

Blog post

How South Koreans remember tragedy through education

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In the wake of tragic events, whether caused by natural or human-made hazards, education has a critical role to play as a beacon of hope, a catalyst for healing, and a pathway to resilience (Park, 2020). As shattered communities and individuals grapple with the aftermath of their loss, important questions emerge for educators: How can education contribute to healing and rebuilding shattered lives? How does education provide a sense of hope and a pathway to a brighter future in the face of tragedy? What should we teach and learn about tragedy to build resilience and advance disaster justice? In this blog, we describe and reflect on our experience as ‘disaster educators’ and share how South Korean society has responded to a major disaster through education.

The [Sewol Ferry disaster](#) was a tragic maritime accident that occurred on 16 April 2014 in South Korea. The ferry, named MV Sewol, flooded and sank while en route from Incheon to Jeju Island. The ship was carrying 476 passengers, 261 of whom were high school students from Danwon High School on a field trip with their teachers. It was reported that the captain [abandoned](#) the tilting and sinking ship, and the passengers were instructed to ‘[stay put](#)’. The ferry sank 101 minutes after it first began to tilt, resulting in the deaths of 304 people. The operating company had modified the ship to [carry more cargo](#), which, allegedly, resulted in raising the ship’s centre of gravity and making it more vulnerable to tilting. It was also reported that the ferry was [overloaded](#) with passengers and cargo to maximise profit, and that [government blunders](#) and inadequate regulation contributed to the disaster.

After a seven-year-long campaign by bereaved families in pursuit of justice, in 2021 the Provincial Office of Education [established](#) the 4.16 Institute of Democratic Citizenship Education. The Institute features ‘[memory classrooms](#)’, where the classrooms and everything in them – desks, chairs, blackboards, lockers, clocks, doors and windows, and personal belongings of the lost students – have been restored and preserved by professionals. Bereaved parents work as guides for visitors to raise public awareness and promote a culture of remembrance, memory, hope and solidarity.

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The Institute offers educational programmes for primary and secondary school students, teachers and parents, organised around the core principles of remembrance and empathy. In the programmes for students, they visit the memory classroom and learn about an account of the disaster and the efforts to remember it. They then convene to discuss what caused the tragedy, what should be done to prevent similar disasters, and what role they can play as democratic citizens. In an activity called ‘Respecting life and safety’, students discuss what they think we should remember about the tragedy, write it down

on a card. and hang it on the ‘tree of hope’. Then they move to a nearby maritime safety centre to learn about ship

Besides educating future citizens, the Institute provides programmes for parents and teachers who will help to achieve the Institute's goals. Parents participate in reading groups focused on fiction and non-fiction works about disasters to discuss ways to learn from tragedies and talk about disasters at home. The Institute also designs and delivers professional development programmes for teachers, along with providing lesson plans and materials that are ready to use in alignment with the national curriculum at different levels.

The South Korean experience serves as a powerful testament to the restorative and transformative role of education in the aftermath of tragedy (Kitagawa, 2021). Schools need to educate citizens so that they can remember past tragedies, sympathise with others' sufferings, and contribute to making a safe and just society. Education about the Sewol Ferry disaster at the 4.16 Institute of Democratic Citizenship Education provides a good model of disaster education that connects educators and disaster-affected communities.

This type of model could also work in other contexts, for example to help UK educators respond to human-made disasters such as [the Hillsborough disaster](#) and the Grenfell Tower fire (see Connelly et al., 2019). What should be remembered about these disasters, and what knowledge and emotions should we pass on to the next generation? How can we talk about these events with respect and sensitivity in the classroom and at home? The story of Sewol Ferry is a reminder that collaborative efforts between educators, affected communities and authorities can enable us to remember and learn from disasters while nurturing a compassionate and resilient future.

References

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