



Education in South Korea

Reflections on a Seventy-Year Journey

Don-Hee Lee · Sam-Geun Kwak
Jae-Woong Kim · Dong-Joon Park
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Preface

The historical depiction of 70 years of Korean education is not something from a distant past, but part of life that has affected the people living today in one way or another. Its contents are known to some generations because they experienced it in the past, to some because they studied it, and others because they are living through it now. Most people only know as much as they have experienced it, learned about it or are currently undergoing it. However, the ones who have researched education and its history until now have been organizing, describing, and interpreting according to a certain systematic framework while referring to various data directly or indirectly. Of course, the facts that have been organized, described, and interpreted in such framework might have lost some of its vividness or may not tell everything one wants to know depending on the generation. Even so, it is necessary to provide the basic structure and details required to view the reality of today's institutional education, its genetic origins, and its future direction.

Nevertheless, as in all aspects of our lives, it is necessary to recognize that the historical description of life's features, including education, is

influenced by the subjective perspectives and opinions of the professional researchers to a considerable extent.

Naturally, conscious efforts are needed to ensure the objectivity of the facts, rationality of the composition, and validity of the interpretation; however, there are preferences and choices of each researcher in this process that cannot be completely avoided, when selecting the object of interest, method of investigation, and technique involved in interpretation. This can be the limitations of the researchers, but also the framework of the professional thought process. Hence, the consistency and comprehensiveness in the contents of this co-authored book might not be perfect, and moreover, other opinions may be raised regarding the overall organization and details of this book. The research team appointed a lead researcher to organize the contents and data of each area and supervise discussion and writing. Professor Lee Don-Hee was in charge of the general supervision, the prologue as well as the epilogue, while Professor Lee Myung-Hee was responsible for the education system, Professors Yang Jeong-Ho and Pak Dong-Jun for primary and secondary education, Professor Kim Jae-Woong for higher education, and Professor Kwak Sam-Geun for lifelong education. The contents of each area were written based on collaboration—cooperation of the research team and help from third-party academics.

Moreover, when we discussed education, at least in relation to the public education system, we tried to abide by the rule of political neutrality. In reality, it is possible to observe pluralistic ideologies in a sort of political power struggle are observed in the world of education today. Political neutrality sometimes means maintaining an objective or transcendent position, demonstrating an attitude of open acceptance, or efforts of coordinated solution in this tangle of ideologies. The authors of this book exerted their efforts to respond to these demands.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Academy of Korean Studies for planning and supporting the publication of this book,

the relevant scholars who participated in providing advice and encouragement, and the editorial staff that reviewed this book thoroughly up to its completion.

On behalf of the group of writers

Seoul, Korea (Republic of)
October 2015

Don-Hee Lee

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Prologue | 1 |
| 1 Perspective of National Education | 1 |
| 2 The State's Reason for Educating Its People | 3 |
| 3 "Liberal and Democratic Basic Order" and National Education | 6 |
| Development of Education System in the Republic of Korea | 11 |
| 1 Introduction | 11 |
| 2 Education System in the State Formation Period: After Liberation of Korea—The Late 1950s | 13 |
| 3 Education System During the Industrialization Period: 1960 to Early 1990s | 43 |
| 4 Education System in the Information Age: After the Mid-1990s | 79 |
| 5 Conclusion | 95 |
| References | 113 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Development of Primary and Secondary Education in the Republic of Korea | 117 |
| 1 Introduction | 117 |
| 2 Primary and Secondary Education During the State Formation Period: After the Liberation of Korea from Japanese Rule to Late 1950s | 120 |
| 3 Primary and Secondary Education During the Industrialization Period: 1960 to Early 1990s | 137 |
| 4 Primary and Secondary Education in the Information Age: Since the Mid-1990s | 155 |
| 5 Conclusion | 199 |
| References | 210 |
| Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Korea | 217 |
| 1 Introduction | 217 |
| 2 Higher Education in the State Formation Period: After Liberation to the Late 1950s | 220 |
| 3 Higher Education During the Industrialization Period: 1960 to Early 1990s | 240 |
| 4 Higher Education in Informatization Period: Since the Mid-1990s | 282 |
| 5 Conclusion | 308 |
| References | 311 |
| Development of Lifelong Education in the Republic of Korea | 315 |
| 1 Introduction | 315 |
| 2 Lifelong Education in the State Formation Period: After Liberation to the Late 1950s | 318 |
| 3 Lifelong Education in the Industrialization Period: 1960s to Early 1990s | 328 |
| 4 Lifelong Education in the Informatization Period: Since the Mid-1990s | 357 |
| 5 Conclusion | 388 |
| References | 396 |

