

Dialogicity in Korean Early Childhood Teachers' Suda Network-Professional Learning Communities (Suda N-PLC)



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Abstract

This study examines suda (수다), a culturally specific form of open-ended conversational exchange, as practiced among early childhood educators in Oju, South Korea. While informal teacher dialogues have been explored in other cultural contexts, few studies have investigated suda as a dialogic practice with distinctive cultural features and professional learning potential. Drawing on interviews, ethnographic field notes, and selected excerpts from suda session transcripts, the research adopts an emic perspective to analyze how Oju participants perceived the nature and value of suda. Using a grounded research approach informed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the analysis identified six interrelated dimensions of suda: dialogicity, emergence, spontaneity, non-hierarchy, openness, and emotional support and empathy. Findings show that suda provided a space for teachers to reflect on and reimagine their practice, often leading to tangible professional transformations such as restructuring classroom schedules, enhancing documentation practices, and fostering greater openness to peer collaboration. By situating suda in relation to other culturally rooted dialogic traditions, this study contributes to dialogic pedagogy scholarship by illuminating how culturally situated informal conversations can cultivate professional growth, strengthen collegial bonds, and nurture democratic participation within early childhood education communities.

Keywords: *suda, professional learning communities, dialogic pedagogy, teacher professional development, early childhood teachers.*

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In the field of early childhood education, teachers often grow by sharing their experiences and knowledge through informal conversations with one another. These conversations, or 'suda,' (particularly in Korean culture, Meacham, 2019, 2021) are not merely everyday talks but can serve as crucial contexts for teachers to reflect on and improve their educational practices. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to qualitatively describe how Korean teachers' suda forms a learning community within the context of networks outside the school and promotes collaboration and growth among teachers.

The Ontoepistemological Value of Suda and its Role in Knowledge Construction

Suda, as a Korean cultural concept, refers to being talkative in private or informal contexts rather than public or formal ones. Traditionally, it has been viewed as trivial or insignificant conversations of women in male-dominated mainstream society (Oh, 2005; Meacham et al., 2019, 2021, 2024). From a feminist perspective, however, suda holds ontoepistemological value by linking ways of being with ways of knowing (Meacham et al., 2019, 2021, 2024). It is not merely information exchange but a process through which participants recognize their existence and its relation to knowledge. Suda can generate knowledge through informal dialogue rather than authoritative discourse. Knowledge is not fixed but continually reshaped through experience and conversation. In this way, suda can disrupt hierarchical knowledge structures and enable collective leadership, as all participants can contribute equally to knowledge creation within a non-hierarchical dialogic space.

Although many cultures have informal teacher conversations, suda is culturally distinct. In early childhood teacher networks, suda embodies mutual care, emotional openness, and suspended hierarchy. Unlike Western professional dialogues often focused on outcomes, suda centers on relationship-building and vulnerability. Younger teachers can initiate topics and question seniors without violating norms because the space is marked as suda, not an "official meeting," making it socially familiar and professionally generative.

Drawing on Barad's (2007) ontoepistemological view that being and knowing are entangled, suda can be seen as a process where participants reconstruct their sense of being while creating knowledge. Barad's concept of the "agential cut," which defines boundaries through interaction, aligns with suda's open-ended dialogue. In suda, the dialogue itself becomes an agential cut through which participants collectively form new meanings and realities, showing that suda contributes to knowledge creation beyond everyday talk.

The ontoepistemological logic of suda also appears in cultural practices such as Pláticas in Latinx communities and Lifenote and Sista Circle in African American communities (Kim et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2023; Meacham et al., 2024). Pláticas are informal conversations that shape identity and community memory, while Lifenote and Sista Circle use storytelling and empathy to build solidarity and collective knowledge. In all cases, conversation links being and knowing, enabling identity formation and shared meaning-making. While these traditions arise from different cultures, they share relational, informal, and community-driven features. This study positions suda within this broader landscape to ask how dialogic pedagogy functions in peer-led, non-institutional spaces. It extends prior work by examining how suda operates over time as a teacher-initiated learning ecology grounded in spontaneity, trust, and ontological transformation, asking how teachers construct knowledge and professional identity without formal agendas. By placing suda alongside these traditions, the study reframes teacher learning as occurring not only through formal collaboration but through culturally situated, affectively rich, peer-driven dialogue that blurs personal and professional boundaries.

Former Suda Research

Since suda was developed as a theoretical framework and research methodology for early childhood education and teacher education by Korean American scholars (Meacham et al., 2019, 2021), many studies have examined its practice. These include suda in Korean American children's exploration of racial and cultural identity and racism (Wee et al., 2023), its use among researchers for critical reflection on educational practice (Kim et al., 2022; Han et al., 2023; Meacham et al., 2025), and its role in play-based family literacy in Korean American households (Kim et al., 2025).

Wee et al. (2023) showed that during COVID-19, family suda supported children's exploration of racial identity and experiences with racism, offering a safe space for reflection and critical thinking about social justice. Kim et al. (2021) and Han et al. (2023) demonstrated that suda supports critical reflection among teacher educators, enabling critique of practice and Western-centered perspectives. Kim et al. (2025) further showed that suda in family literacy includes verbal and non-verbal forms, with play functioning as a form of literacy.

Together, these studies show that suda respects diverse voices and generates new knowledge, functioning as both an educational and research approach that supports meaningful dialogue and growth in early childhood education (Meacham et al., 2024).

Early Childhood Teachers' Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

A collaborative environment where teachers share experiences and knowledge contributes to professional development and educational quality in early childhood education. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) enable teachers to engage in critical dialogue and reflection, improving educational quality (Denee, 2024). Studies show PLCs support growth in teaching practice, self-care, trust, and institutional recognition (Guerra et al., 2024) and reduce isolation through digital platforms (Zhou et al., 2022). Tam (2024) found that PLC participation across cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions supports play-based learning.

