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PRIMARY EDUCATION IN SOUTH KOREA, AN EXCURSION FROM TINY TOTS TO
BLOOM

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ABSTRACT

Education is a channel for your social mobility. And if you want to become somebody in society, you want to go to a better school, better college, and study certain areas which will bring you higher status, and probably high income. South Korea performance in education in the last four years has been masterful in execution. Their results in standardized testing and their student's ability to advance towards college graduation is the model over 200 nations, are chasing to be the best in education. In order to bring Korea to the forefront of the International Knowledge Economy, the Ministry of Education has worked on reformation in the field of new curriculum for overall development of the child. The main objective is to promote student's learning according to their aptitudes, talents and abilities. The common course is intended to equip students with basic life skills such as the traditional three R's- basic skills taught in schools: reading, writing and arithmetic, any foreign language, literacy in information technology and interpersonal skills. More than 25% of middle school graduates prefer to go on to vocational schools where they are taught skills in five important fields including Agriculture, Commerce, Fishery, Home Economics and Technology. The first ten years of school education from primary first grade to high school grade are set as a national common basic education period.

Keywords: Primary Education, Korean pragmatic curriculum, guidelines, Korean traditional Three R's/ Trois R.

The word education means to bring out the inside to outside and the function of education is to draw out rather than to put in. Education means the art of developing and enhancing the cultivation of various physical, mental and moral powers of the learner. Education is a continuous process or long process starts from birth and continues till death.¹ (Pandey: 1998: 219-220). Education has contributed to the growth of Korea's democratic government. It has produced hardworking, skilled employees who have brought about an economic miracle within a single generation. Education in South Korea is largely state-funded and compulsory between age six to fourteen. South Korea benefits from heavy state investment in education as well as an extremely rigorous school day, particularly for those in Primary wing. A broad spectrum of the society recognizes the need for a lifelong learning as a precept for social and economic improvement. Korea Development Institute believes that the education is a channel for social mobility and to become somebody in society, one should go to a better school, better college, and study certain areas which would bring a high

status, probably high income. The first six years of a Korean student's education takes place in Elementary school viz in *Chodeung-hakgyo*. The curriculum for these schools is nationally standardized, and is centered on a basic Mathematics, the Korean language, Science, Music and Art. In third grade (age 8), children learn English (informal conversation) and later the detailed study of grammatical structures. The Education Commission of Korea inculcates the values to their primary wing, the cooperation, mutual regard, honesty, integrity, discipline and social responsibility. It is true that the education is not just a matter of learning the fact rather it is a training the mind, a protection against illiteracy, completeness of Knowledge and efficiency. The Commission stresses the development of scientific temper of mind, respect for manual labor, capacity to put in hard and responsible work, respect for an proper pride in the past faith and confidence in the future, national consciousness, spirit of social service for promoting social and national integration.

The curriculum of the primary wing consists of nine principal subjects: moral education, Korean language, social studies, mathematics, science, physical education, music, fine arts and practical arts. The major objectives stated by the Ministry of Education in 1996 are to improve basic abilities, skills and attitudes; to develop language ability and civic morality needed to live in society; to increase the spirit of cooperation; to foster basic arithmetic skills and scientific observation skills and to promote the understanding of healthy life and the harmonious development of body and mind. The curriculum is prescribed by law, as are the criteria for the development of textbooks and instructional materials. There have been periodic curriculum revisions towards decentralization in determining, diversifying and of course implementing the curriculum. Next attendance requirements call for a minimum of 220 days at all three levels. The three fourth well-educated people according to the curriculum and perhaps shedding further light on what is valued in Korean three fourth society is healthy, independent, creative and moral.

