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## **From Student Activism to a Way of Life: The Student Activists-Turned-Peasant Activists in South Korea**

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Keywords: Social movement, education for social change, transformative learning

**Abstract:** this paper explores the life-experience of six student activists who turned themselves into peasants in their search for social justice and egalitarian society in South Korea. The praxis of the activists crossing class line in the social movement reveals their transformative learning process as well as the development of their own pedagogy of the oppressed.

Adult education has been defined variously depending on peoples' philosophy but many people agree that it goes beyond schooling (Cunningham, 1989; Foley, 1995; Mayo, 1999; Shied, 1995). It does not confine itself within institutional settings and the term 'education' has been used in a much broader way in the field of adult education (Cunningham, 1989; Foley, 1995; Mayo, 1999; Shied, 1995). In this sense, adult education literature discovered huge educational potential in social movements in which adults collectively engage in various educational activities as a way of achieving their goals for social change as well as creating their own knowledge (Cunningham, 2000; Dykstra & Law, 1994; Finger, 1989; Holford, 1995; Welton, 1993).

Social movements become a place where personal development or personal transformation is taking place in conjunction with the pursuit of societal change. In social movements, personal development comes within the context of given society through actions of participants. There is no artificial separation between personal development and social change. It is a place of praxis. Yet, in spite of such great potential, the current adult education discourse fails to pay attention to the learning process of the participants and the knowledge created by the participants in social movements.

The purpose of this study was to explore the learning process of the active participants in a social movement. For the purpose, the life experience of six student activists-turned-peasant activists who dared to cross class line in their search for more egalitarian society have been examined and analyzed. Key questions in this study were: How have the activists' visions for social change transformed since their initial settlement in their communities? How have they developed their personal skills required in their works as peasants? How do they develop their pedagogy to work with communities? How do they learn how to organize people in their communities?

### **Korean Context**

During 1980s, Korea was struggling under military dictatorships which never hesitate to kill those who rose against the regimes' power. At the same time, Koreans were organizing to bring democracy to the country even in face of the harsh oppression, and the student movement was the powerful engine of the democratic movement. Student activists, radicalized by socialism, sought to overthrow the regimes to build a more democratic and egalitarian society. Drawing on socialism and the revolutionary experience of other countries, the student activists

came to believe that workers and peasants were the key forces to be organized to bring fundamental social changes. Based on the belief, student-activists turned themselves into labor workers and peasants, scattering around the nation with the passion of being a seed of fire for future social change.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study to reveal the learning process of the student activists-turned-peasant activists in their communities in details through their perspectives. In this study, in-depth interviews with the activists and observations of their community activities were the primary source of information. For the study, six student activists-turned-peasant activists were selected in purposive sampling for their active involvement in both student movement and peasant movement. All participants were student activists devoting their university lives into a fight against military dictatorships. On leaving the universities, they became peasant activists to organize peasants for social changes and they have worked at least 15 years in their communities since the initial settlements.

For the interviews, I visited their communities and mostly stayed at their homes for two or three days. The interviews were conducted in the format of unstructured open ended questions and audio-taped. In addition, participants' journals, newspapers, and community organization documents were used to supplement the primary source. During the interviews and observations, field notes and analytical memos were continuously taken for future data analysis. After the interviews, the data was transcribed and constant comparison method was used to analyze the data (Glaser, B., & Strauss, A., 1967).

### **Preliminary Themes**

Three preliminary themes emerged from the data: (1) learning from peasants, (2) learning with peasants, (3) learning in social actions. The first theme showed how the activists have changed their vision by learning from the peasants and how they learned their farming skills in their communities. The second one revealed that how the activists developed their own pedagogies while they were working with the peasants. Last theme unfolded that how the activists developed their own way of mobilization in their communities.

#### *Learning from Peasants: the Development of Vision*

The activists had to learn reality and modify their vision. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2000) explained the process of conscientisation of peasants. In order for peasants to be aware of their social context, they have to problematize the world and they have to take back their ability to name the world. This process for the activists was in reverse because most of them came from comparatively affluent families with no experience in farming. As student activists, they were radicalized by witnessing the injustice by military governments and they studied Marxism to improve their activities in search for egalitarian society. During their works as student activists, they studied Korean history, economy, and philosophy in their study groups. As a result, they knew in what kinds of political situation peasants lives and they have clear idea of what to do: organizing and fighting against military regimes. They were good at explaining why peasants had to organize and fight. But they didn't know about the reality peasants were facing in their daily lives. They were nothing but the novices in the new settings. They had to build their theories again from reality and from their practices. As student activists, they had fewer obligations than peasants to bear. They had no responsibility for their families' living and they

had no specific jobs. But as peasants, they had to manage everything: their families and works. Their idea of being peasants need to be aligned with reality. It should come down to earth from the revolutionary images in the books.