Most research focuses on in-school PLCs, though some examine network PLCs (NPLCs) and pre-service teacher PLCs. Denee (2024), building on Azorín et al. (2020), Jackson & Temperley (2007), Prenger et al. (2017), and Stoll et al. (2006), all show that NPLCs enhance self-efficacy and collaboration. Banjong et al. (2021) found that pre-service teachers improved planning, implementation, and assessment through PLC participation.

In Korea, learning communities improve collaboration and teaching practice. Kim & Shin (2024) report positive effects on teaching efficacy and play-based learning, whereas Kim & Ko (2022) find that learning communities strengthen professional skills and institutional culture. However, teachers face challenges such as heavy workloads and a lack of institutional support (Hwang, 2023; Kim & Kim, 2024). From a policy perspective, Sung and Kim (2022) argue that regional differences in policy limit effectiveness, though learning community policies have fostered a communal teacher culture.

Communities of practice theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Hughes et al., 2007) frames learning as participation in shared practice. In a similar vein, suda emphasizes relational participation and collective meaning-making through ongoing dialogic engagement. Won & Yoon (2021) examined suda among Korean teachers using material agency (Davies, 2014; Lenz Taguchi, 2010), identifying four movements of suda: slowing down, speeding up, innovating, and flowing. They argue that to avoid bias, teachers should engage with diverse actors through gatherings or mentorships. Overall, PLC research shows strong benefits, but sustained participation requires institutional support and cultural tailoring.

Suda also aligns with theories of informal teacher learning, such as “inquiry as stance” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) and key PLC features identified by Stoll et al. (2006). However, suda differs in being voluntary, culturally grounded, and blending personal and professional knowledge, including emotional labor and identity.

While prior studies examine suda in identity formation, family contexts, or as methodology, little is known about suda as a sustained, self-organized learning space for in-service early childhood teachers across institutions. This study addresses that gap by examining suda as dialogic education within a teacher learning community, focusing on how it reshapes beliefs, identity, and knowledge through open-ended dialogue. It explores a voluntary out-of-school suda-NPLC, analyzing teachers’ reflections on collaboration, knowledge sharing, and practice change, and offers insights into how teacher-initiated gatherings support professional development.

This study contributes to dialogic pedagogy by showing that dialogic learning emerges not only between teachers and students but also among teachers. It offers a culturally grounded example of voluntary, emotionally rich, non-hierarchical dialogic communities centered on care, curiosity, and transformation.

Methods

As previously stated, the purpose of this study is to understand the role of teachers’ suda in fostering a learning community that supports collaboration and professional growth among teachers. The primary data source for this research consists of individual interview transcripts with participants from the “Oju Suda Gathering (Oju, henceforth),” a suda-NPLC. Secondary data includes the researcher’s field notes based on participant observation, video recordings from the Suda Gathering meetings, and their transcripts. The analysis focuses on two main research questions: First, what are the suda characteristics observed in the Suda Gathering? Second, how do these suda characteristics impact participants’ learning experiences, as perceived by the participants themselves?

Context

The background of this study lies in Oju, a voluntary learning community (PLC) created by early childhood education and care teachers. Oju represents a form of suda-NPLC, established to provide a space where teachers can share experiences, collaborate, and grow together. The formation of Oju began with an advanced workshop on documentation at the Korea Center for Children and Teachers (KCCT). This workshop, designed and facilitated by the researcher in collaboration with the KCCT field research team, was influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach, supporting collaborative learning and decision-making among teachers (Martini et al., 2015). Oju started in 2021 when some teachers who participated in the workshop expressed a desire to continue these interactions. JL reflects on the beginning:

At that time, we always felt the lack of opportunities to spend time talking with fellow teachers; it was so comforting, and there were so many things we wanted to say and hear, but there was no such space. So, we proposed continuing this kind of gathering, and many agreed... it was quite spontaneous.” (Excerpt from an interview with JL on September 5, 2024)

Since then, the group has continued for over three years, meeting monthly on Zoom and occasionally in person. It now includes 17 members, such as teachers, researchers from integrated care centers and KCCT, and graduate students. Oju has been centered around open suda, with flexible themes and formats. Topics are often freely decided, and discussions proceed as general suda when no proposal is made. Even when someone suggests a “book suda,” the conversation remains open and free-flowing. Topics shift according to the group’s mood and interests, sometimes leading to practical discussions about

projects or recent events. For example, the subject of disability inclusion emerged organically and later led to reading “We, Heena” (Oh, 2023) together, resulting in a book suda.

As meetings progress, new projects, such as “Sudapool,” are naturally planned. “Sudapool” involves inviting teachers outside of Oju to join and share the contents of the book suda conducted within the group. Although meetings sometimes shift toward task-oriented planning, open suda still shapes how those tasks are discussed. Each session usually lasts at least two hours, often extending to three or more hours.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study primarily utilized individual interviews with teachers participating in Oju. The semi-structured interviews allowed teachers to freely express their experiences, and the researcher adjusted the interview questions flexibly. All interviews were recorded with participants’ consent, and recordings were transcribed verbatim.

Field notes were recorded during participation in Oju as an active participant, capturing real-time observations and immediate reactions, and all meetings were recorded on video. These secondary data sources complemented interviews and supported credibility and validity by enabling review of specific moments.

