

Korean Education in Cultural Context

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Abstract

This study is overview of Korean education in cultural context and comparison of Korean and American education. Effects of Confucianism on Korean society and education are reviewed. Also, history and development of Korean education, educational reform movement, educational system, educational concerns, and discipline issues are organized and reviewed, and Korean education is compared with American education.

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As Noah (1973) appropriately indicated, a cross-cultural study allows individuals not only to explore various values and norms within each country, but also helps individuals appreciate the cultural differences and to increase understanding among countries on the basis of the observed knowledge. Confucianism has influenced Eastern Asian society since ancient time. Harmony and traditions are indispensable elements in Confucian culture, which values have been cherished in all aspects of everyday life in Eastern Asian countries. According to Rhee (1995), Confucianism emphasizes its traditional values rather than developing new ideas. Confucianistic doctrine inculcates upon people's minds according to what the society expects them to follow.

Oh-Hwang (1993) addressed the effects of Confucianism in Korean society, and pointed out: "Korea has traditionally been heavily influenced by Confucianism. It is present in every aspect of Korean society, including home, school, community, and politics. Koreans are taught that filial piety is the basis of all conducts" (p. 35). This respect affects all other human relationships. The educational process is derived from this principle. Parental influences are significant with their authority viewed as undeniable by Korean children.

Koreans are greatly concerned about the family matters such as family fame, the prosperity of family, and mutual support among family members. Familism in Korea is based on the Confucian thought of proper relations between the members of family. Reagan (1996) indicated that Confucian moral thought is grounded in the concept of five basic hierarchical human relationships: *ruler and subject; father and son; husband and wife; older brother and younger brother; between friends*. These factors are essential to comprehend the characteristics of Asian society. Even today, in the traditional Korean society, the father has played an imperative role in the family as a ruler of a family. Korean is a patriarchal society. Thus, educational thoughts and practices have reflected the hierarchical and fairly rigid social class organization of Korean society.

Kulp (1929) describes *familism* in his book, *Community Life in China*. To him *familism* is a form of social organization through which all values are determined as based on how things are favorable for the functioning of the family. For instance, when there is a choice between a family member and the family as a whole, the interests of the family are always above those of the individual members. Similarly, in the Korean tradition of familism, family relationships take precedence over all other societal relationships.

Particularly, Asian families have put more values on the parent-child bond rather than on the marital bond. Eastern Asian children have internalized their cultural values and norms to socialize through the enhancement of their dependency upon their parents, especially the mother (Lebra, 1976; Shand, 1985). Familism in Korea is based on *collectivity* rather than *individuality*, where an individual cannot become independent of the family in terms of the strongly tied parent-child bond. These cultural value-orientations are permeated by contemporary Korean people today, and undoubtedly influence the way teachers educate students and manage their classrooms.

The value of education is an important cultural element in Eastern Asian society, since it is primarily based on Confucianism. Within the Confucian tradition, the teacher's role is a crucial one. Teachers have been identified as a ruler at schools in some Eastern Asian society. Interestingly, one adage expresses that the role of a king, a teacher, and a father is the same as a ruler of society. As the proverb indicates, teachers are revered and respected by students as authority figures in Eastern Asian countries. Educators are also considered to be *dispensers of knowledge* and *molders of character* for students (Siu, 1992; Strom, Griswold, & Slaughter, 1981).

Eastern Asians value a child's grades more highly than cognitive development for his or her progress and believe those grades more realistically evaluate their child's academic improvement (Stevenson & Lee, 1991). Thus, the role of a parent has been perceived as monitoring their children's homework regularly and retaining higher expectation for child education than all other minority cultural groups (Strom, Daniel, & Leung, 1988). Moreover, generally Eastern Asian students are highly motivated by a strong desire for upgrading their socioeconomic status, upholding family honor, acquiring admiration from their teachers and parents, self-achievement and getting a good job (Schneider & Lee, 1991; Siu, 1992).

Wollam (1992) stressed how Eastern Asian culture demands careful parental monitoring of children's academic progress. Much research has clearly demonstrated the significance of the parental engagement and support for the education system as a major contributor to student academic achievement. However, she indicated that, "In spite of this extraordinary commitment to education, South Korean educators are recognizing the deficiency of a rigid system culminating in a difficult examination for college entrance." (p. 22) In other words, there is an extreme competition on college entrance examinations, which is also closely related to limited opportunity for job employment. For example, in the 1989 – 1990 school year, 800,000 students applied for college entrance examinations for fewer than 200,000 college places. The Korean educational system culminates in one of the most elite selection processes in the world with emphasis on equality of curriculum and instruction. Wollam pointed out that "Korean society places such a high priority on the college degree and consequently the college entrance examination that there are few other legitimate and respected avenues for personal success recognized in that country." She cited a significant selection from the *Presidential Commission on Education Reform's Korean Education Reform toward the 21st Century*.