When the activists came to their communities, they had abstract idea of peasants and revolution. At first, they began their works based on those abstract and naïve idea. Yet, the reality was totally different from their abstract idea. Many peasants were reluctant to step forward for social justice. They acted on basis of their self-interest. This tendency gave the student-turned-peasants hard time in understanding the nature. They had to learn the peasants' point of view and they eventually grew to understand the peasants and their lifestyle in a less naïve way. Additionally, they had an idea of imminent revolution. It came from their experience and their learning in universities. The student activists went through the turbulent period when Korean people stood up against military regime and brought them down. They witnessed the people power and revolution seemed imminent and possible. However, being peasants and working in their community made them aware of their short-sightedness as student activists. They began to recognize that revolution take a long time. A woman activist, *Younghee*, said,

We can't change the world with only dream. If I kept the dream which I had as a student, I couldn't be here now. Because people are so conservative, peasants' financial situation is so desperate, and the life is so hard in reality.

The student-turned-peasant activists had to learn the practical knowledge of peasants and they learned the knowledge through actions. In their communities, peasants used to work together which is called "*Pumashi*" in Korean. When someone has a work to do, everyone went to the people's home and work together. That's a way to do their jobs in peasant communities. It was a collective work. When the peasants worked together, they were divided into several groups depending on their farming experience and skills. The activists as novices started their works from the easiest one such as holding lines and carrying seeds. In a year, they had gone through a whole process and got the hang of it. *Sunhee* remembered how hard it was to learn,

Peasants did the work very easy but it was very hard for me to do it. It took a long time I finally learn it. For example, after flooding your field, you have to make your field flat so that water can reach everywhere. But it was so hard for me to make it.

The changed position from intellectuals to peasants made them recognize their lack of knowledge in reality and made them aware the cultural knowledge of peasants. The jobs required hard labor and sometimes it was unbearable for the activists but commitment made them sustain their works.

#### *Learning with Peasants: The Development of Pedagogy*

Dialogue with the peasants was not easy. The activists entered into communication with the peasants who were still suspicious of their intentions when they settled down in their communities. Many peasants did not understand why people who had gone to universities wanted to become peasants with lower social status and income. Some of them believed that the students came to their communities to agitate a communist revolution. Others didn't understand their intention but sympathized with the students. In such situations, the activists need to win their hearts and for the purpose they should be accepted as peasants from their neighbors first and foremost. Peasants would not listen to the people who have totally different backgrounds. *Cholsu* reflected on that:

First, we need to be peasants and that means that we had our own fields and works. Some of students came to countries for peasant movements but they never did farming. They

worked for KPL (Korean Peasant League) locals. They went to their offices for several years and then left. I would say that it is not good. They are office peasants. We should become real peasants. For that, we have to build our own farms with our own sweat.

That's the only way by which we can turn ourselves into peasants.

As Freire (2000) said, the activists need to be reborn in their works with the oppressed. They worked hard to transform themselves into peasants.

Dialogue with peasants took place in various places such as fields, home visits, community festivals, and local meetings. When sun went down, after a day of hard labor, unlike other peasants, it was a new beginning of their works for the activists in community organizing. They went to peasants' houses they got to know through works and conversations during the day. At the visits, the activists ate together and drank together with peasants, listening to peasants' life stories and farming. The activists have developed their own pedagogies through those meetings and dialogues. Based on their experience, they stressed the importance of human relationship in developing critical consciousness and in facilitating dialogue. They also emphasized that the activists should work with sincerity. *Kiho* said,

You have to work with peasants with sincerity. You can't talk them into a movement.

You have to approach them with affection and sincerity. Only then, people will trust you and you can go further.

While they were working with peasants, the activists developed their life view. During the school days, they learned through student activism and acquired their worldview which was different from what they previously held. Based on the worldview, they decided to be peasants to bring social change for more equitable and sustainable society. But worldview was not enough. As many radical adult educator pointed out, worldview can't change anything unless you don't act on it (Cunningham, 1989; Foley, 1999; Freire, 2000). The activists, through their failures and learning, are developing their life view, putting more value on what they are doing than how much they can make. It became their way of life and it gave them life fulfillment.