This study employed a qualitative research approach that incorporated analytic techniques from grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), including open coding, constant comparison, and memo writing, but the goal was not to generate a fully developed theoretical model. Instead, the analysis aimed to construct a rich, emic understanding of the characteristics and functions of suda within the Oju community. During open coding, a total of 26 individual codes were identified. The codes included openness, non-hierarchy, spontaneity, suda paradox, empathy, suda productivity, age-related hierarchy, suda identity, dialogicity, openness, suda culture, understanding differences, ontoepistemological, accessible modeling, professional development through peer relationships, curiosity about others’ perspectives, ontological, solitude, new perspectives, learning community, moral support, motivation, breaking out of routine, optimized expertise for learning, resources for learning, among others. In the axial coding phase, these were grouped into five themes: 1) Suda Identity (suda culture, suda productivity, dialogicity); 2) Structure and Form of Suda (non-hierarchy, spontaneity, openness); 3) Empathy and Emotional Support (empathy, moral support, emotional interactions); 4) Learning and Growth (new perspectives, ontoepistemological, ontological); and 5) Resources and Accessibility (resources for learning, accessible modeling). In the selective coding phase, the themes were integrated into final concepts of suda nature, ontoepistemology of suda, and Suda PLC (suda-professional learning community), and elaborated in the results and interpretation.

The analysis was iterative and cyclical, employing member checks and triangulation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To enhance credibility and validity, member checks were conducted (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), with participants reviewing interview and observation data and the researcher’s interpretations. Triangulation was also used to strengthen accuracy through multiple data sources (Denzin, 1978), including interviews, field notes, and recorded meetings. Field notes captured contextual details such as tone, non-verbal interactions, and spatial dynamics, and were consulted during coding to confirm interpretations and add nuance. This triangulation process played a crucial role in ensuring that the research findings were closely aligned with teachers’ actual experiences and enhanced the reliability of the researcher’s interpretations (Patton, 1999). Therefore, through triangulation, this study aimed to clearly and reliably illuminate the learning experiences occurring in Oju and the meanings formed by these experiences through cross-examination of diverse data sources.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of eight teachers from Oju who agreed to be interviewed for data collection. Among them, three participants were currently working as teachers in daycare centers or kindergartens, with teaching experience ranging from 8 to 13 years. Another three participants were field researchers at the KCCT, responsible for training in-service teachers. Their experience as teachers in daycare centers or kindergartens ranged from 7 to 9 years, and their experience in teacher training varied from 4 to 15 years. The remaining two participants were graduate students in a master's program. One graduate student had 4 years of experience as a daycare teacher and 7 years at an integrated care center, while the other had 10 years of experience as a kindergarten teacher. Therefore, the total length of teaching and teacher education experience among all study participants ranged from 8 to 22 years.

Researcher's Positionality

The researcher contributed to Oju's formation through the KCCT workshop and remains actively involved. Since 2017, the researcher has collaborated with scholars to theorize suda as a methodology in the United States (Han et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2021, 2023; Meacham et al., 2019, 2021, 2024; Wee et al., 2023). Ethnographic materials from participant observation and recordings supported emic analysis. While insider positionality is a strength, it also requires careful attention to researcher-participant influence. The researcher's U.S. base provides a cross-cultural perspective (Liamputtong, 2010), while distance from Korea may limit immersion; however, the researcher's Korean early childhood teaching and KCCT field research background support contextual understanding and strengthen interpretive credibility.

Findings

This section, which presents the qualitative analysis results, aims to interpret the characteristics of suda in Oju and how these characteristics support teachers' learning and growth.

The analysis of the data revealed that through the suda at Oju meetings, teachers were able to freely share their experiences and concerns while also receiving emotional support and empathy from their peers, leading them to reconstruct their educational approaches.

Teachers participating in Oju recognized that suda was more than just casual conversation; it was a vital cultural practice that allowed them to freely share their experiences and thoughts, generating new ideas and practices. As reflected in teacher JJ's words, those who experienced this culture expressed a desire to continue this flow with their colleagues upon returning to their own centers. The suda at Oju provides an open space for dialogue that is not limited to specific purposes or topics, where anyone can freely participate, encouraging teachers to reflect on their educational practices and try new approaches. This plays a crucial role in strengthening bonds among teachers and fostering a more democratic and voluntary culture of the educational community. In this way, the suda culture of Oju serves as a cultural foundation that enables teachers to recognize each other's existence and create opportunities for mutual growth.

As we experience this culture, I hope we can continue to spread this flow of culture with other teachers back at our own centers... (Excerpt from an interview with JJ, September 6, 2024).

Once during Oju meetings, the researcher shared about the ongoing study on suda with the participants. This context seems to have helped the participants gain a deeper understanding of the already well-established format and culture of suda in Oju. Some participants reflected on this aspect:

SM (the researcher) talked to us about the value of suda from an academic perspective, explaining its worth in the context of her research. What we were doing was just suda, but we

hadn't recognized its value that deeply; we were simply experiencing it. Then, it seemed like the idea that our identity is strongly tied to suda emerged. (Excerpt from an interview with OL, September 5, 2024).

The following discussion will focus on the results of analyzing the "suda nature" of Oju from multiple dimensions. According to the data analysis, the suda nature of Oju comprises several dimensions: dialogicity, where teachers learn by freely exchanging conversations and sharing each other's thoughts and experiences; emergence, where new ideas and approaches naturally surface through spontaneous and open dialogue; spontaneity, where participants autonomously engage and share their experiences; non-hierarchy, where all teachers are respected and listened to equally; openness, where diverse perspectives and ideas are embraced and translated into practice; and emotional support and empathy, which empower teachers to continue challenging themselves and growing.

To illustrate how these dimensions of suda manifest in practice, the following excerpt from an Oju meeting captures a short yet generative exchange among teachers. This conversation began with a simple observation from daily life and, through the natural flow of suda, evolved into an idea for an investigation that could be brought back to their classrooms.

- JY:** When we were in the garden last week, the children found a snail on the leaf. They kept following it, talking about where it might go.
- HS:** That reminds me — in my group, a child wanted to make a little 'house' for the snail. We started wondering what kind of furniture a snail would need.
- OL:** Furniture? That's so funny. My group made a path for a snail once, using the ramps from our marble run set.
- JY:** I never thought of connecting a snail's world to ramps. Maybe the children could design paths and see where the snail chooses to go.
- HS:** Yes, and they could test which path the snail prefers — maybe a smooth ramp or one with little bumps.
- OL:** Or we could give them different starting points and see which route the snail takes first. The children would love to predict it.
- JY:** That could turn into a whole investigation about movement and choice. And it started just from noticing a snail in the garden.