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------|
| Epilogue | 401 |
| 1 Retrospect | 401 |
| 2 Education for Tomorrow | 409 |
| References | 413 |
| References | 415 |
| Index | 439 |

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List of Figures

Development of Primary and Secondary Education in the Republic of Korea

| | | |
|--------|---|-----|
| Fig. 1 | Problems of teacher shortage after the liberation (<i>Source</i> “Chosun Ilbo”, November 29, 1945) | 125 |
| Fig. 2 | Changes in the number of elementary school students immediately after the liberation (<i>Source</i> National Statistical Office, Korea Educational Development Institute [each year]) | 126 |
| Fig. 3 | Education system in accordance with the 1949 Education Law | 127 |
| Fig. 4 | A tent school during the Korean war | 130 |
| Fig. 5 | First Korean language schoolbook after the liberation | 131 |
| Fig. 6 | Policy on the equalization of high schools | 140 |
| Fig. 7 | Parents of students who marked grounded radish juice filed a lawsuit and won in 1964 (<i>Source</i> “Chosun Ilbo”, March 30, 1965, the question regarding the potential ingredients for the traditional Korean taffy on middle school entrance exam in 1964) | 143 |

| | | |
|---------|---|-----|
| Fig. 8 | Charter of National Education Picture Book and Leaflet (December 5, 1968) | 144 |
| Fig. 9 | Changes in the number of teachers (<i>Source</i> National Statistical Office, Korea Educational Development Institute [each year]) | 146 |
| Fig. 10 | A comparison of daily tasks of high school teachers and academy instructors | 159 |
| Fig. 11 | Changes in the percentage of underachieving students (<i>Source</i> Ministry of Education [2013]) | 160 |
| Fig. 12 | Status by PISA ranking by year (<i>Source</i> OECD [each year]) | 161 |
| Fig. 13 | Details of May 31 Education Reform Plan | 164 |
| Fig. 14 | Trends of spending on private education based on official statistics | 181 |
| Fig. 15 | How people view students' ability to live together (<i>Source</i> Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [2012]) | 196 |
| Fig. 16 | Level of satisfaction with character education in schools (<i>Source</i> Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [2012]) | 197 |
| Fig. 17 | NOW Home Portal of Madison City High Schools, Wisconsin, USA (example of detailed information on how student's grade in social studies is calculated) | 204 |
| Fig. 18 | School Info Website (www.schoolinfo.go.kr) | 205 |
| Fig. 19 | Changes in school-age population and local education subsidy by each year (<i>Source</i> "Chosun Ilbo", July 14, 2011) | 206 |
| Fig. 20 | Changes in school-age population and correlation with economic growth (<i>Source</i> Re-analyzed yearly data from the Bank of Korea and National Statistical Office) | 210 |

Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Korea

| | | |
|--------|---|-----|
| Fig. 1 | Old main building of Seoul National University | 227 |
| Fig. 2 | Banner of 1970 preliminary college entrance examination | 266 |
| Fig. 3 | Changes in the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions (<i>Source</i> Korean Educational Statistics Service of the Korean Educational Development Institute [kess.kedi.re.kr/index]) | 292 |