The South Korean education system consists of five parts: preschool, primary, secondary, higher, and continuing education. Primary education is compulsory and free from the age of six for six years. The enrollment rate for primary schooling reached 100 percent in the early 1960s. Almost all primary schools are public enrolling 90 percent of all students. Secondary education lasts for six years: three years in middle school and three years in high school. Students enter middle school generally at the age of twelve. Middle school education is compulsory and free. The enrollment rate is 100 percent for children twelve to fourteen years; 23 percent are enrolled in private middle schools. School systems work with the children who come into them. The quality of children's lives before beginning formal education greatly influences the kind of learners they can be. Many elements go into making a quality learner, including health, early childhood experiences and home support. South Korean government has pursued education reform since the early 1990s. The Presidential Commission on Education Reform presented an overall reform plan to the president in May 1995. The plan stressed the following points: all education must be student oriented school and curriculum must be diversified to provide more choices in learning experience there must be accountability in school management equal opportunity and new technology must be adopted to facilitate continuing education and the quality of education must be improved. In all aspects of the school and its surrounding education community, the rights of the whole child, and all children, to survival, protection, development and participation are at the centre. This means that the focus is on learning which strengthens the capacities of children to act progressively on their own behalf through the acquisition of relevant knowledge, useful skills and appropriate attitudes; and which creates for children and helps them create for themselves and others, places of safety, security and healthy interaction. Gandhi accepts Husley's definition of education: That man, I think has had a liberal education who has been so trained in youth that his body is ready to servant of his will and does with case and pleasure all the work that as a mechanism it is capable of; whose intellect is clear with all parts of equal strength and in smooth order. Whose mind is stored with knowledge of the fundamental truths of nature...whose passions are trained to come to heel by a vigorous will, the servant of a tender conscience...who has learnt to hate all vileness and to respect others as himself?² (Singh: 1995: 34-35)

According to UNICEF in 2000; the Quality content in education refers to the intended and taught curriculum of schools. National goals for education, and outcome statements that translate those goals into measurable objectives should provide the starting point for the development and implementation of

curriculum. The South Korean government tried to establish a national education system, with the aim of providing educational opportunities to all school aged children and high quality human resources to society. The new democratic government aimed at the total reformation of the Korean school system and focused on strengthening competitive power. Parents and students were treated as consumers. The official objective of this curriculum was to cultivate morality and creativity. In lieu of this the Seventh National Curriculum was created in 1997 and implemented since the year 2000. During the difficult and challenging process of cultural adaptation, Korean children need emotional support to make the transition from the traditions of their native culture to those of their new environment. The research cited above suggests several attributes in Korean society that contribute to the success of their educational program. The first is the Korean attitude towards education that places success in education among its highest values. The second is the Korean willingness to invest in human capital with the belief that education will lead to economic success over time. The third is the Korean openness to participating in the global exchange of ideas and processes to improve existing systems.

It is genuinely remarked that getting a teaching certificate in Korea is very easy but finding a teaching job in Korea is very hard. The wide variety of teacher in-service training opportunities in Korea helps ensure the development of a well-rounded teaching force. Professional development can help overcome shortcomings that may have been part of teachers' pre-service education and keep teachers abreast of new knowledge and practices in the field. The jewel of childhood such as imagination and creativity is long time being swept aside. Today every individual should know himself as completely as possible---his body, mind, knowledge, consciousness, genetic centre and brain function including the process of storing and releasing all the experiences of life. It has therefore become imperative to sensitize the youth especially those studying in technical institutions. Astin and Lindholm states: While higher education continues to put a lot of emphasis on test scores, grades, credits, and degrees, it has increasingly come to neglect its students' inner development---the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and of self-understanding. ³(Astin & Lindholm: 2011: 43)

Research during the past decade has revealed much about how children learn and develop. Studies have shown that early childhood is a time when developmental changes are happening that can have profound and lasting consequences for a child's future. Almost all newly immigrated Korean children are concerned about their lack of proficiency in the English language. Speaking and writing in English is extremely difficult for them and causes them considerable frustration. In order to bring Korea to the forefront of the International Knowledge Economy, the Ministry of Education has worked on reformation in the field of new curriculum for overall development of the child. The ultimate goal of this iteration of the Revised National Curriculum was developed to address specifically the needs of the Knowledge-Based Economy: to cultivate creative, autonomous, and self-driven human resources who will lead the era's developments in information, knowledge and globalization.

The main objective is to promote student's learning according to their aptitudes, talents and abilities. The common course is intended to equip students with basic life skills such as the traditional three R's, foreign language, literacy in information technology and interpersonal skills. The first ten years of school education from primary first grade to high school grade are set as a national common basic education period. During this period, students learn from a national curriculum. In revising the national curriculum in 2000, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MOEHRD) judged that a flexible level differentiated curriculum would address each student's different ability, interest aptitude and career direction; and also promote gifted and talented education while satisfying the requirements of a common basic education. The major features included--- A focus on classroom teaching and everyday guidance for children. Teachers make use of the evaluation results as a tool for self development and improved class instruction. Support for teachers with more opportunities and programs for capacity building and expertise enhancement. A multi faceted evaluation system whereby teachers, principals and vice principals engage in the assessment process.