(Excerpt from a transcript, Oju meeting, June, 2023)

Field notes from this Oju session recorded the participants' laughter, animated hand gestures, and playful tone as they explored possibilities for the snail's world. These observations provided important context for interpreting the collaborative and imaginative nature of the exchange.

This exchange demonstrates how suda fosters an evolving flow of ideas in which each teacher responds directly to the previous speaker, extending the conversation while keeping the focus on the snail scenario. What began as a simple observation of a snail in the garden shifted to imagining furniture for it, recalling a previous ramp activity, and then designing possible investigations about movement and choice. These ideas emerged fluidly and without a predetermined plan, showing how playful speculation can naturally evolve into intentional pedagogical possibilities. The predictive and investigative suggestions at the end arose from the participants' curiosity and enjoyment, reflecting the spontaneity that characterizes suda. Throughout the conversation, each contribution was treated with equal enthusiasm, whether it was whimsical, like furnishing a snail's home, or practical, like predicting and testing which paths it would take. The openness of the group to entertain unconventional ideas allowed the teachers to move from lighthearted play to generating experiences they could adapt for their classrooms, illustrating the transformative potential of this dialogic practice.

This brief exchange shows how suda's distinctive qualities can transform everyday observations into shared possibilities for teaching and learning. It also demonstrates how the interplay of dialogicity, emergence, spontaneity, non-hierarchy, and openness creates space for teachers to imagine and refine ideas together.

Presenting every suda interaction in full would be impractical within the scope of this article, and the primary aim of this study is to understand how Oju members perceived suda rather than to document every conversational turn. The sections that follow, therefore focus on the Oju teacher-participants' interviews to examine how they themselves described and made sense of this practice, offering insights into the ways they experienced suda's impact on their professional growth.

Dialogicity and Emergent Quality of Suda

It feels like it's not just the people who are alive in this group, but also the content of the discussions themselves, which seem to move and grow like a living organism, with no clear end to where they might go. (Excerpt from an interview with OL, September 5, 2024).

The suda process happened very spontaneously... It started off spontaneously, and then somehow, interestingly, a topic would form and deepen, leading to a lot of rich conversations. (Excerpt from an interview with HJ, September 6, 2024).

Suda in Oju creates a dialogic and emergent learning environment. Conversations are open, spontaneous, and not bound by predetermined topics, allowing unexpected ideas to surface and deepen. Rather than aiming for fixed conclusions, dialogue continually evolves like a living organism, enabling teachers to generate new ideas, learn from one another, and enrich their practices.

This emergent quality appeared in shifting topics. One book suda (suda on a book) unexpectedly became a discussion of children's peer conflict, leading teachers to exchange strategies for cooperation rather than returning to the book for an hour (Field notes, May, 2024). Field notes also captured how gestures and pauses signaled new directions in dialogue. "I realized through this group just how suda itself leads to one conversation sparking another... endlessly creating more dialogue." (Excerpt from an interview with JL, September 4, 2024). This aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the rhizome as a non-linear, non-hierarchical form of knowledge. Suda similarly spreads in multiple directions without a fixed structure (Meacham et al., 2021).

Teachers described how everyday concerns naturally became generative topics. HS noted that issues in practice "pop up naturally" and expand through suda (Excerpt from an interview with HS, September 5, 2024). JJ recalled how a small topic about "missing snails" grew into discussions of morality, ecology, and natural order (Excerpt from an interview with JJ, September 6, 2024). HI described how a discussion on disability and the book *We, Heena* began as a small meeting but grew into deeper reflections that challenged her assumptions (Excerpt from an interview with HI, September 6, 2024). JI similarly recalled enjoying early conversations around *We, Heena*, and later meeting the author (Excerpt from an interview with JI, September 6, 2024). Teacher educators in Oju also applied suda to their consulting work. They learned that guiding teachers was more effective when dialogue flowed naturally rather than being directed. JJ reflected that observing spontaneous sharing in Oju helped her see how collective dialogue, rather than individual control, creates meaningful learning spaces.

I used to struggle a lot with how to convey my thoughts to others when it wasn't about something happening directly in my own class. I didn't want to just impose my ideas on others, but I thought that part of my job was to create an atmosphere where we could discuss things together. At Oju meetings, I saw how naturally the teachers shared their thoughts and how

meaningful that process was. I could feel the comfort with which the teachers shared their concerns and thought things through together. I realized that creating this kind of environment, like being a catalyst, didn't have to be done by me alone. It could happen little by little with everyone's contributions. (Excerpt from an interview with Teacher JJ, September 6, 2024)

Spontaneity, Non-hierarchy, Openness, and Empathy

Oju is grounded in spontaneity. It formed through teachers' voluntary conversations rather than planning or mandates, with no formal leader and no fixed structure. Topics emerge naturally, and teachers guide dialogue as needed without rules. This freedom allows ideas to flow in ways rarely possible in formal learning communities, helping the group grow organically.

As OL recalled, Oju began when teachers casually shared their desire for such a space and one said, "Why not? What's stopping us?" (Excerpt from an interview with OL, September 5, 2024). HS similarly described the group as driven by spontaneity, with no leader and no forced participation, where practical know-how emerges through shared life stories (Excerpt from an interview with HS, September 4, 2024).

Oju is non-hierarchical. Teachers speak as equals regardless of age or status, suspending cultural norms of seniority. OL noted her effort to avoid being seen as a senior figure and instead remain "just another colleague" (Excerpt from an interview with OL, September 5, 2024). HS explained that learning from approachable colleagues gives her courage to try new practices.

