Review Article

Activity Theory and Collaborative Intervention in Education

By Katsuhiro Yamazumi, Routledge, 2021

Yasuhiko Fujie*

This book by Dr. Katsuhiro Yamazumi, a leading Japanese expert on cultural-historical activity theory, offers a theoretical discussion of practice-building through practitioner-researcher collaboration.

The work presents a new mode of educational research based on cultural-historical activity theory and the theory of expansive learning—a mode of educational research that creates a place for achieving the kind of expansive learning that allows children and teachers (the “parties concerned” of educational practice) to collectively reform their practices, acquire agency, and expand; educational research whereby the creation of this place is achieved by researchers in collaboration with the parties concerned through designing and re-designing practices. Here I examine the content of this book from my perspective in support of the learning and development of children and teachers through pedagogical approaches to school education practices.

The kind of researcher involvement in on-the-ground school practice discussed in this book can be described as “formative intervention.” As a methodology of cultural-historical activity theory, formative intervention places importance on agency—the motives and intentions of human tool usage. Formative intervention differs from the methods of intervention conventionally employed by educational research, which call for linear causality whereby policy makers/researchers provide a grand design, which is then implemented by teachers. Formative intervention begins with practitioners (teachers and children) facing an object with contradictions unknown to the researcher. Intervention processes are left to negotiation, and modes of intervention are ultimately decided by the practitioners (parties concerned). The expected outcome of this mode of intervention is to generate new concepts for local solution and to be agency of practitioner, and the researcher’s role is to awaken and maintain the expansive reform processes guided and carried out by the practitioners (Engeström, 2015, p. xxxi). Formative intervention therefore invests great importance in “resistance by practitioner,” an indication that agency—the practitioner’s own intention and involvement—is functioning. Action research, consultation, and other modes of researcher intervention in school activ-

* The University of Tokyo  
e-mail: yfujie@p.u-tokyo.ac.jp
ties are invariably aimed at constructing “theories in practice” by searching for solutions to the issues at hand. Researchers and practitioners collaborate on equal terms, respecting one another’s expertise. However, these interventions do not always end up successfully developing the capacity and agency of teachers and children, tending to focus instead on the solution of practical problems. As this book points out by citing Elmore (2008), “…substantial investment in human capital aimed at developing the practice of school improvement in a diverse population of school leaders” (Elmore, 2008, p. 39) is completely lacking. Dr. Yamazumi goes on to show how this issue can be overcome by Developmental Work Research based on activity theory framework and methodology: Activity theory examines the exploration of new forms and patterns of social and collaborative practical activities by the practitioners themselves in the midst of historical changes, as well as human development through the creation of these new collective practical activities (Yamazumi, 2017, p. 60).

As its title suggests, this book proposes collaborative intervention as a mode of formative intervention. Collaborative intervention employs researcher-practitioner and/or teacher-student collaboration to identify activity system contradictions, and uses the contradictions as points of departure for creating new subjects, concepts, and activity styles for further collective activities, which are then practiced (pp. 63–64). It is a form of “expansive learning” that involves “learning what is not yet there” (p. 63), as opposed to acquiring or participating in an existing culture, or adapting to systemic or institutional constraints. The book also introduces readers to the two principles of collaborative intervention in activity theory, namely the “principle of agency” and the “principle of hybridity,” according to which the case studies included in the second half of the book are organized. The case studies include teacher-to-children agency transfer (Chapter 4) and formative intervention by the researcher to encourage expansive learning by the teacher as collaborative change agent (Chapter 5), based on the principle of agency; and hybrid education composed of multi-partner knotworking (Chapter 6) and knotworking agency formation by means of a community-based disaster prevention learning program (Chapter 7), based on the principle of hybridity.

These chapters employ case studies to logically and specifically elucidate the key concepts of cultural-historical activity theory, such as expansive learning, formative intervention, and knotworking. They also leave the reader with a new question: What kind of expansive learning can the intervening researcher expect from a formative intervention designed to create new education during the course of a school reform, or in the community? Formative intervention conducted as part of a negotiation requires the researcher to interpret the practices and the practitioner activity. These interpretations are likely to be based on the researcher’s personal experiences and beliefs. Moreover, the formative intervention itself is likewise subject to the social context (rules, community, division of labor) constituting the activity-system substructure of the researcher. In order to understand the structure of the scenes of education through engagement with the contradictions between the activity systems of the researcher and those of the parties concerned, and to conduct a formative intervention in order to understand practitioner agency, processes must exist for the researcher to gain a meta-view of their own activities while learning from on-the-ground input and preceding theories. This learning could be regarded as a form of expansive learning for the researcher toward acquiring agency. Perhaps we can envisage educational research as processes of greater complexity where intervening researcher activity and practitioner activity have mutually reflective effects.

This book sets out to construct pedagogy as an “emancipatory social science” used to
explore personal development for collective engagement in the construction of common good (Chapter 1). It is an invaluable resource for considering how to work with on-the-ground practice at schools to achieve this goal.

References