning of new teachers with that of their more experienced colleagues and school leaders. This process is now systematic and has been carefully refined and scaled over time thanks to most Korean experienced teachers and their sense of professional responsibility for providing support to new teachers.

This commitment is best illustrated by an experienced teacher who expressed that although the system provides dedicated positions to support new teachers – such as consultant or master teachers – “I am ready and willing to help my new teachers any time”. Experienced teachers also recognise the value of supporting newer colleagues for their own professional development. By collaborating with new teachers, they are in contact with the updated knowledge coming from teacher education. In the words of a teacher “teaching always involves having to learn new things/ new technology. Teaching is always fun, but mentoring is also meaningful and has the added benefit of developing respect for and from new teachers.”

The teacher Study Groups or Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in Gyeonggi grew out of a regional commitment to supporting strategic innovation to help teachers respond to changes in society and an increasingly diverse local population. PLCs in Gyeonggi illustrate well how this approach has emerged in South Korea over the last decade and is now a key feature of the education system (Lee and Kim, 2016^[2]). As reported by the governor, in Gyeonggi, PLCs started in 2000 on an experimental basis and the process was systematised and formalised in 2009. There are now 442 schools of Innovation and over 5 000 PLCs with over 70% of teachers in active participation.

The approach was based on the belief that teachers’ passion and motivation is the most important determinant of success, and has proved to be successful to support the professional development and the collaborative learning of teachers (Park and So, 2014^[3]). The process starts with teachers voluntarily forming professional learning communities and building a critical mass of teachers who have a positive orientation towards innovation. Based on the interviews conducted in the review, the governor and officials of the province understand the development of enthusiasm for and confidence in innovation amongst teachers as a lengthy process, one that is deeply rooted and nurtured through the opportunity to evolve over time.

It is the role of the PLCs to provide direction and to identify strategies capable of accelerating innovation that respond to the needs identified by teachers. While experienced teachers introduce new teachers to the community and induct them into the culture of collaborative study and innovation, school leaders have responsibility for “moderating the atmosphere” around innovation and for empowering new teachers to participate and contribute. Study groups also collect practical case studies to improve teaching through annotated feedback, and record the process of co-constructing the curriculum, collaborative planning and evaluation. The resulting accounts illustrate how schools can develop a more horizontal culture driven by innovation to better respond to student needs (interviews with the governor and officials).

Regional authorities support these PLCs through organising conferences and seminars and are now planning to introduce a master’s programme to build a cadre of practitioner innovation experts, aiming at formal recognition of 100 teacher experts each year.

Why is it a strength?

The OECD review team in its review of Korea on 4-8 December 2017 saw professional learning communities as a strength of the system because:

- *It provides a venue for a gradual and sustained integration into structured, lifelong professional and organisational learning.* The way in which support for new teachers is systematically integrated into the development learning opportunities for all teachers in Gyeonggi province is distinctive in its holistic conception and its strategic, long term and large-scale operation.
- *It is the result of a collective responsibility for the profession and for supporting new teachers.* The way in which experienced teachers value the opportunity to support new teachers and also to learn from them through the professional learning communities sets a strong base for developing induction initiatives in Korea. The distinctive approach in Gyeonggi province has the capacity to establish a virtuous circle of professional and organisational learning at system level that simultaneously provides deeper and stronger support for new teachers.

How could it be improved?

The OECD review team also noted that:

- *There is a lack of available training for master teachers.* There was widespread recognition of the importance of providing more training for both informal and formal mentors and many concerns about the lack of support for master teachers.
- *Regions should strengthen their collaboration.* Diverse stakeholders raised concerns about the need for further collaboration between local authorities and schools to secure the consistency of how best practices are identified and implemented in different contexts.

For more information

- Lee, M. and J. Kim (2016), “The emerging landscape of school-based professional learning communities in South Korean schools”, *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, Vol. 36/2, pp. 266-284, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2016.1148854>. [2]
- Park, M. and K. So (2014), “Opportunities and Challenges for Teacher Professional Development: A Case of Collaborative Learning Community in South Korea”, *International Education Studies*, Vol. 7/7, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ies.v7n7p96>. [3]
- Research Institute for Teacher Policy and Ministry of Education (2016), *OECD TALIS Initial Teacher Preparation Study. Country Background Report Korea*, Ministry of Education. [1]