Development of Lifelong Education in the Republic of Korea

| | | |
|--------|---|-----|
| Fig. 1 | Second Nationwide Literacy Education, 1955 | 320 |
| Fig. 2 | Third Nationwide Literacy Education (<i>Source</i> 『Kyung Hyang Newspaper』, January 19, 1956) | 321 |
| Fig. 3 | Education to improve living (<i>Source</i> “Kyung Hyang Newspaper”, November 28, 1948) | 326 |
| Fig. 4 | Enlightenment activities by college students for eradicating illiteracy in rural communities (<i>Source</i> National Archives of Korea [1962]) | 330 |
| Fig. 5 | Conference in August 1968, Korea Association for Community Education | 338 |

List of Tables

Development of Education System in the Republic of Korea

| | | |
|---------|---|----|
| Table 1 | Key educational issues and policies in each period | 14 |
| Table 2 | Results of the 2nd five-year plan to expand facilities for compulsory education | 46 |
| Table 3 | Changes in the number of middle school students | 58 |

Development of Primary and Secondary Education in the Republic of Korea

| | | |
|---------|---|-----|
| Table 1 | Number of schools, students, and teachers immediately after the liberation (1945) | 125 |
| Table 2 | Elementary education-related indicators (units: EA, persons) | 128 |
| Table 3 | Policies and features of curricula under successive governments | 132 |
| Table 4 | Number of elementary school subjects and class hours per year under the U.S. Military Government (September 1946) | 134 |

| | | |
|----------|--|-----|
| Table 5 | Standards for class hours for elementary schools under the first curriculum | 135 |
| Table 6 | Private Education Policies from the Park Chung-Hee government to the Roh Tae-Woo government | 150 |
| Table 7 | Percentage of underachieving students | 162 |
| Table 8 | Process of changes of the school steering committee | 167 |
| Table 9 | Teacher policy goals and tasks of the Kim Young-Sam government's education reform plan | 171 |
| Table 10 | Teacher policy objectives and tasks of the Kim Dae-Jung government's education reform plan | 176 |
| Table 11 | Percentage of students taking private lessons by school level unit: % | 180 |
| Table 12 | Trends in spending on private education | 180 |
| Table 13 | Major measures for private education by year and government | 183 |
| Table 14 | Number of special-purpose schools by year (National/Public/Private Schools) | 189 |
| Table 15 | Changes in high school system by each government | 192 |
| Table 16 | Number of schools where temporary teachers took on a homeroom teacher between 2007 and 2011 | 203 |
| Table 17 | Features of the May 31 Education Reform Plan (1995) and major policies related to educational accountability | 207 |

Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Korea

| | | |
|---------|--|-----|
| Table 1 | High school graduates, college student enrollment quota, increase in re-takers (1970–1986) Unit: 1,000 | 253 |
| Table 2 | Kim Young-Sam government's higher education reform plan | 285 |
| Table 3 | Evolvement of university and college admission method | 290 |

Development of Lifelong Education in the Republic of Korea

| | | |
|---------|---|-----|
| Table 1 | Achievement of Nationwide Literacy Education project | 327 |
| Table 2 | Evolution of literacy education | 332 |
| Table 3 | Illiteracy rate in major surveys on literacy of Korean adults | 334 |

| | | |
|----------|--|-----|
| Table 4 | Goals and achievements of Saemaul Education | 337 |
| Table 5 | Number of students taking courses at private institutes | 340 |
| Table 6 | Number of women's community centers | 340 |
| Table 7 | Centers for lifelong learning at universities | 347 |
| Table 8 | Bachelor's degrees awarded through the Bachelor's Degree Examination for Self-Education (unit: persons) | 349 |
| Table 9 | Characteristics of lifelong education policy in the informatization period | 359 |
| Table 10 | Status of lifelong education institutions in 1997 | 368 |
| Table 11 | Number of lifelong education institutions | 371 |
| Table 12 | Number of lifelong learning programs | 372 |
| Table 13 | Number of learners | 373 |
| Table 14 | Current status of school style lifelong education facilities | 374 |
| Table 15 | Current status of lifelong learning cities | 376 |
| Table 16 | Status of lifelong learning city by region | 377 |
| Table 17 | Comparison of Saemaul Education and Lifelong Learning City Project | 379 |
| Table 18 | Comprehensive plan for the promotion of lifelong learning | 380 |
| Table 19 | Participation rate in lifelong education by gender and age group unit: % | 382 |