I think this group is fundamentally driven by spontaneity. Whether it's the process of selecting a book or participating in the meetings, no one is forcing anyone to do anything. Even in the discussions, while there might be someone who somewhat guides the conversation, there really isn't a concept of a 'leader.' So, it's not like the traditional setting where someone teaches and others learn; it's just a space where everyone freely shares their lives, and through that, various kinds of know-how naturally come to light. That in itself has been a great source of learning for me. (Excerpt from an interview with HS, September 4, 2024).

Field notes captured moments when newer and more experienced teachers built on one another's ideas with equal respect: "There was no visible senior-junior divide; ideas flowed freely" (Field notes, April 2023).

Openness is another key feature. No method or conclusion is imposed; teachers explore multiple perspectives and decide individually what to try. As HJ explained, ideas such as attaching a cellphone to the classroom ceiling sparked further collaboration and on-site experimentation.

For example, JL shared how he attached a cellphone to the classroom ceiling for children's multimodal project to create a video.

While there were parts that were difficult for me to apply directly, MJ and I shared play-related examples and met separately with other teachers on-site to propose and adopt ideas to try in practice. I think this kind of process is a major strength of our group. (Excerpt from an interview with HJ, September 6, 2024).

JJ noted that not having a fixed conclusion is healing and creates solidarity. JJ said:

So, no one in the group says, 'Here's the conclusion,' and it's up to each person to reflect on it. And if someone doesn't even think about reflecting on it, that's fine too. Just having that time to think about various things, to throw around ideas—that in itself can be quite healing. It makes you realize, 'I'm not the only one dealing with these concerns,' and gives a sense of

solidarity. Also, by listening to things I hadn't considered before, I gain something from it. And while listening to others, there comes a moment when you really feel like speaking up. (Excerpt from an interview with JJ, September 6, 2024).

Spontaneity, non-hierarchy, and openness foster empathy and emotional support. Teachers feel safe sharing struggles and receive affirmation from peers. In one meeting, a discussion shifted to teacher well-being when someone said, "Sometimes, after difficult parent meetings, I cry in my car," prompting collective empathy and reflection (Transcript, October, 2022; Field notes, October, 2022). Another teacher added that this helped her rethink professionalism as including emotion.

Through such exchanges, teachers feel less alone, gain emotional comfort, and find courage to change. HS shared that hearing multiple perspectives helped her feel supported and emotionally strengthened (Excerpt from an interview with HS, September 4, 2024).

Suda enables teachers to continue to evolve and transform, much like a living organism, with open-ended possibilities, and its educational value lies in developing teacher professionalism. These transformations were evident in several participants' accounts. JJ explained that before joining Oju suda, she followed a tightly structured daily schedule with short activity blocks, but after hearing OL describe how extended project time allowed children to sustain interest and problem-solve more independently, she restructured her own schedule to provide longer periods for open-ended exploration. OL, in turn, shared that suda discussions about documenting learning inspired her to move beyond brief anecdotal notes to richer narrative records, often accompanied by photographs or children's words, which deepened her reflection on teaching decisions and enhanced communication with families. HY reflected that she had once avoided bringing classroom challenges to peers for fear of criticism, yet in suda's trusting environment she began openly sharing dilemmas — from managing group dynamics to addressing parental expectations — and came to see collaborative problem-solving as central to her professional identity.

Suda Paradox: Light but Heavy, Challenging but Enjoyable

Although suda in Oju appears light and casual, it may carry deep and serious meanings. Teachers share professional concerns, parenting experiences, and personal interests, gaining insight into themselves and others. What seems like casual talk often becomes meaningful reflection, showing the paradox of light conversation as a space for serious learning. HS explained that although it is called a "suda group," the conversations are not light at all, as teachers share deeply about both work and life without pressure to immediately apply everything (Excerpt from an interview with HS, September 4, 2024). She also described how discussions about the "Case of the Missing Snail" led to serious reflection on values, children's thinking, and empathy, showing how even small topics become sites of deep meaning.

There was a time when we discussed a booklet together, and I found that conversation particularly meaningful. It was about the 'Case of the Missing Snail' booklet, and I thought, 'Who would seriously contemplate something like a snail?' That thought stayed with me. It showed that we seriously consider objects, subjects, or situations with deep thought, regardless of what they are. It wasn't just a discussion limited to children; it was for all ages. Even though it was about dealing with children who encountered a snail, we talked seriously and thoughtfully about it, finding our own values within that conversation. It felt like a moment for me to take a step back and reflect. ... Children, at times, have this teenage-like attitude, like calling their teacher without using their name, and we compared it to some sort of 'hip-hop spirit.' I think it was an example from JI. So, at Hanmi, there was a case where this idea was connected with digital media, and when that was thrown into the conversation, we couldn't just let it pass. We resonated with it, understanding that, yes, children could indeed think that way. Along with this spirit of empathy, we also bring our seriousness, trying to understand the world

of children anew. This atmosphere feels so natural every time. (Excerpt from an interview with HS, September 5, 2024).

Suda is also challenging yet enjoyable. Teachers struggle to break from familiar thinking, yet find joy in doing so. Exploring topics like the missing snail pushes them to rethink children's worlds and their own teaching while enjoying the process. OL recalled a conversation where teachers expressed gratitude for Oju and a desire to rethink existing frameworks, but JL cautioned that teachers may want connection more than risk and that breaking the "well" can feel overwhelming (Excerpt from an interview with OL, September 5, 2024). HS captured this paradox by saying that although suda feels tough, it is also strangely enjoyable.

This conversation had come up before within our Oju meetings. It's like the contradictory feeling I have too — something is tough, but it's also somehow enjoyable. Why is it enjoyable? It feels almost like a strange, masochistic enjoyment. (Excerpt from an interview with HS, September 5, 2024)

So, What Kind of Learning Takes Place?

