

Socio-Economic and Political Changes and the Cultural Hybridization of Early Childhood Education and Care since South Korean Independence in 1945

Seonghwan Kim¹⁾

Mokpo Catholic University

Mary McMullen

Indiana University

Abstract

South Korean ECEC has been transformed by dynamic socio-economic and political changes. In these changes, the Korean culture as it is embedded in ECEC is continuously being retranslated and reshaped in the new, and ever-changing context by means of globalization and from those who travel abroad and bring back new ideas. Previous research is limited in that it fails to connect broader Korean cultural and societal changes to changes in ECEC over time. In this paper we illustrate the history of South Korean from its independence from the Empire of Japan in 1945 to today and identify connections between socio-political and economic benchmarks and changes in South Korean ECEC. In doing this, we consider the nature of the centralized South Korean educational system, the human capital approach, care versus education, and cultural hybridity.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education and Care, Cultural Hybridity, Globalization, Culture, History, South Korea

Corresponding author, ¹⁾ kim877@indiana.edu

Introduction

Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa (2009) claimed that preschool sites are in which different social domains, actors, and interests intersect each other, in their book¹, *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited*. The authors clarified the connections between the changes in the early education culture and systems of Japan, China, and the U.S. and their macro contexts. In their ethnographic study, they concluded that, over the prior twenty years, preschools in China had changed a lot, preschools in Japan not very much, and preschools in the US were somewhere in between.

One of the salient points in the Chinese preschools was the change of China's perceptions of the Western value of 'individualism.' According to an original investigation in 1985 (Tobin, David, & Davidson, 1989), individualism conveyed a negative meaning within the Chinese context. In the original research, the Chinese interviewer said that individualism might spoil collectivism, which is a tenet of the traditional ideologies of socialism and Confucianism that many Chinese people believe young children should keep in mind in order to properly be Chinese. However, the authors argued that this trend had changed since the early 1990s. For example, the new research (Tobin et al., 2009) found that Chinese preschool teachers and directors appreciate the pedagogy of individualism, such as child-centered and children's choice-based education, as important values that Chinese children should experience in the era of globalization.

Although the Japanese preschools showed less transformation in terms of teacher belief change between the first publication of *Preschool in Three Cultures* and its revision 20 years later, recently Japan has faced new challenges. The preschool market in Japan is becoming more competitive than before due to dramatic decreases in birth rate. Similarly, even though the pedagogic beliefs among American educators have not changed much in the twenty years between the two publications, the main discussion on Early Childhood Education in the US

¹ This book is a sequel to a previous book, *Preschools in Three Cultures*, which was published in 1989. In the original book, the authors concluded that preschools in Japan, China, and the US are institutions that promoted the central norms of their cultures. The authors of the new book expanded the topics to what has changed and what has stayed the same over the last twenty years within the three nations using the main study question: Have Chinese, Japanese, and American early childhood education ideas and practices grown more alike since our original study in the mid-1980s?

has moved from the necessity of institutions for young children, to a focus on inquiry about 'quality' and how to define it. Such arguments focus primarily on curriculum stressing academic outcomes versus those that are considered more responsive to children's needs and interests.

Looking back over the 20 years between their two studies, Tobin et al. (2009) concluded that although Chinese, Japanese, and American approaches to early childhood education had become more alike over time in some respects, but in other ways, they had become more dissimilar. Their argument implied that globalization is not a system in which the most powerful cultures dominate others. Rather, each of them is culturally hybridized and thus, produce contextualized or evolved forms (Burke, 2009).

In recognition of this reality, in July 2019, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) added nine Seowon, the Korean neo-Confucian academies of the Joseon Dynasty (15th-19th centuries), to the World Heritage List (UNESCO, 2019). One of the important reasons that UNESCO decided to include them on the list was that the Korean neo-Confucian academies indicate a culturally hybridized process in which Confucianism from China had adapted to Korean backgrounds. It is significant to note that there are historically Chinese values that have influenced traditional Korean education, and that curricular changes evolved in the way of indigenous conditions. Historically, the northeast Asian cultural belt has been thought of as constituting of Korean, Japanese, and Chinese cultures. These three nations influence each other and share an interest in bringing foreign ideas into them. Yet, each nation is passionate to create their own educational systems that respect their native contexts.