Prologue

1 Perspective of National Education

The institutional system of the current education was officially launched simultaneously with the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948. Education, obviously, was not absent of institution or culture at the time. Korea is known as a nation of long tradition, special passion, and accumulated wisdom, especially where education is concerned. Therefore, it is difficult to limit educational characteristics to a certain period even if the period is set to 70 years after the Liberation to tell the history of education. However, the task of focusing our interest in this period to analyze, evaluate, and reflect on the ideological trend, institutional system, policy direction, changes in the field of education as well as the characteristics of education is very significant. Not only will the achievement of this task help understand the education and people's lifestyles of the present day, but also provide meaningful data in confirming what was accomplished through education and what tasks remain, in addition to a glimpse into the future for the country and its people.

What we take interest in and write about here is “national education in the Republic of Korea”. This does not mean all activities are put into

practice by every citizen in every household as they rear children in this country.

Furthermore, it does not include all efforts involved in nurturing and training members required by the government organizations, military, businesses, religious organizations, social communities, and other organizations. Of course, such activities and efforts are part of the national education in broader context. The comprehensive definition of “national education” (or “public education”) is all educational activities that are permitted, supported, supervised, and controlled institutionally by the state. However, in narrower definition, it can be restricted to a school system that carries out universal education for citizens of a certain growth period. The areas of interest dealt with here are not limited to the narrow definition of national education, but a wide range of national education that includes institutions and activities in university and professional vocational education as well as pre-school and adult education implemented in the context of lifelong education.

In broader or narrower sense, if an activity is “educational” based on evaluation, it implies that the education is in consistency with the ideologies and values of national education. Any activity or attempt that contradicts or regresses from these ideologies and values is not called “educational”. For instance, we do not call member training by anti-social groups or immoral organizations “educational”. The ideologies and values of national education are expressed officially in terms such as “humanitarian ideal” or “democratic citizen”, but are also shared implicitly within the value consciousness of every citizen in a nation. Whether the ideologies and values are explicit or implicit, they allow a considerable level of open understanding and interpretation because they are expressed in highly abstract language. However, actual educational judgment is determined in accordance with the conscious value standards within the lives of the people. Therefore, national education as a whole has unique value-oriented characteristics overall and is writing history with those characteristics.

The following three perspectives have been determined in writing the history of national education that has developed over the past 70 years. First, what are the major challenges and conflicts Korean education went through, and what are its accomplishments and remaining tasks? Second,

what are the results of the emphasis on the social function of national education? Third, how did we respond to the problems of ideological conflict and practical hindrance?

We will divide the 70 years after the Liberation into three periods to examine the history of ROK's education. First is the "state formation period" from 1945 to 1960. During this period, the Korean education system formed its institutional framework and full-scale efforts were made to form a state through education. Second is the "period of industrialization" from the May 16 coup in 1961–1994. The government intervened actively to reorganize the education system established during the state formation period, and national development through education was the central task throughout these years. Third is after the "May 31 Education Reform" by the Kim Young-Sam government (the "Civilian Government"). This period was when attempts were made to change the education system and welfare improvement through education started to gain attention. This period is also referred to as the "period of informatization" because coping with the swift informatization that proceeded in the environment surrounding daily lives became the motive for reform. This division of periods may be unreasonable depending on the areas of education; however, outlining the overall flow will be helpful in understanding the history of education.

The 70 years of education after the Liberation will not be written in chronological order according to the divided periods above, but dealt with in four main areas: general education system, primary and secondary education, higher education, and lifelong education. Also, there will be a prologue and epilogue before and after the four areas.

