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The Social Networks of Korean Female Adult Learners in a Middle School

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Abstract: This study investigates the social networks of Korean female adult learners in middle school through social network analysis and examines the development of these networks by interviewing the main actors involved.

Keywords: social network, female adult learner, social network analysis

Purpose of the Study

There are women who were unable to attend school in adolescence and who have returned to school as adults in Korea. For them, school is a place where they can heal from the pain of the past, enjoy learning in the present, and plan dreams for the future. In order for school to be such a meaningful place for them, various factors such as their individual motivations for attendance and their family/social support are generally required to be positive. In other words, not only an individual's effort but also a diverse set of relational and social aspects influence the learning and school life of adult learners.

Human beings do not act in a vacuum but rather in the context of specific social relationships that are always evolving. An individual's social relationships form a 'social network,' which critically influences learning retention, satisfaction and achievement. According to Lim and Kim (2016), social networks in learning, such as those related to academic advice or direct support, play a central role in effecting high academic achievement.

Despite the importance of social networks in learning, however, there are few studies that have paid attention to social relationships, especially in the field of adult learning. Many studies are exploring the meaning of learning later in life from a life history perspective (Kim & Choi, 2014; Lee & Ahn, 2007; Lee, 2006), or identifying factors that affect an adult learner's academic achievement (Dupeyrat & Mariné, 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvic, 2005). But these studies have focused on the narratives and characteristics of individuals, while largely overlooking the relational dynamics formed by adult learners within their learning situations. The critical factor of social networks has been lost. Therefore, this study aims to investigate and visualize the social networks of female adult students in middle school through social network analysis (SNA), and to examine the development of these networks through qualitative data analysis. Specifically, our research questions are: 1) What are the social networks of female adult learners in school? 2) How did they develop their social networks?

Female Adult Learners in Korea: Sociocultural and Historical Backgrounds

As of 2015 in Korea, the rates of people whose highest level of schooling is 'graduated from elementary school' are 0.63% for males and 0.88% for females in their 40s, 5.84% for males and 10.96% for females in their 50s, 17.03% for males and 33.18% for females in their 60s, and 31.20% for males and 42.49% for females in their 70s or older (Statistics Korea, 2015). The proportion of women is relatively higher than that of men due to the patriarchal social structure of Korean culture. Women were traditionally expected to devote themselves to their families for their lifetimes. Daughters were usually forced to sacrifice their educational or career opportunities for those of their brothers. In addition, access to educational opportunity was limited in general due to a labor market structure that was segmented by gender and academic background. Living with a low level of education in Korea - where educational enthusiasm and credentialism are extreme - is a severe stress factor (Baek, 2002). In these circumstances, women who were excluded access to education and who try to return to school later in life face new challenges in the way they feel about themselves (Kim & Choi, 2014).

The schools they return to are classified as "school-type" lifelong educational establishments, for recognition of educational attainment (Lifelong Education Act, 2016); the schools provide secondary education opportunities in elementary, middle, and high school curricula, as well as academic qualifications, for adults who missed opportunities for formal schooling.

Theoretical Framework

All the social relationships of an individual are included in that individual's 'social network' (Ell, 1984). This social network, consisting of formal and informal human relationships, changes with the changing roles of the individual and those around him in daily life, and is fundamentally a dynamic concept. Network theory is concerned with the relationships between the actors in such a network. Therefore, in explaining the performance of individuals or organizations, researchers studying networks consider not only the characteristics of the individuals or organizations, but also the relationships in which the actors or organizations are embedded, which both constrain and provide opportunities (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010). Social network theory can serve as an important complement to certain andragogical modes that overlook social context and over-emphasize individual autonomy and self-direction (Kessel & Poell, 2004). In addition, social networks play a key role in shaping social capital, which is a latent consequence of adult learning, and the networks themselves are also a form of social capital (Han, 1998).

Social network analysis (SNA) is used to describe the characteristics and structures of different types of networks, to explain the characteristics of systems in relation to their units, and to describe the behavior of the units that make up a system (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). One useful, representative index of SNA is centrality. Centrality is a concept of quantifying the degree from center of a certain actor in a network. Three approaches to centrality are 'degree centrality', 'betweenness centrality', and 'closeness centrality' (Freeman, 1979). Degree centrality represents the number of network connections to an actor and is a good indicator of the point of focus of the network. Betweenness centrality measures the extent to which an actor plays the role of a mediator in a group, and measures the degree to which the actor, represented as a vertex, is located "between" the other points in the network. Closeness centrality is expressed as the sum of the distances between one actor and the others, and is an indicator of the actor's centrality relative to the whole network. It is possible to explain the role and position of each actor in the network through these indicators.