#### *Learning in Social Actions: Pedagogy of Mobilization*

*Local vs. national.* The activists were the members of Korean Peasants League and some of them were the founding members of their locals. They worked hard to organize their communities. The national organization KPL set the agendas and supported the locals in organizing efforts. KPL was established in 1990 and has played a key role in advancing peasant movement and Korean democracy. When KPL tried to organize rallies to support their agenda, it asked its locals to participate in their national efforts to organize. The activists worked hard to organize in their communities but sometimes it was hard to make a balance between the readiness of their communities and the need of the national organization. *Cholsu* reflected on the issue, KPL sent us a schedule of protests but it is almost impossible to meet all the demands. At first, we thought that we had to do it whatever it takes if the organization tells us to do but I don't think that way now. I have to consider my community first. If it is ready, I can happily join the scheduled fighting but if it is not, I won't do it. It will ruin my community. My community is a base for me. *Cholho* expressed the same concern: "In organizing rallies for several years, it turns into a routine. KPL members attended the rallies but that's it".

They began to recognize the importance of their own communities and putting more importance on bottom-up process than simply following the orders from the national organization. Under a military regime, the role of the national organization loomed large and it made a great contribution to bring democracy. But political situation has been changed and their

ways of organizing need to be changed.

*Cholho* explained the change in his local union:

In our previous works, city local union made an initiative, waging symbolic protests against government and *Gun* locals followed the lead of city union. But we're changing the way. When there were the issues concerned communities, we joined their efforts to fix the problems. For example, we have lots of community issues such as waste facility, city developments, and American military camps and the peasants made groups to solve the problems but they did not know how to proceed in their works. We sent our members to each groups and worked together.

*Personal transformation.* The activists have experienced their personal transformation in their works. Common theme was that they were more open to different ideas than before. Many expressed the similar idea. *Kiho* reflected on his experience, saying that "I think I'm willing to listen to different ideas. At first, when I heard something I don't agree, I immediately criticize it but I don't do it anymore". *Yonghee* also mentioned that,

Peoples in my community have all different ideas. If you simply reject the ideas, you can't work with them. Or if you simply accept their idea, you're staying where they are. We have to work together and change the idea together.

*The significance of political alliance.* In social actions, the activist learned the importance of political alliance. Peasants should go beyond their own interest and work for the common cause. In their works, they need to build a strong coalition to win their cause. In case of their fighting against Rice market opening, they had to work with other groups to forward their agenda. The activists invited many organizations, even the groups which they don't share their political positions, into their meetings to build a coalition. *Minsoo* reflected:

There are lots of peasant organizations in communities and some of them are funded by a government. Naturally they were conservative. They sometimes criticized government policies but they didn't act on their positions. Just talking. But we need to include those organizations into our coalition to win.

In other case, the activists worked with labor unions. As a good example, public servants were organizing and mass media was busy criticizing their organizing efforts. The activists invited the members of Korean Government Employees' Union to their community meetings in which the union members explained their purpose. Later, the union members joined the peasants' fight to stop the opening of rice market. Such efforts helped peasants understand the union better and strengthened solidarity between the peasants and the workers. Based on those experiences of political alliance, the activists were working to build *Minjoong Yondai* (Peoples' Alliance) which is a coalition of various groups in their communities.

*Impact of political and economical context.* Political context played important role in their learning process and organizing. When the situation was oppressive, the activists had to move slowly in clandestine way in their communities. For example, in 1989 after the big rally of peasants in the middle of the capital city of Seoul, a military government began to crack down on peasant activists. Many peasants were arrested and the organization suffered under the aggressive attacks. The political oppression hampered their organizational efforts in the communities. When the political situation was in favor of peasants such as the beginning of civilian government, the activists could work better in their communities. Under the military regimes, the activists were considered as a menace but peoples' perception has been changed with the development of democracy, recognizing the role of political activists including peasant activists.

Economical issues also made an impact on the organizational efforts. Many peasants who were reluctant to step forward began to see the danger of imminent opening of agriculture market. The possible devastating impacts on peasants attracted the attention of many peasants in communities. In this situation, the peasant activists found more peasants willing to listen to their arguments.

### Conclusion

The life-experience of six activists in the peasant movement clearly showed the transformative learning process in their actions for social change. They acquired new visions, developed their pedagogies, and learned new ways of mobilization. This research contributed to the current adult literature in two ways. First, it revealed the dynamic learning process in the context of a social movement. In doing so, it extended the notion of adults learning and gave better understanding of the relation between personal transformation and social change in the praxis.

This research is also meaningful in showing the role of adult educators in social movements. When educators are willing to cross over the barriers of class, race, and gender as the activists did, they can make a difference. Horton (1990) stressed that adult educators should find places for social change but he added that “the only way these pockets can be found is to get outside the traditional sort of things that everybody else is doing and identify with these people” (p. 95). Many committed adult educators have embarked on the search for pockets of hope in their own settings and more research is in great need to bring the voice and knowledge of the courageous educators to the center of adult education.

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