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Introduction

- 1 This paper discusses the educational issues and societal changes that have led to proactive reforms in the education system of South Korea. Korean pupils achieve high academic levels, but there have been some criticisms relating to sociocultural issues. In addition, Korea is being transformed into a multicultural society. Here we consider two examples of Korea's educational interventions, introduced in response to contextual demands and societal changes: firstly, the Schools for Improvement plan; secondly, multicultural education. We conclude with some issues and concerns that arise from their implementation.

High academic achievement and its implications

- 2 The high level of academic performance of Korea's pupils has been widely recognised. Korea has officially participated in PISA since 2000 and in TIMSS since 1995, and has consistently performed well in both, being ranked top in all three areas (reading, mathematics and science) of PISA 2012 (OECD, 2013a, 2013b) and in two areas (mathematics and science) of TIMSS 2012 (Martin *et al.*, 2012; Mullis *et al.*, 2012). Korea's improving academic standards are confirmed by the National Assessment of Educational Achievement (NAEA),¹ with the percentage of underperforming pupils falling from 7.2 percent in 2008 to 2.3 percent in 2012 (MoE, 2012; Kim, K. H. *et al.*, 2012).

- 3 It has been generally agreed that two major factors have contributed to such educational accomplishments. One is the national character and educational culture of Korea. Koreans traditionally have a strong appreciation of education and believe that they can achieve a better life through it. Devoted attitudes to study are highly valued in the society, and are usually accompanied by strong family support. Socioeconomic background does not have a critical effect on academic performance, and the degree of social mobility in Korea is high (OECD, 2013a). Korea's educational achievements are also due to its effective education system. Strong governmental initiatives have improved the quality and equity of education. The increasing rate of school enrollment, the reform of school systems, the development of high standards for the national curriculum and textbooks, the improvement of teaching quality, and the utilisation of high-stakes exams promote the effectiveness of the system. Each has contributed to the country's remarkable economic growth and to the development of social democracy in the last six decades (Lee, C. J. *et al.*, 2010; OECD, 2013c; UNESCO, 2011, 2013).
- 4 The significant accomplishments of Korean education have earned domestic and international recognition. However, some cultural and educational traditions have raised criticisms and controversies, e.g. long learning hours, the considerable expense of private lessons, and exam-driven competitive teaching and learning. In addition, some problems highlighted in the evaluations (apart from the low achievements of Korean pupils in affective domains (OECD, 2013a)) have resulted in demands for a support system for underachievers and for students from multicultural backgrounds. There is still an achievement gap between pupils in their academic performance, and the multicultural background has been identified as a negative variable in some pupils' learning (Kim, K. H. *et al.*, 2012, 2013; Shin, J. A. *et al.*, 2012; Jo, Y. D. *et al.*, 2011).
- 5 Given this contextual situation – the rapid increase in the number of multicultural pupils who experience learning difficulties and are in need of support – systematic interventions such as the Schools for Improvement plan and Multicultural Education have become top educational priorities (Oh, E. S. *et al.*, 2007; Lee, H. J. *et al.*, 2007; Oh, S. C. *et al.*, 2013). While the problems are being resolved by increasing the academic level of low-performers and reducing the gap among pupils, sustainable achievement and the quality of education in Korea is being promoted even further.

Educational outcomes and Schools for Improvement

- 6 Since 2009 the Schools for Improvement plan has been a proactive strategic intervention driven by a strong governmental plan called the Zero Plan for Below-Basic-Level Pupils. Its aims include coping with the results of evaluative studies, minimising the number of underachievers, reducing the gap between pupils, and ensuring every pupil is equipped with the key competencies required by the national curriculum. The government, through local educational offices, provides holistic and comprehensive strategies and support systems for teachers and schools either designated or self-designated as Schools for Improvement according to the NAEA results. Together with administrative support and human resources, the schools are provided with financial support. The schools, however, are accountable: they must become effective; offer not only instruction in curricular subjects but also multi-dimensional systematic approaches for underachieving pupils; intensify teacher and parent education programs; and more. According to the results of evaluative studies, there have been significant improvements in pupil

performance in many aspects, including positive changes in the interests and attitudes of pupils, teachers, parents, educational practitioners, and policymakers (MoE, 2008, 2014; Lee, H. J., 2009, 2011; Oh, S. C., 2013).