2 The State's Reason for Educating Its People

As the world entered the nineteenth century, a fundamental change occurred in the organization, scope, and role of schools with the establishment of public education system, especially in the narrow definition of national education. Unlike the few scattered schools that existed in

the past, an education system with a systematic and hierarchical structure was set up in many locations. Institutions and agencies that were solely responsible for education were created and initiated learning and training required almost exclusively for the diverse occupations in those organizations. This change was a revolution in regard to the concept and form of education. In addition, it showed a great transition in the relationship between school, society, and the state. Education did not only become a popular phenomenon, but was also in a position to decide the basic characteristics of social organizations. Thus, it became impossible to imagine any state that did not have an education system.

Then why did the state want to educate its people? Although the timing of the launch of the national education system (or public education system) differs from country to country, the motive various nations had for establishing a national system for universal education can be explained with at least three functions.

One is the “protective function” to maintain the fundamental system and characteristics of a nation, the other is the “welfare function” to contribute to enhancing its people’s quality of life, and the last is the “investment function” to reinforce the required manpower in maintaining and developing the country. These three functions naturally cannot be clearly separated from one another. Sometimes, the functional attributes work together, and at times, the distinction of the functional features can be ambiguous. Depending on the primary interest, the same system, policy, or activity can reveal functional characters in a relative manner.

First, the protective (守護的) function reminds us of the “protective community” mentioned in *Politics* by Aristotle. That is, there is a moral foundation of common understanding among its people for a country to exist, and a certain way of life is maintained based on that foundation. In other words, there is this kind of communal consciousness where people gather to live together forming a society and building a nation. The protective function is there to form the knowledge, ability, and attitude—national qualities—required for a citizen to form and maintain a country. Communal interests such as the legislation of necessary rules and authority, attitude and ability to abide by those rules, patriotic sentiment (情操) related to the country’s history and identity, and the duty and commitment to the preservation, defense, and development of one’s

nation are postulated as educational values. Compulsory education is primarily required from a protective motive.

The overall efforts on the various institutional sectors of politics, law, economy, and culture determine what kind of characters a country will have when it is built and how it will be maintained and developed. However, the success and failure of those efforts depend on the qualities and abilities of the people which have been shaped by education. In regard to the protective function of education, we need to review, with historical interest, the educational efforts put in to cultivate the basic qualities and abilities of the people required to build, maintain and improve the “democratic republic” stipulated in the Constitution.

This interest is not simply about how the subject of social studies or history has been taught. Even though there are basic common qualities of the people, the special qualities required in various national sectors need to be reviewed analytically or comprehensively to find out what institutions and policies developed them and what conflicts and achievements manifested in the process of national education.

Second, the welfare function signifies the nature of nation’s welfare-promotion business to improve the quality of life of the people through education. This means the state plans and manages education to teach its citizens, develop their functions, offer the necessary knowledge they need to acquire, provoke thinking, provide people with the qualities needed to live with others in a group, train them to learn problem-solving methods in various situations, and assist in realizing their values.

The original assertion regarding the welfare characteristics of the national education system was made by the so-called utopian socialist philosophers. Naturally, there may be objections to calling the national education system a socialist idea; however, they wanted to leave the social value of education under the management of certain form of nation or community. Some examples are the education system in Thomas More’s *Utopia* and Robert Owen’s statement of how public moral ideals must be taught under the state’s central control system of the state with the respect for individual diversity.

Third, the investment function applies to the planning and management of education as a type of social investment when developing the state into a safer country with growth possibilities and cultivating and

supplementing manpower that can enhance economic potentials for the nation.

That is to say, the state will educate its citizens for the purpose of the nation.