This section addresses the various learning experiences that occur within the Oju meeting, focusing on participants' remarks. Specifically, it explores the specific forms of learning that teachers experience in the Oju meeting and their significance. First, it discusses the usefulness of the suda communication style, emphasizing how teachers freely exchange thoughts and gain new ideas through this method. Next, it examines how the meeting provides valuable time for teachers to acquire useful information, analyzing comments on how they share and utilize knowledge and insights that are difficult to obtain elsewhere. Finally, it analyzes remarks about breaking one's own frameworks and empathy, observing how teachers respond to and partially agree or disagree with one another's opinions in a deep, suda-learning process. Through this discussion, I aim to clarify how learning in the Oju meeting contributes to teachers' professional development and enhances their educational practices.

Suda as an Effective Communication Method

In Oju, suda is central to teachers' learning. Through this communication style, teachers share experiences, explore perspectives, and reshape their practices. Suda goes beyond information exchange, as dialogue continues and ideas intersect, helping teachers discover and apply new approaches. JJ described how one topic branches into many, appearing chaotic but later revealing deep connections, showing that the communication process itself becomes a form of learning.

When we talk about a single topic, the conversation often branches out in many directions, flowing here and there as the suda progresses. In this process, thoughts are freely shared, and ideas are tossed around, eventually coming together to spark a new topic. It may seem like the conversation is wandering off course, but when we look back, we realize that those side branches naturally intertwined, layered upon one another—whether on the x-axis, y-axis, or diagonally—much like the framework of a building gradually being constructed. It's in those moments that we understand it wasn't really off track after all. This creates rich discussions and opportunities to talk about topics we hadn't considered before. The very way we communicate in this process becomes a form of learning itself. Rather than moving from one topic to the next in a segmented, omnibus style—'Let's discuss this, okay, next topic'—our conversations are more like tangled vines, interwoven in a way that might feel chaotic at the moment, but in hindsight, reveals deep and sturdy roots. How should I describe this feeling? (Excerpt from an interview with JJ on September 6, 2024)

OL explained how SM's curious questioning, rather than judgment, led her to reflect and see the world differently (Excerpt from an interview with OL on September 5, 2024).

Such dialogic learning also contributes to strengthening emotional support and a sense of camaraderie among teachers. During these gatherings, teachers share their challenges and difficulties and receive psychological support and encouragement from their peers. This process plays a crucial role in sustaining their motivation and passion for educational practice, serving as an essential factor in promoting educational growth and professional development.

As the days go by, even if it feels increasingly tough, whenever I attend these meetings with fellow teachers, listen to their cases, or share my own experiences, I find that when I return to my school, I feel a psychological boost, a fighting spirit, if you will. I can say with pride that over the past 2-3 years, despite the challenges and the effort required, I have felt that I should keep pushing, not stop, not rest, and do even a little more. Personally, Oju has played a huge role in being that lifeline for me. (Excerpt from an interview with JI on September 4, 2024)

Still Gaining Useful Information

Oju also plays an important role in providing opportunities to acquire practical information and knowledge that can be directly applied in educational settings. JL emphasized this, stating, "Books are not something I read habitually, but through opportunities like this, I found that reading them has been very helpful in practice." This highlights that Oju serves as a chance for teachers to gain new knowledge and practical ideas. Such information can be directly incorporated into their educational practices, enhancing the practical value of their learning.

I don't usually read books out of habit, but through opportunities like this, I found that reading those books has been very helpful in my practice. Reading books has been quite beneficial in many ways." (Excerpt from an interview with JL on September 4, 2024)

Honestly, I didn't have much information about academic conferences, including the ones introduced this time. If I knew, I would have wanted to adjust my schedule and participate because I have a passion for it. But as I live day by day, working hard, I tend to miss such information. When I get to know about it, if I can make time or adjust my schedule to attend, it feels like a chance to succeed. I truly enjoyed that. It feels like it opened another path for someone who has been digging into just one well. (Excerpt from an interview with HI on September 6, 2024)

HI also mentioned, "I didn't have much information about conferences or related opportunities, but through Oju, I learned about new information. If the timing worked out, I could participate and have successful experiences," indicating that Oju opened new avenues for them. The key point is that this information becomes even more valuable because it is shared in alignment with each teacher's educational practice and context. The information shared in Oju helps teachers reflect on specific educational approaches and strategies tailored to their unique situations and facilitates in-depth discussions on how to implement them in their classrooms. Thus, Oju serves as an essential platform where teachers can explore various resources based on one another's experiences, enriching their educational practices. This information goes beyond simple knowledge sharing; it provides practical assistance suited to each teacher's educational environment, significantly contributing to their professional development. It suggests that Oju is a critical opportunity to strengthen teacher networks and enable them to use a broader range of educational resources to improve their practice.

Breaking One's Own Framework, Empathy, But Only 70% Agreement...

HS noted her hope that even one person might feel empathy and openness through Oju (Excerpt from an interview with HS, September 5, 2024). Empathy is central in Oju, yet teachers emphasized that it often requires breaking their own frameworks. HS reflected that she still leans toward her own perspective but learns to nod along and realize the need for openness (Excerpt from an interview with HS, September 5, 2024). OL described witnessing moments when teachers' frameworks "begin to crack," especially when familiar practices become routine and go unexamined (Excerpt from an interview with OL, September 5, 2024). She saw Oju as a space where teachers revisit what they have built and reconstruct it with fresh eyes. Similarly, JI shared that Oju helped broaden how she views children and support practices, contributing to her professional growth (Excerpt from an interview with JI, September 6, 2024). JI explained that realizing that her "right answer" was closed-minded led her to rethink professionalism as openness to multiple ways of knowing and supporting children (Excerpt from an interview with JI, September 6, 2024). Teachers also emphasized that empathy does not require full agreement. JJ explained that she may disagree or agree only "70%," but by listening and mixing ideas, she better understands her own values.