Social changes and multicultural education

- 7 Korea has experienced an influx from other countries due to its phenomenal economic development, its decreasing birth rate, and its aging population. As a consequence, its demographic structure has changed, with approximately 66,500 school-aged multicultural pupils in 2012. The number of multicultural pupils has increased by approximately 20 percent every year for the last five years (MoGEF, 2013; MoE, 2012a).
- 8 Korea is not the only country becoming a multicultural society, and this is an international trend elsewhere in this globalized world of the 21st century. The percentage of the multicultural population of Korea is still small, but multicultural education has become one of the most prominent concerns in Korea.
- 9 The growth of the multicultural population is expected to continue and to reach 5 percent in 2020 and 9.2 percent by 2050 (Constitutional Court, 2010), with the number of school-age children from multicultural families increasing throughout the country (MoE, 2010, 2012a). The three major multicultural groups are international marriage families, foreign families, and North Korean defectors. Pupils from these families have often been identified to be socioculturally disadvantaged (Cho, Y. D. *et al.*, 2011; Ryu, B. R. *et al.*, 2012; Oh, S. C. *et al.*, 2013); multicultural backgrounds have been claimed to be a variable for the underachievement of some pupils; and their school dropout rate was reported to reach 43 percent (KBS, 2012; Chosun, 2010). Furthermore, while Korea has been moving toward becoming a multicultural society, its traditions and long history continue to foster a strong homogenous identity, and some Koreans are less flexible in coping with such fundamental changes in population composition and cultural diversity (Chung, J. Y., 2010, Lee, K. H., 2011).
- 10 Therefore, political, legal, and social pressures have resulted in diverse reforms in the educational system. Proactive multicultural education policies have been implemented to remedy the current educational problems, to intensify national integration, to promote social equity, and to help pupils become capable citizens (MoE, 2008, 2014). Philosophical and educational fundamentals such as the directions, approaches, and principles of multicultural education have been examined (Hong, W. P., 2010; Moon, S. H., 2010; Lee, K. H., 2011; Jahng and Lee, 2013); specialised schools for multicultural pupils only have been established; and various instructional programmes, including Korean as a Second Language (KSL) and bilingual/bicultural programmes, have also been developed (Oh, E. S. *et al.*, 2009; Won, J. S. *et al.*, 2011).

Discussion and conclusion

- 11 The Schools for Improvement and the multicultural education reforms illustrate how sociocultural changes have initiated educational adaptations in the Korea education system. However, some issues and concerns raised during the implementation entail a critical review on the reforms.

- 12 Firstly, the results of the Schools for Improvement reform should be critically reviewed from other perspectives. Its first priority was pupils' cognitive proficiency as measured by standards-based high-stakes exams; however, some other aspects of learning, including the emotional, social, physical, and personality development of students during the educational process, should receive more attention. A heavy burden lies on the teachers and schools accountable for the plan (Jahng, K. E., 2011; Maier and Wood, 2005; Harris and Herrington, 2006; McEwan, 2009), and more cooperative support from various authorities and communities should be provided.
- 13 Secondly, multicultural education in Korea is still at an early stage. Nevertheless, a comprehensive reflection is required. There are concerns that multicultural education may sometimes create negative perceptions of multicultural pupils, that some programmes are not effective or appropriate to each multicultural pupil, and that many of the programmes overlap. More importantly, there is a need to review the fundamental concepts, the ultimate goals, and the implementation processes of multicultural education (Jahng, K. E. and Lee, S. J., 2013; Banks, 2005; Park, H. Y., 2012; McCarthy, 1994; Lee, K. H. *et al.*, 2011) so that, on the basis of a reflective evaluation of multicultural education, redefined approaches and programmes can be developed to promote learning and teaching further.
- 14 This paper attempts to address the value of such educational reforms and raises the issue of how to interpret the characteristics "government-driven", "top-down", "systematic", "proactive" and "effective". These characteristics have provoked fundamental longstanding debates in Korea and other societies. The whole process and product of interventions, including subtle, undesirable consequences, needs to be critically examined from a long-term perspective. In addition, monitoring of, and communicating with, other international educational systems that share common interests is proposed.

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NOTES

1. NAEA is an annual nationwide evaluation. From 2009 to 2012, the whole population of the target grades (6th grade of primary, 3rd of middle school, and 1st and 2nd of high school) were administered with the NAEA.

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Palabras claves: educación multicultural, modelo cultural, tradición cultural, sistema educativo, reforma de la educación, cambio social

Mots-clés: éducation multiculturelle, modèle éducatif, tradition culturelle, réforme de l'enseignement, système éducatif, changement social

Keywords: educational reform, multicultural education, educational models, cultural tradition, educational system, social change

Geographical index: Corée du Sud

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