The tendency to perceive education as a social investment is a phenomenon that manifested as “knowledge” started to be associated partially with productive activities with the progress of the industrial revolution. Before, receiving education in the traditional sense meant possessing knowledge for personal character building. Especially in the late eighteenth century, the scholars called the “Encyclopédistes” played a critical role in changing the simple experiential skills of the past into an engineered system. The technical schools and Encyclopédistes in those days were merely interested in utilizing knowledge that was already known and did not consider producing new knowledge. Only the knowledge from natural science which developed from the seventeenth century was partially utilized in productive activities. However, after the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, the trend of using knowledge in the production process began in earnest. This trend turned knowledge into a key factor in production alongside resources, capital, and labor by the twentieth century. The scope and form of work did not remain stagnant at the level of physical activities, but gained characteristics of wide-range application of theoretical principles. The world of education also went through a significant change. Schools and education systems were considered the “managers” of knowledge in their respective society, and education was at least recognized as the surest investment in a knowledge-based society. In the case of the Republic of Korea, we can recall that the investment function of education was associated with economic growth or national development in the 1960s, which is normally categorized as the period of industrialization.

3 “Liberal and Democratic Basic Order” and National Education

Whether education is randomly or intentionally implemented, it is a value-oriented activity. If it is an activity within the boundaries of

the national education system, then it is conducted on the premise of realizing a value system based on the national standards. Due to the nature of national education, voices of political power can be raised to the extent only allowed by the national comprehensive value system. However, regardless of type, political neutrality holds its value within a certain range provided by the pluralistic value system. The functional rules of the state that is called political neutrality are not meaningful to all countries that claim to be a “democratic nation”. A country with pluralistic value system and autonomous value choices is truly a “liberal and democratic nation”.

Then is the Republic of Korea a liberal and democratic state? The preamble of the Constitution stipulates the term “liberal and democratic basic order” and this is the declaration of “comprehensive value system” which the Republic of Korea pursues. According to this basis, ROK is generally called a liberal democracy, and “liberal democracy” is occasionally abbreviated as “liberalism”. Yet, some disputants belonging to certain powers strongly resist these assertions and tendencies understood as “liberalism”. The following would be a case in point.

When the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology announced the guidelines for writing textbooks for subjects such as history in 2011, it expressed that “democracy” should be written as “liberal democracy” to clarify its values because it can have various meanings. However, this was not carried out because of opposition, especially, from the so-called leftists. Their argument was that if liberal democracy is reminiscent of “liberalism” and democracy is only understood as liberalism, other meaning, such as the values of “social democracy” or “socialism”, will be excluded which could mislead the people on the constitutional values.

As such, there are two distinct camps in Korean society regarding the lines of political ideologies. One camp argues that the Republic of Korea is clearly a “liberal state” as specified in the Constitution; the other camp denies this claim and argues that the expression “democratic republic” is sufficient. The former asserts that a policy with social democratic characteristics can be embraced as long as it does not contradict the “liberal and democratic basic order”, whereas the resistance to “liberalism” in the latter sounds like a voice concerned with the adverse effects of “neoliberalism” in the competitive structure of market economy.

The true value of “liberal democracy” in the Constitution and its system’s attributes should be examined instead of being obsessed over the self-interpretation or its historical origin to discuss its meaning. As the representative of the Constitution Drafting Committee, Dr. Yu Jin-Oh (俞鎮午), announced when he introduced the constitution to the National Assembly on June 23, 1948, the constitutional characteristics at the time did not coincide with ones of the classical Western liberals and actually reflected the social management of economic structure advocated by socialism (social democracy) considerably in the principles of production and distribution.

The concept of “liberal and democratic basic order” can be interpreted as an expression of will to pursue the values of freedom and equality in a balanced manner while not constrained or rejected by the values of orthodox liberalism or neoliberalism. Since this basic order fundamentally postulates the diversity of values and beliefs, there are institutional sectors, such as education, where the state needs to maintain political neutrality. That is why the value systems of Nazism, communism, and people’s democracy which restrict the values of freedom and equality and institutionally justify the monopoly and dictatorship of power cannot be accepted. It would make the maintenance of the liberal and democratic basic order impossible.

Originally, the core principle of liberalism and socialism is about the relation of the state and its people, and the distinction between the characteristics of their policies is actually not clearly pronounced. The freedom of privacy and development of individuality stressed in liberalism are values emphasized by many philosophers categorized as socialists, and the values of social relationships enjoyed by families and communities expressed in socialism are the ones valued by liberals. If so, does this mean that socialism can exist within the system of liberalism and vice versa? This question can be answered by reviewing whether liberalism with attributes such as exchangeable justice, competence-oriented freedom, and government with minimal functions can coexist with socialism that is characterized by distributive equality, personal (ontological) freedom, and government of socialized economy.