Therefore, it can be inferred that South Korean ECEC has been transformed by dynamic socio-economic and political changes. Along with these changes, the Korean ECEC culture is continuously being retranslated and reshaped in the new, and ever-changing context by means of globalization and from those who travel and study abroad and bring back new ideas. In this paper, we illustrate the history of South Korean ECEC from Korea's independence from the Empire of Japan to today and identify connections between socio-political and economic benchmarks and changes in South Korean ECEC over time.

The word 'history' originates from two Greek words, namely, 'historia,' which means 'narrative,' and 'histōr,' which means 'wise man.' 'History' is also translated into the Korean

word 역사, which has its origin in two Chinese characters, 歷史, namely, 'records about the past.' Therefore, the meaning of 'history' can be interpreted as a knowledge about the past that has been passed down through narratives, with human beings, who are the only ones on earth who can create narratives (MacIntyre, 2007). People put their experiences into narratives, and these then become a form of knowledge. Dewey (1938/1997) posited that human experience is not self-explanatory, but that peoples' problems have meaning that can be uncovered by reflecting on their exterior impetus. Therefore, we see 'history' as a crucial mediator through which knowledge of the past connects to that of the present.

When considering the meaning of history, as discussed above, to know the history of South Korean ECEC implies that one clarifies the experiences of the actors who participated in forming previous contexts. Considering South Korean ECEC history can help the field understand context holistically and how change is impacted by socio-political forces and globalization.

Informative discussion has been undertaken on the history of South Korean ECEC. Rhee and Kim (2019) and Song and Park (2019) examined the history of South Korean early education and care systems in light of their separation and more recently, integration. Chung and Kim (2016) reviewed the case of a prestigious kindergarten in Korea during the early 1900s to reconstruct the origin and history of South Korean early education. Kim (2016) investigated the historical changes in the meaning of children's rights, which first appeared in Korean newspapers from the 1920s to the 1930s. These studies and others like them provide readers with lenses through which they can explore how specific issues or concepts have changed in the history of South Korean ECEC context. However, existing studies have limitations in that they fail to connect to broaden Korean cultural and societal changes occurring concomitant to those in ECEC over time.

In the following sections, we briefly review South Korean ECEC history according to historical benchmarks. Also, based on the history of Korean ECEC, we discuss the characteristics of Korean ECEC. Specifically, we organize the characteristics according to the themes, centralized system, human capital, 'care' and 'education' in Korean ECEC, and cultural hybridity. To help readers to understand the Korean context we quote the voice of

one Korean ECEC educator² who experienced changes in Korean kindergarten practices. These excerpts come from principal author's dissertation in which he explored the biographical narratives of Mrs. Kim, a leading South Korean early childhood educator. We include her comments to provide context to how one ECEC practitioner who spent her life in the field as an educator and leader experienced these changes. Listening to the narratives of educators in classrooms and in leadership positions over time can serve as informative references through which educational policymakers and researchers can understand the South Korean early childhood education practices and, as a result, it helps them suggest knowledge for better educational conditions for teachers and children.

The Historical Benchmarks of South Korea and Korean ECEC

After Independence from The Empire of Japan, 1945 to Late 1980s

Right after the Japanese government's surrender to the Allies, the Pacific War ended, and Korea achieved independence from the Empire of Japan in August of 1945. However, Japan's defeat resulted in the division of Korea at the 38th parallel: The Soviet Union occupied the northern part of Korea, and the United States occupied the south. Although, during the U.S. military government period of the south, the US-Soviet Joint Commission discussed establishing a unified government of Korea, this discussion failed. In 1948, the south

² Mrs. Kim is a retired private kindergarten director who ran her kindergarten for about 60 years in South Korea. She graduated from the temporal teacher education program during the Korean War and taught children in an elementary school for a while. In the late 1970s, she entered the early childhood education field, and, since then, she has contributed to it as a passionate early education curriculum leader who is eager not only to learn new things but also to share her experiences with young educators. The first author met Mrs. Kim when he was five years old during the regular meetings she and her peers had at his mother's kindergarten. His mother met Mrs. Kim at a Korean private kindergarten association meeting in 1987. His mother, who was fascinated by Piagetian theories, Reggio Emilia, and Project approaches, was inspired by Mrs. Kim's academic group and they often traveled to Italy for field experiences in preschool classrooms in Reggio Emilia city. Mrs. Kim has asked him to learn about the educational theories and philosophies of the West. At the same time, she reminds him that he must not lose my identity as a Korean. She frequently emphasizes that we should create new things based on the combinations of our traditional values and the foreign ideologies of developed countries that have achieved success earlier than us.