Research Design

This study was conducted by partially mixed methods (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). The participants were a total of 85 female students attending two different classes (A, B) in the same grade in a middle school. Most participants were in their 60s (63.5%); next were participants in their 50s (21.2%), followed by participants in their 70s (12.9%); with participants in their 30s and 40s being the minority (1.2%). The average age was 62, with the youngest woman 33 years old

and the oldest woman 76 years old. This study had two stages. In the first stage, the social networks in the school were measured through a questionnaire in which each student wrote the names of 7 classmates in general and 7 classmates whom they considered helpful. In the next stage, in order to examine the development of the networks, interviews were conducted with participants from the top 3% of degree centrality, from the top 3% of betweenness centrality, and from the bottom 3% of overlapping degree centrality and betweenness centrality. A total of six interviewees (two in each group) were selected after the initial analysis of the social network, but only three agreed to participate in interviews. The interview data was analyzed by initial, focused and axial coding.

Findings

Visualization of the Social Networks in the School

The sociogram of the social networks of female adult students in the study is shown in Fig 1. In the figure, circles represent students in the 'A class' (the first class) and squares represents students in the 'B class' (the second class). The arrows connecting the circles and the squares represent directional relationships. The one capital letter and two numbers next to each circle or square are randomly assigned identifying numbers.

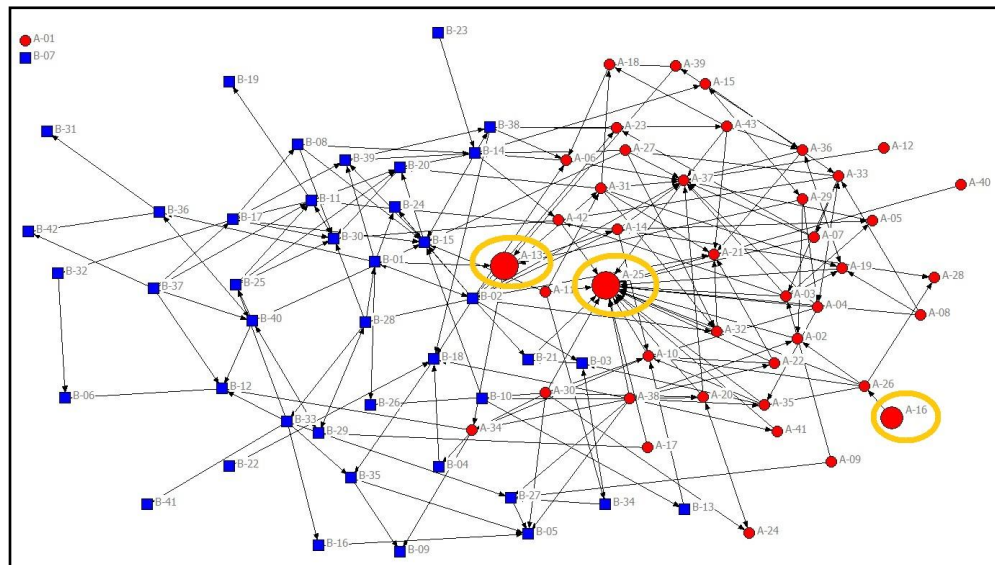


Figure 1. Sociogram for the Social Networks of Female Learners in the School

As a result of the first analysis, student A-01 in the first class and student B-07 in the second class could be considered as isolated from the network. Student A-25 in the first class was identified by 21 students as a learner who provided learning support, and student B-15 in the second class was so identified by 10 students. The student having the highest betweenness centrality was B-14, followed by A-13.

The Development of the Social Networks

Jihye Kim/A-25 (the student with the highest degree centrality): Jihye actively built her social network with the other classmates through both academic and non-academic methods. As the youngest student at the school, the 33-year-old woman was more enthusiastic about learning and showed higher educational achievement than other older students. She already had failed the GED twice, which gave her the opinion that it was difficult for students to study by themselves. So, by sharing her English homework through SNS in advance and summarizing the course for others during exam periods, Jihye supported other students' learning. Being the youngest student in the school made her influential to other students in not only academic areas but also everyday life. For example, she assisted others who were not used to using smartphones. However, this did not mean that her roles were solely supporting in the class. She often received care and assistance from others.

I help out often when it comes to class related things, and they (older classmates) return the favor with food. They pay for my lunch or give me extra food to take home. Things like side dishes or a pot of soup.

