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From the Margins to the Mainstream and Back Again: A Comparison of Lifelong Learning in South Korea and the United States

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Abstract: This paper compares the development of lifelong learning in South Korea and the United States. The paper examines how and why lifelong learning has achieved mainstream status in Korea while remaining on the margins in the US.

Introduction

This paper compares the development of lifelong learning in South Korea and the United States. While we recognize that lifelong learning occurs in informal and nonformal contexts, this paper focuses on formal governmental policies, largely geared towards economic development. The paper examines how and why lifelong learning has achieved mainstream status in Korea while remaining on the margins in the US. The study argues that the Korean government has actively supported and encouraged lifelong learning through a series of governmental policy initiatives and provided systematic financial support that lead the creation of a lifelong learning system that permeates daily life. Each of the sixteen provinces has a lifelong learning center and local districts sponsor an additional forty centers. In fact, the recently appointed Minister of Education & Human Resources Development was a former professor of adult education (Kwon, 2005, 2006).

The idea of lifelong learning has taken a different path in the United States. We argue that in the US lifelong learning remains on the margins. Not only is there no governmental support, but lifelong learning is mostly seen in exclusively economic terms and as an employee responsibility. In fact, though some federal governmental policies encourage the idea of lifelong learning, support for even retraining programs is funneled through private industry or independent agencies that are often under the control of private industry.

Background: Lifelong Learning in Korea and the United States

Korea was a poor country with a 60% illiteracy rate and \$79 per capita annual income (*Chosun Il Bo* October 30, 1997) and assisted by financial and material aid from the US. Today South Korea is on the threshold of becoming a developed country with a 99% literacy rate, \$19,500 per capita annual income and has the 10th largest economy in the world. Ironically, ten years after the 1997 currency crisis and International Monetary Funds (IMF) mandated remedies, South Korea obtained a seat on the IMF's Executive Board (*The Korea Herald*, October 1, 2007).

South Korea's 1997 currency crisis was generally attributed to the fact that the country did not prepare to globalize in the areas of economy, education, and culture. But the fact that South Korea quickly graduated from the IMF fund's rescue program was due to its effort to

transform the country into a lifelong learning society(Lee, 2002). The key legislative initiatives were the establishment of Lifelong Education Act (LEA) in 1999 and National Human Resources Development Act in 2002. The comprehensive 5-year Lifelong Learning Development Plan of 2001 was developed as a follow-up to the LEA (Ministry of Education/Human Resource Development [MOE/HRD], 2001).

Lifelong learning has taken a different path in the United States. While there has been no (at least not yet) economic crises that compares to the Korean crises, indications are that the US may be in for difficult economic times. The US has consistently seen educational attainment and a highly mobile and educated workforce as the engine of economic development. Education in the 20th century has been a major contributor to productivity gains in the U.S., and economic growth has been tightly linked to increases in education attainment. A congressional Joint Economic Committee report in 2000 found several estimates of the effect of human capital gains on economic growth in the range of 10 percent to 25 percent. A more recent study concluded that the direct effect of educational advances accounts for about 22 percent of the 1.62 percent average annual increase in U.S. labor productivity from 1913 to 1996. That study also underscored the indirect contribution of educational advances in fueling innovation and the adoption of new technology (Investment in Education, 2000; Gordon, 2000; DeLong, Golden, Katz, 2003).

However, over the next 40 years, the labor force will not grow at anywhere near the rate of growth of the past 40 years. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects total labor force growth of only 29 percent between 2000 and 2040, way down from the 102 percent over the past 40 years. Among the prime age workers 25 to 54, BLS projects cumulative growth of only 16 percent, a small fraction of the 120 percent increase in the past 40 years (Toosi, 2002). Moreover, just as a huge number of baby boomers age out of the workforce and into retirement, labor force participation rates for men as well as women will decline. In fact, that decline in has already begun. From a high of 67 percent in 2000, the participation rate declined to 66 percent in 2005, and the BLS projects it will continue to decline each decade to reach 60 percent in 2040. But sluggish labor force growth is only half the story. Over the next four decades, we can expect very little gain (and maybe an actual decline) in the educational attainment of the workforce, at least as a consequence of young adults moving in and through the labor force (Bosworth, 2007).

Lifelong Learning Policies and Systems in Korea

There are many laws and systems related to lifelong learning in Korea. These laws and systems can be divided into three parts. First, there are laws and systems related to education and academic achievement, such as the Lifelong Education Act, Credit Accreditation Act, Bachelor's Degree Examination Program for the Self-Educated, Institute Establishment and Operation Act, UNESCO Activity Act, Korean National Open University Establishment Ordinance, Broadcasting and Communication High school Establishment Standard Ordinance, Proprietary School Rules, Special Class Establishment Standard Ordinance for Educating Children and Youth in Industrial Company, and Higher Education Act.. Second, there are policies related to skill development and vocational training such as the Polytechnic College Act, Human Resource Development Service Act, Employment Insurance Act, and Vocational & the Professional Competence Development Act.. Third, there are acts related to culture and leisure living such as the Library and Reading Promotion Act, Local Culture Institute Promotion Act, Museum and Art Center Promotion Act, and the All School Facility Open and Use Rules,