established the Republic of Korea, and the north established the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

The failure to establish a unified Korean government facilitated tensions between the two Koreas. Finally, in 1950, the Korean War broke out which lasted for three years and resulted in the injury or death of approximately 2.5 million civilians. After the Korean War Armistice Agreement in 1953, and despite financial aid from allies such as the U.S., South Korea suffered from economic difficulties due to the loss of industrial bases, built during the Japanese colonial period, which were devastated in the war. Furthermore, the first president of South Korea, Lee Seungman, who was a famous independence fighter against the Japanese colonial government, turned into a dictator and continued his monocracy for 12 years.

The April Revolution in 1960 finalized Lee's dictatorship, and the people in South Korea constituted a democratic cabinet. However, in May 1961, Park Chunghee and his allies carried out a military coup which signaled the start of the second dictatorship in South Korea's history which lasted until Park was assassinated in October 1979. Park was a controversial figure in that although he was a dictator who hindered the democratic spirit of South Korea, some historians have considered him the father of the country because he is credited with creating the foundation for national economic development. After Park's death, South Korean society was still controlled by yet another dictatorship, that of Jeon Doohwan, who gained political power by a military coup in 1980. However, many historians and economists consider the two military dictatorship periods as the time in which society overcame the scars of the Korean War and achieved the Miracle on the Han River³.

The first education law of South Korea

After independence in 1945, the United States Military Government in Korea invited the American Education Mission to the country, and, with their contributions, the government produced the first *Curriculum Handbook for the School of Korea* (Yang, 2008). Later, the handbook was referenced for providing the philosophical and theoretical backgrounds for the development of the first kindergarten curriculum of South Korea in 1969.

³ The Han River is one of the major rivers in South Korea, and it crosses the middle of Seoul. South Koreans have named their rapid economic growth period in the late 20th century the Miracle on the Han River, which was coined after the Miracle on the Rhine in West Germany after the Second World War.

One year later, after the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, the state first legislated **교육법** [the education law]. Through the three articles of the education law, the government specified the purpose of early education, the scope of educational content for young children, and the kindergarten entrance age. In the middle of the Korean War, in 1952, by proclaiming the enforcement ordinance of the education law, the state specifically announced guidelines for the establishment and closing of kindergartens, the legal number of children per classroom, school subjects, class days, and so on (Park, 1996). In the same year, the government first pronounced **후생시설요강** [the main points about welfare facilities], suggesting standards for the establishment of child-care centers for children from disadvantaged families and orphans (Lee, 2009).

After the Korean War, under **경제개발 5개년계획** [the five-year national master plan for economic development], which was proclaimed to promote South Korea's industrialization and economic activation, the government tried to increase the number of child-care centers to secure the female labor force, legislating **아동복지법** [the child welfare law] in 1961 (Lee, 2009).

The first national kindergarten curriculum

Although the government referred to the importance of early education in the Education Law in 1948, South Korean society still did not consider early education as an independent school system as they did elementary and secondary schools. In an effort to recognize and proclaim the distinctive significance of early education, the South Korean government developed and announced the first national kindergarten curriculum in 1969 (Lee, 1992). Focusing on a life-centered curriculum, the first national kindergarten curriculum was composed of health, society, nature, language, and art learning domains. The first curriculum was developed from the *Curriculum Handbook for the School of Korea*, which was a guideline from the United States Military Government in Korea (Yang, 2008). Naturally, because of the involvement of the Americans, the first curriculum reflected the child education movement and the progressive education movement of the U.S. between the 1920s and 1950s. Instead of suggesting specific instructional methods and content, the Ministry of Education recommended guidelines to run the curriculum, respecting the reconstruction and empowerment of the local education departments (Park, 1996).

Meanwhile, the South Korean government stopped using elementary school entrance exams in 1965. This was done in order to prevent parents from misusing kindergarten education as a preparatory course to enter prestigious elementary schools. Also, by establishing the first public kindergarten in 1976, the Ministry of Education proclaimed that early education was not a special form of education for privileged families but a social program over which the government has a responsibility. For the first time, the state proclaimed that it was the government's responsibility to serve all children regardless of their familial backgrounds. Additionally, in 1970, the South Korean government merged the four different kinds of child-care centers, which were controlled by four different departments, into 새마을유아원 [the New Village Nursery School], under the auspices of the Ministry of Welfare and Health.