Even if people were living in a country that is on the extreme end of liberalism, it will not be unacceptable to live with people who hold

socialist values as long as their freedom is not violated. At least, there is no reason to exclude alienated and equal characters and communal values from liberal values.

However, people living in an extremely inflexible socialist country will find living with people of other values, especially liberal ones, not exactly possible. In particular, if privatization system and competence-oriented distribution policy are partially permitted, realizing the ideals of socialism will be institutionally impossible. In this regard, even somewhat extreme liberalists are open and possess tolerance for diversity as long as the system itself is not threatened. By contrast, it will be difficult for rigid socialists to accept a competitive system that is regarded as the cause of inequality and they will reject and be aggressive toward large and small forces hindering the realization of egalitarian ideals.

If “liberal and democratic basic order” is viewed as the comprehensive value system of a nation, the will to fulfill and balance liberty and equality can be understood as the “declarative doctrine”. This, in a manner, is the restructured ideas and institutions of liberal traditions which have been germinated, grown, and transformed. We need to pay attention to how John Dewey pointed out that “liberalism” does not signify a fixed framework of thoughts or rules of conduct, but holds historical relativity in its interpretation of human freedom, individuality, and intelligence. He asserts that the new liberalism makes us contemplate the historical relativity in his book, *Liberalism and Social Action* (1999). The answer to the question of what kind of individual is an individual and what form of freedom is freedom is different in every time period, and it is the same principle as one individual changing from one’s childhood to adulthood.

Strictly speaking, the democracy we have to establish is not about selecting the traditions of liberalism or socialism, nor about realizing a fixed social system that technically maintains balance between the two.

Whichever it is, a social structure normally loses its original significance once it takes roots. What is important is not liberalism or socialism in its stationary “structural form”, but that the “procedural rules” which have dominated the ideological background and social institutions have to be democratic. From the perspective of liberal and democratic traditions, “the idea that sovereignty is vested in its people (主權在民)” in

politics, “the principles of freedom of ownership and market exchange” in economy, and “distributive justice in production value” in society are the primary “ways of life” are considered crucial. However, in education, the practice of procedural rules that pursue rationality, namely “procedural democracy”, is the most important value that should be recognized above all else.

In reality, Korean education is highly evaluated internationally in various indexes, regardless of whether it is conducted by a developed or underdeveloped nation. Yet, national education has been mobilized, in actuality, for its instrumental function rather than its intrinsic function. During the 70 years after the Liberation, Korean education moved forward with the practice of democracy as its most critical task from the very beginning; however, it was challenging to achieve significant results. The Republic of Korea first had to overcome the war and poverty, then increase its defense against external invasion, develop human resources as well as discover and nurture talent for specialized fields, and maintain social and political stability. It is true that education onsite had to defer the realization of its natural significance and values had to be deferred many times in the progress of Korean history, and this is the part where systematic review and introspection are required.



Development of Education System in the Republic of Korea

1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the education system in the Republic of Korea over the past 70 years. Education system may be or may not be a familiar term. In this chapter, we intend to identify the education system as a complex structure that includes school system and its operation method at the national level, and educational traditions or educational cultures. The change of education system does not only mean a simple change in relevant laws or institutions, but it means change of the ideology, content, and method of education, and subsequent changes in our behavioral patterns. From a national perspective, the purposes of education can largely be divided into three categories as follows. The first purpose is to form a state by educating the people. Education to serve the first purpose includes the 3Rs (Reading, wRiting, aRithmetic), national consciousness-raising, and democratic civic education for the people through history and geography education, and education to cultivate rational thinking by teaching science and mathematics. The second purpose of education is to promote national development. Education for the purpose of national development includes fostering talents for doing research and development of strategic technologies through universities