Overheated enthusiasm for education is manifested in overemphasis on the level of education attainment as, . . . One's [prestigious] college degree is even foolishly considered as the indicator of character and personality [or success itself]. So strong is the parents' pride that they demand more and more education for their children, willing to bear whatever the cost. This enthusiasm has been an asset, as the underpinning of national development. . . . It rather becomes a liability, when it encourages a blind pursuit of education irrespective of one's aptitude and interest or even possibly burnout. (p. 24)

What the Korean teachers have perceived as student behaviors in the classroom is largely dependent upon their persistent value perceptions and attitudes where they have interacted with their own traditional, cultural, and social environments.

The Development of Korean Education System

Educational goals in Korean education. The broad goals of Korean education were originated from the ideology of *Hongik Ingan* – the founding spirit of the first ancient kingdom of Korea about 5,000 years ago. *Hongik Ingan* means the extension of human welfare, which contributes to the overall benefits of every human being's life; to assist all people in developing individual moral character, to develop the ability to achieve an independent life, to acquire the qualification of citizens of a democracy, and to be able to play a positive role in democratic society. This educational goal has integrated and reflected in all aspects of educational practices, such as the decision making process for educational policy, administrative and financial support for all levels of schools, developing school curricula, creating textbooks, supervising local educational institutions, and administrating teacher training programs and so forth (Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development, 2004).

Historical background and structural frameworks of Korean education. From 1910 through 1945, during the Japanese occupation, the Japanese educational system had much influence on the foundation of the modern Korean one. However, since World War II, with the foundation of the Republic of Korea in 1948 (usually referred as *South Korea*), the new government began to establish a modern educational framework, which is based on that of the United States. The Korean public education structure is divided into three parts: six years of elementary school, three years of middle school, three years of high school, and four years of college or university (Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development, 2004).

Despite the liberation of Korea from the Japanese occupation in 1945, Korean education has still adopted elements from the Japanese colonial rule that had a deep influence on the basic education paradigm in Korea. For almost half a century, the dictatorial government had enhanced its power through centralization that still has a vast implication for every aspect of the Korean society. Uniformity was regarded as the major characteristic of the educational paradigm during this period. For instance, education meant teaching the subjects and contents that were assessed important from the supplier or ruler's point of view in such a way that was thought effective. Consequently, consumers were completely excluded from the decision-making process regarding curriculum. Thereby, students were regarded as simple beneficiaries of the education suppliers (Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development, 2004).

Educational reform movement. Although the current centralized education system in Korea is based on strict government regulations and controls, this trend is slowly changing

into more decentralized policies due to the emergence of a democratic government. In accordance with the law for local autonomy in 1991, the national Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development delegated budget planning processes and major administrative decisions to municipal and provincial education authorities (Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development, 2004).

As a consequence, recent educational reform is innovative in that it presents a new direction that emphasizes diversity rather than uniformity. In other words, the reform takes into account the students' needs. For example, students in the past were forced to choose a certain number of subjects, regardless of their interests and aptitudes. If the subjects were included in the College Scholastic Ability Test, students were forced to study a wide range of subjects that did not necessarily meet their needs. As a result, students were overburdened with pressure to study too many subject areas in a superficial manner.

The recent educational reform introduced a new system that permits 11th and 12th grade students to organize and select their own courses. The new system allows students to choose subjects or groups of subjects that suit their interests. Influenced by the recent education reform movement, the College Scholastic Ability Test also restructured in order to incorporate such changes into the system (Park, 2002).

The recent history of the educational system in Korea demonstrates the transition from government's monopoly in deciding the curricula, choosing textbooks, and the whole management of educational policies to the autonomy of shared with the provincial/regional education authorities, individual school principals, teachers and students. Consequently the teachers and students can take a more active role in the education process thanks to the recent educational reform movement in Korea.

The school curriculum and educational system in Korea. Korea has a national curriculum developed and monitored by the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Department. The curriculum is prescribed by educational law, as are the criteria for the development of textbooks and instructional materials. There have been several curriculum revisions, most recently in March 2000. The trend is definitely toward decentralization in determining, diversifying, and implementing the curriculum (The School Curriculum of the Republic of Korea, 2004).

The National Common Basic Curriculum includes 10 major subjects; Korean language, social studies, moral education, mathematics, science, physical education, music, fine arts, practical arts, and foreign languages. Since 1999, learning English as a foreign language in the third grade became mandatory (The School Curriculum of the Republic of Korea, 2004). Meanwhile, American elementary school curriculum consists of reading/language arts, math, science, social studies, physical education, and music and arts.