And even if someone seems to be giving an incorrect answer, that is their choice, and it should be respected. However, while listening to what might seem like a wrong answer, I find myself thinking, 'Why do they think that's the right answer?' This process helps me realize a lot. On the other hand, I may find myself thinking, 'I completely disagree,' which solidifies my own perspective even more. So, instead of determining who is right or wrong, I understand that 'your thoughts are like this, and mine are like that,' or 'I agree with you, but only 70%.' In finding these differences, listening to others, and mixing ideas, I think I come to understand my own thoughts better. It becomes an opportunity to redefine my own inclinations or values. (Excerpt from an interview with JJ, September 6, 2024)

Matusov (2009) argues that for education to be meaningful, it must be dialogic, requiring an environment where diverse perspectives are shared and respected. He believes that true learning occurs not merely through pattern recognition or knowledge transmission but in the process of questioning and responding to each other's perspectives. Matusov posits that learning occurs in the collaborative construction of meaning among people with different opinions. This perspective is relevant to JJ's view that learning is not about determining who is right or wrong but about understanding and accepting each other's perspectives, leading to a clearer understanding of one's own thinking.

Ontoepistemology of Suda: Curiosity About Other Members' Thoughts and Meaning-Making in a Learning Community

I think it would be really interesting to create teacher education opportunities like Oju, where I return to the center (Early Childhood Comprehensive Support Center) and meet with teachers or conduct training after having experienced Oju. These days, there's a lot of talk about learning communities, but most groups seem too rigid and limited in their topics or composition. So, if we could form a group where a diverse range of people can participate, where members naturally become curious about 'What would that person say?', and share conversations that could change teachers' perspectives, I think it would be very enjoyable..." (Excerpt from an interview with HS on September 4, 2024)

One of the key findings from the one-on-one interviews with the Oju teachers in this study is that they are highly curious about the thoughts of other members. This curiosity is connected to the recognition that interactions occurring within their learning community play a crucial role in knowledge formation and learning. This phenomenon can be explained through Relational Epistemology, which asserts that knowledge is not generated in isolation but rather formed within relationships (Code, 1991). The curiosity

of the Oju teachers indicates their strong intention to expand their learning through relationships with other teachers.

Oju also bridges theory and practice. JI described discussions that connected directly to graduate classes, calling them “living learning” (Excerpt from an interview with JI, September 6, 2024). Through dialogue among professors, students, and teachers, participants explored how theory works in real classrooms and how research can respond to teachers’ challenges. Beyond linking theory and practice, Oju reshapes participants’ sense of being. Through interaction, professors, students, and teachers continually redefine who they are. From a relational epistemological view, conversation itself becomes a mode of learning where participants recognize and change how they understand themselves and others. This is not just knowledge exchange but mutual recognition of existence.

JI shared that engaging with diverse colleagues helps her navigate difficulties in implementing play-based curricula and eases feelings of isolation, giving her reassurance and camaraderie (Excerpt from an interview with JI, September 6, 2024). These feelings reflect an ontoepistemological process in which being and knowing are formed together through dialogue. Drawing on Barad, this process can be seen as an “agential cut,” where participants come to exist and know differently through interaction. HS similarly described how discussing *We, Heena* led her to rethink what it means to “understand a person as they are,” beyond fixed categories of difference (Excerpt from an interview with HS, September 4, 2024).

The context of Oju serves as a vital platform for teachers to share diverse perspectives and experiences, facilitating the acceptance and reconstruction of each other’s viewpoints. This environment significantly deepens teachers’ understanding of diversity as they engage in dialogue with colleagues from various backgrounds and experiences, and it has profoundly impacted how they apply this understanding in their educational practice. By creating a space for open dialogue, the suda group allows participants to explore new ways of thinking and to reflect on their own teaching approaches, thereby fostering professional growth and development in a collaborative and inclusive manner.

Discussion & Implications

As demonstrated in this study, teachers or teacher educators from diverse contexts value not only the acquisition of knowledge but also emotional support and empathy, recognizing these as core elements of a professional learning community. For example, members of Oju frequently expressed their curiosity about the thoughts of other teachers and their desire to learn from their experiences, highlighting that teacher dialogue can serve as a meaningful learning experience that goes beyond mere information exchange. Thus, there is a need to foster learning communities that include not only professional learning communities within the same institution but also those that allow teachers from different institutions to participate together. Through this, teachers can be exposed to a wider range of perspectives and experiences, gaining richer learning experiences by sharing practical knowledge and methods from various educational environments.

The non-hierarchical, collaborative learning environment that emerges through dialogue fosters emotional support and a sense of belonging among teachers, providing the impetus for their continuous growth. In line with this, as previously discussed, Won & Yoon (2021) suggested that, to prevent educational dialogue from becoming biased, teachers should engage with various educational stakeholders through out-of-school gatherings or by seeking mentors (p. 65). Therefore, policymakers and educational institutions should encourage and support diverse learning communities that connect and support teachers across institutions.

Meanwhile, the study participants indicated that professional learning communities among teachers, facilitated through dialogue, particularly enhance emotional support by fostering empathy among teachers. This suggests that various follow-up studies focusing on the emotional and psychological processes of dialogue could be valuable. For example, Park et al. (2024) demonstrate that the suda methodology can be a useful tool for exploring mindfulness and psychological stability among teacher educators. This study, based on the suda methodology proposed in the author's previous research (Meacham et al., 2022), investigates how Korean early childhood teacher educators reconstruct their identities and professional expertise through online dialogue and examines how this process can promote mindfulness and psychological stability in educational practice.

The current study suggests that suda plays a crucial role in helping teachers reinterpret their educational experiences, fostering deeper self-understanding and professional growth. Therefore, the results of the present study highlight the need for further research that explores the impact of suda methodology on knowledge construction and identity formation within teachers' professional learning communities from multiple perspectives. The process of teachers sharing their educational experiences and exchanging emotional support and empathy through dialogue underscores the educational value that goes beyond mere information exchange. If such research continues, suda could become an essential learning context for reconstructing identity and developing professional expertise in various educational settings. This would contribute significantly to teachers' opportunities to continually grow and develop within their educational contexts by autonomously constructing and providing support to one another.

