

Perspectives on General Subjects in the Vocational High Schools

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Emphasis on work-based learning has become an international trend as a policy measure to reduce youth unemployment and skill mismatch by strengthening the linkage between schools and labor market. In Korea, strong policy have been implemented to increase employment rate of graduates of vocational high schools who used to pursue higher education. As an outcome of a series of policies in recent years, peoples' perspectives have been changed, considering learning specific skills are the most important in vocational high schools under the social slogan of "building the meritocratic society", the meaning of which is rather obscure. Reflecting these trends, general subjects have been gradually neglected in vocational high schools in Korea. This study started based on a sense of crisis that while a society is over-emphasizing specific skills, there might be a danger of overlooking arguments that specific skills oriented education can not ensure the later period of workers' lives than does the concept-based education due to lack of adaptability to the changing society.

The aims of this study is to contemplate the purpose of learning general subjects in vocational high schools and explore the ways to improve the quality of vocational high school education with regard to general subjects, in a way that it can not only contribute the need of labor market but also for the good of student's lifelong competitiveness and human resources development at the national level. Various approaches have been deployed in this study such as literatures review, interviews with teachers and students, and quantitative analysis based on survey with teachers and student.

The results provided the following characteristics as the current status of general education in vocational high schools. First, despite of considerable differences in educational context between general high schools and vocational

high schools, officially the curriculum of general subjects of these two types of schools are the same. There is no guideline or system to help teachers of general subjects in vocational high schools to deal with less motivated students with less time for teaching than general high schools. Secondly, many teachers think that the number of courses for general subjects in vocational high schools need to be reduced and 21.8% of students responded that there is no need to learn general subjects. Third, more than half of students are aware of lack of basic ability for learning. Fourth, many teachers of general subjects are relatively alienated in the process curriculum planning and showed the tendency of less actively participating in professional education and training.

As the final conclusion of this study, two scenarios were provided which shows contradictory characteristics. In the Scenario 1, based on the perspectives of Brunner(1960), Hirst(1965), Gardner(2006) and Young(2009), general subject would be more emphasized than now with changes in teaching method in order for students to be better equipped for the rapidly changing labor market as well as enhance their wisdom for life and citizenship. On the other hand, in the Scenario 2, the objects of general subjects will be limited to facilitating development of basic competencies required in the work places. In case of choosing the Scenario 1 as a policy direction, changes in curriculum, teacher placement and training, and quality control of teaching in order to assure students of vocational high school have chances to learn, at their piques of cognitive capacity, the “powerful knowledge” with “disciplinary minds” which will help them in the lifelong learning society.

Addressing the limitation of the study, further suggestions of researches were made.