

“Healing” workshops on education in South Korea

Peter Dankmeijer, 8 May 2017

On May 6 and 7, South Korean activists joined in two workshops offered by GALE on education strategy and on informal education through storytelling. GALE was invited by "Solidarity for LGBT human rights of Korea" to do the workshops after being helpful in connecting them with UNESCO and with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, who readily agreed to make a public statement to promote strategies to combat homophobic bullying in South Korea.

Sense of isolation

The Ban-Ki-moon statement and the GALE workshops came at the right time for the South Korean LGBT movement. The Korean activists feel somewhat isolated. This is in part a language problem, because not many Korean speak English. Also, since South Korea is considered a “developed” country, development organizations are not interested or able to support the local LGBT movement. At the same time the South Korean authorities have no



intention to support their own LGBT citizens in their struggle for equal rights. This situation creates a sense of isolation for the small Korean activist organizations and they feel they are up against overwhelming forces of government resistance and social prejudice.

Photo: Peter Dankmeijer (GALE) and translators. The public is not depicted because of privacy reasons

Students rights charters become battleground

An illustration of this is the recent battle over the adoption of “students rights charters”. In the Korean school system, students are supposed to be silent, obedient and to not voice their opinion. Teachers implement a strict discipline which often includes corporal punishment. The curriculum mainly consists of rather out-of date learning facts by heart and does not include any life skills. Students are obliged to spend each day in school from 8 AM till 10 PM and there is enormous pressure to get high grades to be able to access a good university. Although voicing youth opinions is strongly discouraged or punished, recently a youth movement has started to challenge this and demand that rights of students are protected. The strategy is to ask local authorities to adopt students rights charters. The LGBT youth movement joins this strategy because it would include a legal space for their self-expression and to have some degree of protection against discrimination. Some districts are open to this, but in others there is a harsh fight about it. One of the reasons for authorizes to be against students rights charters is exactly because it would protect LGBT rights. It is hard to establish contact with the educational authorities. They act as if they are a Kafkaesque total institution, in which students are not entitled to rights or information. In addition, the Korean youth feels powerless because the system and the Korean culture has never taught them to raise their voice in any way. It’s a double bind.

Exploration of a strategy

The GALE workshops took place in two evenings: one small workshop with selected activists, and a second evening with a lecture on education strategy and a taste of training on how to use storytelling for advocacy and informal education. During the first workshop, there was an intensive discussion about the South Korean situation and the challenges of LGBT grass roots organizations. Using the division in State stages as “denying”, “ambiguous” and “supportive” from the GALE Advocacy brochure, the activists first would classify South Korea as a “denying State”. This was mainly based on their emotional response to the strong resistance of some authorities. But after looking more objectively to the situation, the

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conclusion had to be that South Korea is more at an “ambiguous” stage, although in the most early phase of it. In this situation, it is often most difficult for activists to see opportunities and the reflex is to feel disempowered or protest against the authorities. There can be counter-productive strategies, because in “ambiguous” States real progress is usually made by identifying mainstream opportunities and by creating cooperation between activists, schools and authorities. However, this does not happen automatically. It requires a mind shift both in the mind of educational staff, authorities and activists. For the Korean activists, this new way of looking at their situation helped to overcome their sense of disempowerment and see some opportunities for next strategic steps. Most critical seems to be to attempt first contact with schools and school authorities and to find out which are their interests and priorities. Framing the LGBT movements demands in such mainstream priorities will facilitate cooperation.

Are you a spy?

The workshops also discussed the potential to start informal education interventions by grass roots organizations through informal storytelling or testimonials. There is a great interest in this in Asia, but there a lot of questions about how to strategically tell you story so it maximizes effect. GALE developed a training on this, but the time available in South Korea was too limited to do the training. Instead, Peter Dankmeijer gave a short lecture about the main interactive processes that come into play while making your testimonial and engaging in a dialogue with aggressive or silent students, In the public workshop on May 7, Dankmeijer also ‘acted out’ a session, with himself ‘playing’ the volunteer educator and the participants ‘playing’ secondary school students asking the most difficult questions they could come up with. This was education through demonstration.

The final and most difficult question one participant asked was: “are you a spy?” Dankmeijer returned the question by asking where the ‘student’ got this weird idea. In the ensuing discussion, it turned out that South Korean students may perceive themselves as ‘strong and proud of the South Korean nation’ and fear North Korea to such an extent that they imagine a North Korean plot to send homosexual spies to South Korea to weaken the nation with effeminate homosexual tendencies. Further dialogue on this clarified how a fear of softening

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the norm of heterosexuality – in this case connected to a distorted image of national pride and strength – is rooted in basic fears of being ‘different’ which is common to the biological make-up of human beings. It is a basic ‘transversal competence’ to learn how to deal with such natural of often not constructive feelings of panic. This is true both for secondary school students but also for activists who may feel paralyzed or outraged by the offensive responses of authorities, or of students. Dankmeijer explained why he did not panic when hearing the “spy” question and gave suggestions on how to deal with the panic instinct in educational and advocacy contexts.

“Healing” impact

After the 2 workshops, some of the organizers and participants sat together to relax and to reflect on what happened. One of them reflected that the workshop had a “healing” effect on her. The sense of isolation and the feeling of being disempowered by unwilling authorities had dissolved in part during the workshops. This was due to two learning impacts of the workshops. One was the realization that the situation in South Korea is not a stagnant one, but a phase in a development. This particular stage has its own challenges but by realizing it is a phase, it opens up reflections of what already has been gained and of future opportunities. The other learning impact was the reflection on the basic competence on how to deal with paralysis and rage. Realizing how to recognize and then adequately dealing with such panic, helped the participants to see constructive ways of how to deal with it.