Elementary education is free and compulsory. It provides a general and rudimentary education that emphasizes on basic skills and habits essential for learning and daily life. In contrast to the low enrollment rate at the time of the national foundation in 1948, the current rate has reached almost 100% in primary schools.

Middle school education provides more diverse curricula than elementary education. These curricula of middle schools are designed to develop basic skills and engrave democratic values among students. It includes the national common basic subjects and

specialized subjects such as industry, commerce, fishery and marine transportation, etc. Since 1985, free and compulsory middle school educational policies have been introduced in agricultural and fishery regions and are being gradually extended to other urban areas (Levy & VanSickle, 2004).

High school education put an emphasis on helping students to acquire skills for vocational career and developing the qualification of world citizens. The curriculum of general high schools consists of national common basic subjects such as Korean language, math, science, social studies, moral education, Korean history, music, fine arts, physical education, and English (The School Curriculum of the Republic of Korea, 2004).

High schools also provide various elective courses such as ethics, geography, world history, law and society, economics, physics, chemistry, biology, earth science, diverse foreign languages, etc. Whereas, the curriculum of secondary schools in American education consists of English, math, science; biology, chemistry, physics, physical science, earth science, social studies; world history, American history, American government, civics, principles of democracy, economics, psychology, political science, geography, social science, physical education, and foreign languages. In addition, Korean high schools also provide some electives, which include computer science, technology, drama, dance, theatre, music, visual arts, and fine arts etc. (Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development, 2004).

The vocational high schools are divided into several categories, such as agriculture, engineering, business, transportation, and maritime studies. The curriculum of vocational high schools is made up of usually 40% to 60% of the general high school curriculum and the rest are vocational courses. Among general high schools, there are several specialized high schools classifying arts, science, music, foreign languages, and physical education high schools. These specialized high schools provide appropriate educational opportunities for students who have special capability in specific fields. In 1995, approximately 62% of students were enrolled in academic high schools whereas 38% of students were enrolled in vocational high schools. In 1996 only about 5% of high schools in Korea were coeducational. The proportion of coeducational schools has steadily increased by almost 10% since 2000. However, classes in many coeducational high schools are still divided along by gender when the lesson is delivered (The School Curriculum of the Republic of Korea, 2004).

Although middle and high school education is not provided for free, both enrollment and retention rates are very high. According to statistics in 2000, student enrollments in middle and high schools were respectively 1,860,539 and 1,324,482. During the same year, transition rates from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school were respectively 99.9% and 99.5% (Park, 2002).

School calendar in Korean education. Attendance requirements call for a minimum of 220 days at all three levels meanwhile, a minimum of 180 days at schools in the United States. The school calendar has two semesters; the first semester lasts from March to July and the second from September to February. This is the opposite way in American education system. There are summer and winter breaks which last about one month and 10 optional half days at the beginning and the end of each break. Usually winter vacation is longer than summer's. A typical Korean school day includes six to seven 50-minute classes per day and additionally there is a half-day of classes on Saturday. There is a 10-minute break between them and a 1 hour lunch break. Each classroom is assigned an identification number to

distinguish it from other classrooms instead of using teachers' last name like in the United States. Students do not move to other classrooms for attending lessons between periods but teachers do (The Republic of Korea, 2004).

Concerns of Korean education. Despite recent reform movement of the education system, the Korean education system is based on rote learning and almost exclusively on college entrance examinations. Therefore, parents spend a large portion of their income on their children's private tuition to prepare their children for college entrance examinations so that they can be admitted in prestigious universities. This process is ultimately related to job competition.

In addition, many educators in Korea have perceived that reducing the number of students per each class by providing new classrooms and schools is one of the most fundamental requirements for the quality of education. They contend that the excessive student load has made it difficult for teachers to provide sufficient guidance and instruction to students on an individual basis. Although the statistics demonstrates that a student-teacher ratio was 58.8 in 1960s, this figure has steadily been decreasing to 35.8 in an average in 2000, a number of schools still suffer from the inferior circumstances of overload students per class (Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development, 2004).

Discipline Issues in Korean Education

Discipline in the Korean school system has not been a major issue since modern schools were introduced in the 1880s. Traditionally Koreans have placed great importance on the need for education, not merely as a means for personal advancement, but also as the most basic requisite for self-fulfillment. Many people have perceived the role of teacher as the primary source of knowledge and an important authority figure. Thus, the teaching profession is usually regarded as one of the respected occupations in Korean society (Yum, 2000).

However, in response to the changing society, young generations have a different perspective from the old generation. For instance, according to the administrative policy in education, the practice of corporal punishment has been changing in recent years in the Korean education arena. Over the past couple of years, the use of corporal punishment in the Korean school systems has been a subject of much debate (Park, 2002).