The Economic and Political Stability of South Korea, The Late 1980s to Present

Thanks to what has known as the June Struggle in 1987, President Jeon announced his resignation, and South Korean civilians elected a new president through a direct democratic election. Since the elections in 1987, South Korea's democratic system has been stable. Just one year later, South Korea held the Seoul Summer Olympics in 1988, representing South Korea's arrival at what some refer to as its economic and political puberty. South Korea's economic and political stability also meant that society was ready to take part in global rules. For example, by joining the United Nations in 1991 and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 1996, South Korean society recognized and complied with global standards for children's rights and the quality of education systems.

A new era was heralded by the South Korean Financial Crisis of 1997, a crucial turning point after which neo-liberal values came to prevail in social domains. Although the International Monetary Fund (IMF) provided help to the South Korean government in late 1997 and the people overcame national bankruptcy in early 2001 by paying off all the debt from the IMF, the crisis hurt national pride and left many scars. In particular, the crisis resulted in rising unemployment and income inequality. Since the early 2000s, the people have suffered from the neoliberalism principles of many social areas, and there has been an upsurge in the suicide rate. South Korean society faces challenging social problems such as

economic inequality, human rights issues associated with the handling of immigrants and their families, a low birth rate, and a high suicide rate. Recently, the government has provided financial aid and welfare policies to help marginalized people.

Early education as instruments to develop human capital

Announcing 경제사회발전계획 [the economy and social development plan] in 1977 and 1982, the government made its first statement affirming early education and care as one of important means to develop good-quality human capital (Park, 2001). In the same year, by legislating 유아교육진흥법 [the early education promotion law], which was the first independent law only for early education, the government emphasized the significance of early education if South Korea was to flourish economically (Soma, 2003).

It was under this circumstance that early education was associated with good-quality human capital. In the second revised curriculum, which was introduced in 1979, the cognitive development theory of Jean Piaget was first referenced (Park, 1996). The learning domains of the second curriculum were composed of social-emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and body and health development, which were reported from studies in Western society as key factors for children to achieve later academic success. Also, each learning domain specified learning content corresponding to different developmental stages (Park, 1996).

The government facilitated the growth in the number of kindergartens and child-care centers with national initiatives aimed at developing good-quality human capital (Park, 2001). For example, by allowing the investment of the private market in the child-care and education service in 1978, the government tried to change social perceptions of child-care centers, which up to this point, had largely been considered as merely welfare services for children from marginalized familial backgrounds (Soma, 2003).

The revisions of curriculums on a regular basis

There are still conflicting views on the purpose of early education and care. For instance, in a study exploring the historical changes of child-care systems in South Korea, Soma (2003) reported that in the 1980s, the government was against what they considered the distortion of early education as a prerequisite for learning academic subjects. Rather the government supported the definition of high-quality care as truly child centered, rather than teacher

controlled. To announce their definition of high-quality early education and care, in the third revised curriculum in 1981, which was constituted of body, emotion, language, cognition, and social development learning domains, the Ministry of Education first introduced the term ‘holistic development’ (Park, 2014). The curriculum highlighted learner's as unique individuals and the school's responsibility to provide individualized learning environments for young children.

These learning domains were continued into the fourth revised curriculum in 1987 without salient changes. Like previous curriculums, the fourth curriculum did not stress academic subjects for elementary school readiness, but it did highlight the development of children's creativity and basic life-habit education. The latter focused on educating children about complying with social laws and respecting traditional Korean courtesies (Park, 2014).

After the fourth revision of the curriculum, the government announced the necessity that the curriculum be modified on a regular basis due to rapid social change and the advent of up-to-date early education theories. As a result, in 1992, the government proclaimed for the fifth revised national kindergarten curriculum that the Ministry of Education must entrust a private academic agency, the Korean Society for Early Childhood Education, with the revision (Park, 1996). The learning domains included in the fifth revised curriculum in 1992 were health, society, expression, language, and inquiry.