Organizational structures can be divided into administrative and implementation organizations. In administrative organization, there is a Lifelong Learning Department in the MOE/HRD at the central government level, a Lifelong Education Division at the local government level and a lifelong learning division in the district governmental level. Implementation organization can be divided into central government level, state government level, and county level. The implementation organization for national lifelong learning is a National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE) at central level, sixteen local institutes for lifelong education (LILE) in each province, and over forty lifelong learning centers in city and county levels

National Institute for Lifelong Education. The National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE) was founded in 2000 by MOE/HRD under the Lifelong Education Act.. The NILE has as its mission promoting lifelong learning and institutionalizing the idea of lifelong education at the national level. It is primarily responsible for four main objectives: conducting research on lifelong education, providing training to those involved in lifelong education, and sharing information related to lifelong education. In designating NILE as a supervisory organization, MOE/HRD also included several additional tasks including collaboration with local information centers concerning lifelong education and other related projects commissioned by the Ministry (Choi, 2000).

Local Institute for Lifelong Education. The Local Information Institute for Lifelong Education (LICLE), an organization attached to prospective institutions in the provinces, was founded in 2000 by of the Lifelong Education Act for each province. The LICLE devotes its efforts to achieve a vision toward a learning society by conducting research, developing and implementing training programs, and providing information of lifelong education in each province. The mission of LICLE is to build a lifelong learning society by promoting quality and access to education for all people. In pursuit of this mission, the objectives of the LICLE are (1) building a network between Institutes for Lifelong Education, (2) implementing research activities for lifelong education, (3) enhancing the quality of professionals in lifelong education, (4) broadening access to information on lifelong education, and (5) operating educational programs for lifelong learning of adult learners in each province.

District Lifelong learning Centers. Forty lifelong learning Centers were founded in seventy-six districts designated as lifelong learning cities by MOE/HRD (Park, 2007). MOE/HRD instituted the creation of lifelong learning center s under the management of the lifelong education promotion committee when the district applied to be a lifelong learning city. The centers are to execute a local community network project, lifelong learning policy development project, program development, management of a lifelong learning information system, and operate professional guidance consulting. Lifelong learning center s operate these projects by using libraries, schools, lifelong education facilities, welfare facilities, health facilities, commercial and industrial facilities, and physical and cultural facilities within the local community.

Lifelong Learning Cities. Policy for building a lifelong learning city is a movement that contributes to the revival of the region and regional human resources development and has been promoted as means to expand lifelong learning opportunities of local residents. By 2007, a total

76 cities had been selected by MOE /HRD as lifelong learning cities. In 2004, the government invested a total of \$40,000,000 for creating lifelong learning cities. Local districts invested an additional \$ 37,000,000 while MOE/HRD contributed \$ 3,000,000 (Buyn, et al., 2005).

Lifelong Learning Policies in the United States

Unlike South Korea, the United States does not have a comprehensive national lifelong learning policy. There are, however, several programs and policies that, though not the main focus, influence lifelong learning. The Higher Education Act offers some modest grants and loans to adults returning to higher education. However, the monies provided are inadequate to support returning adults and often come with complex needs attendance requirements.

The Taxpayer Relief Act of 1997 incorporated the Lifetime Learning Tax Credits (LLTC) program with the goal of making college more affordable and encouraging lifelong learning. The LLTC is available for unlimited years to those taking classes beyond their first two years of college, including college juniors and seniors, graduate students, and working adults pursuing lifelong learning. Eligible expenses for each credit include only tuition and required fees. Yet the utilization of the LLTC has been a little more than one-half of the projected budget. Because of the structure of the LLTC, adults seldom become eligible for full amount of credit.

Adult Basic Education (ABE) is provided through the Adult and Family Literacy Act along with state funding. Enrollment has declined from 3.5-4.0 million in the 1990s to about 2.7 million currently. Moreover, nearly 40 percent are young adults aged 16-24, suggesting that a large group is using the programs as an alternative formal education system. While there are many examples of successful ABE programs, most enrollees do not make any significant gains, educationally or in income.

Another program, the Workforce Investment Act, guides job-training programs. Based on the kinds of training provided and the time limits frequently imposed by state and local boards, it seems unlikely that more than a quarter or a third of the participants gained a degree or a nationally portable credential (Bosworth, 2007).

The federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program assists states in moving people off public assistance and into work. TANF requires that each state engage at least 50 percent of assistance recipients in “work activities.” The legislation provides that vocational training an allowable work activity, but limit straining to 12 months and forbids states from allowing more than 30 percent of the work participation requirements to be met by individuals in vocational training or attending high school.

Implications

The study found that the two countries have taken radically different approaches to the idea of lifelong learning. In Korea, the various lifelong learning centers have become an integral part of Korean society. Events such as the celebration of a city’s designation as a “lifelong learning city” is highly desirous and attracts thousands to its various activities.

In the United States, lifelong learning remains largely within the realm of private industry, though indirectly supported by various federal and local initiatives. Unlike Korea, the focus is almost exclusively on re-training the workforce. It seems clear to us that the piecemeal lifelong learning policies pose a serious challenge to the United States. The United States risks falling behind those countries that have developed a national lifelong learning policy.

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