In this sense, Jihye's ways of building relationships was bidirectional.

Youngja Park/A-13 (the student with the second highest betweenness centrality): Youngja was 77 years old, the oldest student at the school. She graduated from an elementary school two years ago and entered the middle school together with about 20 friends. She felt a strong sense of responsibility as the oldest student, and she made effort to behave in an exemplary manner. Youngja actively participated in social gatherings of the classmates.

When I make a promise to meet someone, I honor it. I can't break it, because I don't want people to think 'oh, that's her opinion of attending school.' A promise is a promise. Especially now that I have peers, I try to come, even when I am sick. I want to set a good example for them.

She had a belief that people should not to be rude to each other, and should understand and care for those younger than themselves. Despite her age, she made other classmates feel that they could treat her as an equal.

Honestly, there's a generation gap amongst us. But there's no point in making standards here. Outside, there is an age difference, but inside here, we are all sixteen year olds. So there is no gap. Sometimes they just call me by my first name and I say their name back and we giggle together. No one likes those people who act like they are a big deal because they are older.

I am the one who receives more. It's hard to give back, because I can't catch up with the young people. I wouldn't be able to mingle with them if they didn't accept me as one of them. They don't think of me as a different kind of person and so we just laugh and hang out together, just like friends do.

Her attitude toward the others placed her at high centrality in the social network of the class.

Sunja Yang/A-16 (a student in the bottom 3% of both degree centrality and betweenness centrality): Sunja started going to the school last year but often had to miss her class due to diabetes, which she had been fighting for 8 years. A distinctive characteristic in the formation of her social networks was her belief in the limitations of age and past career. She believed that 'age' and 'past career' could not be disregarded in building relationships.

It's hard to get involved at this age. And it's difficult to make friends, because we don't know who people really are. Who knows what they did in the past?

She had had to raise her daughter alone since her husband's death early in her marriage, but she had earned a good deal of money in business. The combination of her economic condition and her prejudices about other students brought her into conflict with a classmate. Eventually, the student who fought with her quit school.

When I was in first grade, I had a fight with a 70-year-old and so I quit. She told others that I was rich and questioned how I became rich. But I'm not rich at all. She and the others just made up rumors about me and I found no need to respond to them.

Sunja showed the minimum amount of effort in relationships with her classmates that she felt necessary to maintain her social image. Fundamentally, she did not have an interest in forming close relationships with them. Rather, she preferred to build relationships with teachers instead of students.

They call me, but I just want to rest because I don't feel well. But I do try to win their hearts by being polite, by hanging out with them and eating with them, and by sharing homemade food with the teachers. We are peers who have the common goal of studying, so I do want to be on good terms with everyone.

Sunja spent relatively less time with other classmates and had negative opinions of other classmates. This led to her excluded status in the network.

Conclusions and Implications

By using social network analysis, this study explored the structure of the social networks of female adult learners in their school lives. It explicitly showed which students played central roles in the overall network and which students were distant or alienated. In this sense, SNA could provide useful implications in practices of adult education. First of all, through SNA educators could identify actors who are alienated from their networks and help them to get appropriate intervention and support. In addition, SNA could be useful in identifying actors who most influence the overall network, such as the full network of students in the same class or in the same grade, and then enhancing the educational effect of those actors' centrality.

This study also examined adult learners' ways of developing social networks. For adult learners, not only the school - the academic learning setting - but also certain contexts from everyday life were important elements in the formation of their social networks. Adult learners developed their networks through supporting each other both academically and in daily life by helping with assignments and sharing food. The more they met and spent time together, the stronger their positions and relationships in their networks. Therefore, in future frameworks of andragogy, a diversity of social interactions should be considered for the healthy development of students' social networks.

In this study, a student's attitude and perception towards others generally helped explain her position in the overall social network. Those who had a positive perception of others and who were willing to make and continue intimate relationships were located in the center of the network, while those who had a negative perception of others, such as of distrust or doubt, tended to be alienated from the network. Additionally, sociocultural factors were as important as individual characteristics in the development of the social networks. For example, age and economic status influenced the way students regarded themselves and others. From this it follows that a proper regard for sociocultural factors is essential in understanding social networks - social networks clearly develop through not only the individual actors' actions but also through sociocultural cues. However, current discussions of social networks tend to focus excessively on actors' behaviors, overlooking sociocultural influences. Therefore, to better understand the social networks of adult learners in general, it is necessary also to promote understanding of the sociocultural contexts in which those social networks develop.

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