Quality education can be a determining factor in attainment of educational success and the achievement of economic prosperity as in the example of South Korea, the world's 11th largest economy. The South Korean Ministry of Education believes that the quality of education cannot exceed the quality of

teachers. According to a 2002 ranking by UNICEF that provides the first big picture comparison of the relative effectiveness of education systems across the developed world. South Korea highly effective appears to use similar teacher training methods as the United States. Korea is constantly working toward educational reform and improvement. It is stated that a knowledge-based society must be full of learners who are more than just receivers of information. Koreans need to be able to create new knowledge and they need to be able to communicate that knowledge effectively with others. Korean education has primarily served individuals in a way that it can help them obtain more material things than others. Economic and thus educational, competition is an incredibly strong motivation. Current reforms attempt to rectify problems of the past resulting from the rapid expansion of tertiary education and thus catapult Korean universities into the global education market. There is a general trend to globalize and localize as was addressed in the discussion of the Seventh National Curriculum with an equally long and complicated list of reforms. Recent higher education policy issues focus on the following broad areas: the restructuring of institutions, a new admissions system, the merger and acquisition of institutions, specialization and diversification through the building networks and cooperatives, globalization and internationalization. Professor Jeong-Kyu Lee articulated that Korean education fever has been a core factor for education reform as well as the means by which to achieve the development of the national economy as well as the rapid expansion of higher education.

The Korean education system is radically different from that of any other developed countries, Korea has school scores and exam results that other countries could only dream of. South Korea spends about half the amount on school students as the USA but its performance in maths is much higher. In 2005 South Korea was ranked in first place in the OECD rankings in terms of the number of younger people who have completed an upper secondary education leading a small group of countries including Norway and Japan where more than 90% of students reach this level. The South Korean success is also reflected in test results. Let's explore the strengths of Korean education system, it goes like--

- South Korean people have a very high zeal for education and believe that human capital developed through education is their most valuable resource.
- There is a strong after school learning program for students' including arts, sports and foreign languages. This provides learning opportunities for low income students. The student participation rate in these programs is 60%.
- South Korean people have high respect for members of the teaching profession and the salary of teachers at all levels in South Korea is relatively high compared to other countries.
- Special education in South Korea has made great strides both in number and quality of programs for the past twenty five years since the enactment of the Special Education Promotion Act in 1977.
- Introduction of the 'alternate school' policy for students with special needs.
- Promotion of educational development in remote areas and educational programs for gifted students.
- A well developed and supported e-Learning focus.

The modern education- System is based on a 1968 charter that identifies education as an important aspect of citizenship and defines the government's role in providing all Korean children with access to education. South Korea has compulsory education through the ninth grade, with 95 percent of school-age children attending high school. Approximately 25 percent of all high-school students attend one of 350 public and private postsecondary institutions, the most prestigious of which are Seoul National, Yonsei, Koryo, and Ewha Universities. Many observers regard students as the 'National conscience' of South Korea especially given their important role in democratic reform movements since 1960. The literacy rate is 98 percent. In last almost twenty years till today, has been a period of education restructuring the seventh national curriculum, aimed at producing a knowledge-based society in order to meet the demands and challenges that come with globalization.

Learning at school requires students to pay attention, to observe, to memorize, to understand, to set goals and to assume responsibility for their own learning. Learners must know how to plan and monitor their learning, how to set their own learning goals and how to correct errors. Wilkins remarks: Language learning, like any other kind of learning, will partly depend on characteristics of the learners, and for an understanding of this we will look to sociology and social anthropology. Fairly obviously, the context in which learning takes place will be important. We cannot ignore the resources that are available to the teacher. We can see what assistance can be provided by technology and how far proper administrative arrangements can be made to facilitate language learning. Language learning is not considered to be in isolation from other developments in education either⁴ (Wilkins, 1972: 215). These cognitive activities are not possible without the active involvement and engagement of the learner. Teachers must help students to become active and goal oriented by building on their natural desire to explore, to understand new things and to master them. The focus should be on identifying individual student needs, linking instruction to the preschool curriculum, providing appropriate supports and program modifications, and regularly evaluating student progress. The student, who passes though, has a qualification that meets top international standards, and of which he or she may be justifiably proud. Korea - living proof of the power of a knowledge-based economy.

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