In subsequent re-examined curriculums, there were no conspicuous changes of educational content. However, the government included attention to social values in new curriculums. For example, although the sixth revised curriculum in 1998 also followed the fifth's revised learning-domain components, following the guidelines of the Education Reform Commission in 1995, this revision articulated the purpose of specifically, educating children on moral virtues for a global and information-based society (Oh & Kim, 2007). The learning domains of the seventh revised curriculum were the same as that of the fifth and sixth curricula. However, the seventh curriculum in 2007 emphasized the virtues of citizens in a global and information-based society, and articulated its purposes, such as understanding and being proud of traditional Korean culture, were newly included (Moon, 2008).

The first national curriculum for child-care centers

Contrary to the revisions of the national kindergarten curricula and its legal announcements

about running the curricula in practice, there have been no national curricula for child-care centers in South Korea. The fact that child-care centers had not been operated without following the national curriculum, such as the national kindergarten curriculum, enhanced social perceptions that child-care centers were of lower quality than that of kindergartens. In addition, research that concluded that child-care centers were less effective than kindergartens as it related to children's later outcomes, such as social skills and language development (Kang, Lee, Choo, & Namgung, 2004; Lee & Kim, 1999), prompted increasing social demands that the government should develop a national curriculum for child-care centers.

In 2002, in an effort to improve the quality of child-care centers to match the higher quality more typically found in kindergarten, the Ministry of Health and Welfare established a national standard curriculum for child-care centers. However, the national child-care center curriculum came to be mandated through the revision of the infant and young children protection law in 2007. The development of this national curriculum was influenced by national kindergarten curricula in terms of theories, philosophies, and the construction of learning domains. As a result, the child-care center curriculum consisted of basic life habits, body exercises, social relationships, communication skills, nature investigation, and art activities. Additionally, the curriculum included the learning principles of the development stages for toddlers and infants (Jung, 2010).

The Nuri Curriculum and 2019 revised Nuri Curriculum

In an effort to reduce the inefficiency of managing two different national curricula by two different ECEC institutions, in 2012, the Korean government established a single standardized national curriculum for 5-year-old children, the Nuri Curriculum. In 2013, as the Nuri Curriculum expanded to include children ages 3-4, the kindergartens and the child-care centers in South Korea were mandated to adopt the single national curriculum for three to five-years-olds.

The combined curriculum has two aspects: the Nuri Curriculum as a policy and Nuri Curriculum as a framework. One of the main purposes of the Nuri Curriculum as policy is to increase educational equities across the income groups of families in South Korea. It aims to

provide a high-quality curriculum for all Korean children, regardless of parents' social and economic status, so that they would be prepared for school. In addition to this official statement, the Korean government has been increasing tuition subsidies. For example, the Nuri Curriculum supplied KRW 200,000 (about US\$200) per month in 2012 to parents as a tuition voucher and this will be increased to KRW 300,000 (about US\$300) per month by 2016 (Lee, Tseng, & Jun, 2015).

At the same time, the Nuri Curriculum is a formal framework in which the kindergarten and child-care center teachers can gain information for planning curriculum and environments for young children. The curriculum is organized into three main parts. The first describes five learning domains, the second outlines teaching methods, and the final part focuses on empowering children.

The learning domains of the Nuri Curriculum are constituted into five areas: physical activity and health, communication, social relationships, art experience, and nature inquiry. Teachers should plan lessons and activities, ideally in an integrated manner, so that each of the five areas is addressed evenly during the three to five hours per day that children attend their ECEC program. Also, these areas should be run according to the daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly plans of each ECEC center schedule. Both indoor and outdoor environments for the five areas should be arranged corresponding to the interests and the degree of development of young children, which teachers are encouraged to plan and manage in an interrelated manner.

Finally, the Nuri Curriculum handbook emphasizes young children's empowerment in the teaching-learning activities. Specifically, individualized methods should be considered in teaching-learning activities. In accordance with this guideline, teachers should schedule and manage the teaching-learning activities according to the interests, abilities, and the levels of development of each child in the group. Also, the handbook suggests using children's experiences as lesson materials and reflecting their different cultures.

In 2019, the revised Nuri Curriculum proclaimed. The learning domains of the previous curriculum were continued into the 2019 revised curriculum. However, the new curriculum focuses more on the autonomy of teachers in running and planning curriculum schedules than that of the previous curriculum. Additionally, the revised curriculum partly includes the emergent curriculum philosophy and highlights the educational importance of play-based

learning in classrooms. In this sense, the curriculum specifies that teachers should guarantee children enough playtime to increase their efficient learning opportunities (The Ministry of Education & The Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2019).