The older generations have taken for granted for the role of corporal punishment in the learning process, whereas, new generations have tended to view corporal punishment as the infraction of individual civil rights. There has been a great controversy over the Korean Education Ministry's new guidelines on corporal punishment at schools, which permitted it in a limited manner only when it is unavoidable for educational purposes (Korea Times, 2004). Despite the much debate, a majority of teachers and parents still believe that corporal punishment or the threat of corporal punishment is the only way to control students' misbehaviors. To abolish it would create an environment in which the students would misbehave with a complete lack of respect for their teacher. Besides, majority educational leaders support corporal punishment in schools, which remains widespread in Korea. Unlike in American schools, teachers and not the principal, usually do the corporal punishment in Korean schools (The Australian Education International (AEI) Seoul, 2004).

If a student with a disrespectful attitude often distracts whole classroom atmosphere, the teacher may take the student to the faculty office after class for detention. Moreover, if it

is a severe or serious case, the teacher usually calls the parents of the student to let them know about what their child did at school. Acts of violence such as bullying other students in and out of the school may be punished by one or two suspension weeks. This extreme form of punishment is highly effective in correcting student behavior since it is viewed as tainting the honor of their families. Parents will severely punish their child as well. Finally, the highest level of punishment is expulsion. However, it is very rare in primary schools and even more so in secondary schools. Most students do not experience detentions during their school days in Korea.

Peer pressure is also utilized to monitor potential misbehaving students particularly in secondary schools of Korea. For instance, in most public schools, students are required to wear school uniforms as well as their name tags. From time to time, a group of designated senior students inspect younger students each morning to ensure whether or not they follow school rules (The Republic of Korea, 2004).

The Korean culture grants teachers the same authority as parents. In addition, the culture norms attributes to teachers even greater responsibility for students' moral and academic development. Another factor that has influenced student discipline issues in school lies in the societal importance of the college entrance examination, which is regarded as the most important test for a student's future. In fact, this examination determines a student's future profession in Korean society. Most Korean parents have perceived that the role of teachers is crucial in teaching students academic skills to prepare them for the college entrance examination. For achieving the short-term goal of passing the college entrance examination, most students and their parents have cooperated with teachers in all aspects of the child's learning at school. Thus, student discipline problems in middle schools and high schools seldom appear openly and so are not disruptive. However, one Korean education problem is that there too much competition in college entrance examination (similar to SAT/ACT in the Untied States) (Yum, 2000).

One research study was conducted in which a survey was given to students, parents, and teachers about the main concerns for public education in Seoul. Most students responded that teacher instruction was insufficient for the preparation of college entrance examinations; whereas, teachers indicated students' negative attitudes, such as wanting to quit school (13.6%), skipping classes (8.8%), and impairing leaning environments within public schools (11.3%), served as their main concern. Most parents were concerned about the deteriorating public education, including mistrust of public schools, an increase in costs for private tutoring, school violence, and disrespect towards the teaching profession (Park, 2002).

Korean Education and American Education

In brief, review of the literature on student discipline indicates that American educators have developed a myriad of behavior management strategies to attempt to create positive learning environments. Meanwhile, Korean educators seem to have few disciplinary tactics and rather heavily rely upon the punitive behavior management system. However, the recent educational reform movement has reflected in a changing trend in Korean education system. Thus, this harsh aversive intervention policy is gradually changing to a less punitive posture in the Korean schools.

The Koreans are characterized by a single ethnicity, whereas the United States represents its diverse populations. American educators usually have more concerns about

multicultural education in developing various curricula as well as behavior management skills for diverse or disadvantaged students. Meanwhile, there are little concerns about the need for multicultural education in Korean education.

Since ancient time, Korea has culturally been influenced by the ideology of Confucianism (Oh-Hwang, 1993); thereby it is characterized by a hierarchical and patriarchal society. Familism in Korea is based on communitarianism rather than individualism, emphasizing the importance of groups or communities. However, in America, people believe that individuals are the most important aspect in human relationships. Thus, this emphasis has contributed to the expansion of an individual civil rights. In addition, this liberal trend has reflected in student discipline practices in developing more humane and democratic behavior management strategies than simply in enforcing authoritarian leaderships.

One survey conducted in early 2000 about the value of education in the United States, named '*How the public and parents – White, African American, and Hispanic – view higher education?*' This survey revealed that most people believed that a higher education is essential for a person to succeed in contemporary world. Most people viewed a higher education not as an entitlement, but something students for which a person should. Through this higher education, students gain a sense of maturity and learn how to manage on their own and how to get along with people different from themselves (Immerwahr, 2000).

Most Korean families value and have an enthusiasm or zeal for their child's education. However, their viewpoints are somehow different from Americans; they view a higher education opportunity as the means of success itself in terms of having a great job, upgrading their socioeconomic status or even a better chance or condition for their marriage. Therefore, lots of Korean parents are spending a large portion of their income for their child's education or private tutoring.

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