A professional learning community for teachers, facilitated through suda, can serve as a vital space for sharing diverse perspectives and experiences, thereby enhancing teachers' understanding and sensitivity toward diversity and diversity education. For instance, one of the suda sessions that left a significant impression on teachers, as revealed through interviews, centered on *We, Heena* by Sook Hee Oh Han (2023), which focused on inclusive education for children with disabilities. This suda led to a profound reflection on understanding 'people as they are,' transcending the mere understanding of children's temperaments or differences, and moving beyond the distinction between disabled and non-disabled. This demonstrates how dialogue can help teachers develop a perspective that goes beyond traditional frameworks, fostering a new understanding of their roles and responsibilities as educators.

This discussion also connects with previous studies conducted by the researcher in the United States, which critically examined issues of racial discrimination through dialogues among Korean American professors and children (Han et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2023; Meacham et al., 2025; Wee et al., 2023). These studies show that suda, beyond being a form of everyday conversation, has become a significant space for both adults and children to share experiences and emotions, build awareness of racial discrimination, and find their voices. Similarly, teacher's suda can offer valuable opportunities to enhance sensitivity to diversity and explore new educational approaches, going beyond simple information exchange or case studies.

Through such suda, teachers can share diverse experiences and perspectives, fostering a human-centered educational environment that respects the characteristics of young children from varied backgrounds. In this context, dialogue can help teachers reconsider existing biases or stereotypes, enabling them to understand children and their backgrounds from a more multidimensional perspective. In the process of sharing diverse experiences and stories, teachers can cultivate attitudes of understanding and respect for differences, striving for more inclusive and sensitive educational practices.

One limitation of this study is its focus on a single learning community, the Oju Suda Group, which may make it difficult to generalize the applicability of teacher learning communities across contexts. Future research should explore the role of teacher dialogue and learning experiences in various contexts.

Comparative studies involving different types of teacher learning communities could provide a broader understanding of the processes and effects of such dialogues.

Rather than treating the findings as an endpoint, this study invites further questioning. How might suda function differently across cultural, institutional, or generational contexts of teachers? What forms might suda take in face-to-face settings, hybrid spaces, or policy-driven professional learning communities? How do power, language, and positionality shape whose voices are centered or marginalized within dialogic spaces of suda? How might emotional support, empathy, and identity work through dialogue be sustained over time, especially under conditions of institutional pressure and reform? Finally, how might future studies continue to honor the relational, ethical, and dialogic commitments of suda while adapting it to diverse educational contexts? By leaving these questions open, this study frames suda not as a finished model, but as an ongoing, evolving practice that continues to call teachers, researchers, and institutions into deeper dialogue.

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Appendix A: Coding Framework for Suda Analysis

This appendix presents the coding framework used to analyze suda practices in the Oju teacher learning community. The table below lists the raw codes, axial categories, definitions, operationalizations, and illustrative excerpts from the data. The goal is to make transparent the analytic process from initial coding to the higher-level conceptual categories reported in the Findings section.

Axial Code	Raw Codes	Definition	Operationalization	Illustrative Example from suda Sessions
Dialogicity (Suda Identity)	Exchanging stories; Asking open questions; Sharing interpretations	The practice of engaging in reciprocal, open-ended conversations where participants respond to and build on each other's contributions.	Applied when participants actively listened, responded directly to prior remarks, and extended the conversation by connecting experiences, insights, or questions.	"When you described the children rolling marbles down ramps, I thought of adding forks and curves in the pathways so they could test which designs made the marbles faster or slower."
Emergence (Suda Identity)	Sudden topic shifts; Unexpected associations; Later discovery of links	The way new topics or ideas surface fluidly, sometimes appearing unrelated to the ongoing discussion, but later revealing meaningful connections to teaching, learning, or children's projects.	Applied when an idea or story seemed to come out of nowhere during suda, yet later tied back into shared themes or inspired new directions.	"In the middle of talking about our shades-of-pink exploration, someone suddenly mentioned the pocket monsters her group invented. At first it felt unrelated, but later we realized both involved the children inventing and naming new variations of things."

Spontaneity (Suda Identity)	Unplanned sharing; Informal topic shifts	Voluntary and unscripted participation without predetermined agendas or prompts.	Applied when participants contributed without being directly invited or when conversation naturally shifted topics based on participant interest.	“That reminds me — last week one child mixed dried clay powder with petals from the garden, and suddenly the whole group started experimenting with different colors and scents.”
Non-hierarchy (Suda Identity)	Equal turn-taking; Lack of dominance; Respect for all voices	The absence of formal power structures in conversation, where all contributions are treated as valuable regardless of position or seniority.	Applied when experienced/younger teachers, or teacher educators interacted as equals, with no deference to status in the conversation.	“I’m still new, but when our children were exploring the shades-of-pink, one of my quieter children took the lead, showing others how to make lighter and darker tones. And named them...”
Openness (Suda Identity)	Accepting diverse ideas; Encouraging experimentation	The willingness to hear, consider, and adapt to differing perspectives and practices.	Applied when participants validated ideas different from their own or expressed interest in trying unfamiliar approaches.	“I’ve never thought of connecting our clay powder work to literacy, but now I want to have the children write recipe cards for the different clay mixtures they invent.”

Emotional Support and Empathy (Suda Impact)	Sharing personal struggles; Offering encouragement; Expressing understanding	Providing affirmation, comfort, and solidarity to peers, often around challenges in professional or personal contexts.	Applied when participants acknowledged feelings, provided reassurance, or shared similar experiences to validate a colleague's perspective.	“When I first introduced the ramp project, I doubted my ability to guide it well and felt overwhelmed. Hearing that you also felt unsure at the start, and how you found ways to keep going, makes me feel less alone in this work.”
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