Early education and care integration debates⁴

Currently, South Korean early childhood education and care is a dual system in which the Ministry of Health and Welfare supervises child-care centers and the Ministry of Education controls kindergartens. There are no salient differences in the cost of tuition between private kindergartens and private childcare centers. However, private childcare centers and kindergartens are more expensive than public schools⁵. For example, in Seoul, parents who send their children to private kindergartens pay 22 times more than parents who send their children to public kindergartens (Mah, 2015). Although the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health and Welfare have controlled the upper limit of monthly tuition of private kindergartens and childcare centers (National Law Information Center, 2018), tuition between the schools has deviated since the government does not supervise the expenses of extracurricular activities, such as ballet lessons, music classes, and English language lessons.

In 2016, although the government has continued to increase the portion of public childcare centers and kindergarten, 49% of kindergartens were reported to be private institutions and nearly all (93%) of childcare centers were privately owned and operated (Social Security Committee, 2017). Due to the lower number of public schools compared to private ones, every year, a small number of parents who win a raffle for entering public kindergartens can

⁴ The current South Korean early childhood education system is a dual system, with the Ministry of Health and Welfare supervising child-care centers and the Ministry of Education controlling kindergartens. Unlike in the U.S. context, kindergartens and child-care centers are not different institutions. They both serve children aged three-to-five-years-old. However, zero to two-year-old children can be enrolled in child-care centers but not in kindergartens. Moreover, the government does not provide teachers in child-care centers who look after the zero to two-year-old toddler and young children with a national curriculum.

⁵ The meaning of 'good quality' of early childhood education is not value-neutral (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013). Instead, it can be different according to the interpretations of diverse stakeholders. For this paper, we found gaps between Mrs. Kim's educational beliefs and the state's understanding of good quality. Although many parents have their own pedagogical beliefs and are willing to pay expensive tuitions fees for private early childhood education and care institutions, academics in South Korean have been concerned with the commercialization of early childhood education and care, and how the state is enforcing their control on the private sector, since paying more money does not necessarily imply better quality.

send their children to public schools. To be specific, in Seoul, the number of public childcare centers averages 3.09 per 1,000 children. Furthermore, only 11% of parents who want to send their children to public kindergartens win the raffle (Mah, 2015; Lee, Jung, & Choi, 2015).

The economic recession from the late 1990s and increasing discussion of women's right to not have to interrupt their careers due to rearing children at home, has resulted in challenges to the present dual system of ECEC in South Korea. In accordance with such social demands, in 2001, the government began consultative groups to merge the dual structure into a single system that the Ministry of Education will supervise, forming 유아학교 [Young Children School], which will integrate kindergarten and child-care (Park, 2001). Additionally, the government under this plan will provide financial aid to support parents' tuition expenses. This discussion, however, remains controversial due to conflict between administrative departments and financial problems.

Discussion

In this paper we reviewed the historical contexts of South Korean and how South Korean ECEC has been transformed within it. Lastly, in this section, we discuss what the traits of South Korean ECEC are and how economic and political benchmarks have been associated with the changes of South Korean ECEC over time.

A Centralized System

It is important to consider how, historically, South Korean ECEC has been mainly controlled by the government. This centralized system has often relied on private sectors. For instance, although governmental power has dominated the system for several decades, it has also encouraged the private sector to invest in opening kindergartens and child-care centers. In addition, the state's dependence on the private sector has decreased recently, a pattern that might be attributed to economic factors in South Korea. Overall, since the economic development of South Korea in the late 1970s, the government has increased public funding to the ECEC system, which is demonstrated in its establishment of more public kindergartens.

Furthermore, more recently, the state has been increasing the amount of federal aid in the ECEC system in an effort to raise South Korea's birth rate, which is currently one of the lowest in the world.

In the words of Mrs. Kim

This system could be understood as a totalitarian and static structure. For example, when asked about this issue, Mrs. Kim, a private kindergarten owner in South Korea, critiqued the highly centralized system of Korean ECEC. I have become concerned that the more that the government increases the investment in early childhood education, the more the government may enforce its power to control the quality of private kindergartens. The most challenging thing that I had to accept was the government's legislation in which the Nuri curriculum, an integrated national curriculum between kindergartens and child-care centers, became mandatory for all kindergartens in South Korea. (Principal Author, 2019)

However, it is also true that in this government-controlled tradition, democratic processes discuss educational policies. For instance, after the independence and the Korean War, the South Korean government first established the national curriculum for young children, and since the fourth revision, the state has revised it on a regular basis. This tradition might be interpreted as democratic forums held by the state in which policymakers, professors, teachers, and parents are invited to discuss the definition of high-quality curricula. Basically, this requirement prevented the state or any national force from denoting any single individual to hold authoritarian power over such decisions alone. Instead, it indicates public meeting places where members from different domains dispute and negotiate with each other through their own perspectives about changes in the ECEC curriculum.

The Human Capital Approach

In the words of Mrs. Kim

My experiences in national challenges always remind me of patriotism education and producing talents like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates who contribute to the increase of national wealth. In line with my beliefs, at one time, Venus Kindergarten had the reputation of being the top private kindergarten that produced many gifted children. (Principal Author, 2019)

The significance of the South Korean ECEC has often been associated with the rationale of developing human capital. Specifically, as shown in government policy documents, educational laws, and national curriculums for young children, the South Korean government more recently has emphasized the importance of ECEC with reasons for developing talents, helping parents keep their economic activities, and increasing the low birth rate for the future economic development of South Korea. For example, the government's discussion for establishing 유아학교 [Young Children School] to integrate kindergarten and child-care aims to utilize the integrated public early-education and care system as an effective instrument to ensure human capital.

For example, in establishing the first integrated national curriculum between kindergartens and child-care centers, the Nuri Curriculum, which was announced by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health and Welfare in 2012, the state referenced the Perry Preschool Project in the U.S., stressing financial benefits from governmental investments in early education and care (The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology & The Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2013). Furthermore, in Korean early-education and care research field, there have been studies that cite foreign investigations that reported correlations between governmental investments to public early-education care systems and national benefits. To be specific, Shin, Jung, Park, Kwon, and Jeon (2005) argued that government's intervention in early education and care got more monetary returns than those in elementary and secondary school systems. This led Shin et al. (2005) to claim that the South Korean government should invest more money in early-education and care systems.

‘Care’ and ‘Education’ in Korean ECEC

In the words of Mrs. Kim

It seems that childcare centers and kindergartens are becoming homogeneous. Accordingly, of all these government mandates, parents do not have to explore which philosophies might be better than others. When they consider the best schools, they seem not to be interested in the educational originalities of different schools, but the number of hours in the day that schools can take care of their children. (Principal Author, 2019)

The different and separate roles that the ‘care’ and ‘education’ systems in South Korea

play are notable. Many people perceived child-care centers as places for children from low-income families in rural areas to be cared for during the day. Contrary to this, kindergartens were regarded as special education for children from privileged families, before the South Korean government established the first public kindergarten in the 1970s. However, these separate roles of child-care centers and kindergartens have changed since the South Korean government started to integrate the care and education systems for young children. This perceptual transformation also correlates with South Korea's economic development between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s. Although the integration debate is still ongoing for financial and political reasons, thanks to drastically increased national wealth, the state has tried to integrate the meanings and functions of child-care and kindergarten systems, providing equal access to the high quality of ECEC for young children regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

Cultural Hybridity⁶

In the words of Mrs. Kim

I believe in recontextualizing foreign ideas; however, my priority is to keep our traditional values. For instance, although I have espoused Western approaches and thoughts about children, one of the mottos of my school is based on the Three Bonds and the Five Relationships of Confucianism. (Principal Author, 2019)

The history of South Korean ECEC has been one in which educational reforms are evolving systems influenced by diverse economic and political events. The result is continual change that supports various interests and involves numerous stakeholders. In these processes, South Korean ECEC cannot be seen as static, but rather organic and in continual flux. Moreover, South Korean ECEC, as an organic entity, has presented culturally hybridized characteristics. For instance, the Nuri Curriculum, which is the latest version of the South

⁶ As Tobin et al. (2009) explained, globalization indicates interactions in which diverse cultures present their own colors, influence with each other, and create hybridized cultural outcomes. According to this perception, globalization does not mean cultural homogenization that superior cultures dominate indigenous cultures but is a sort of frontier where different cultures intermingle and localize with each other. As a result, it is hard to deny that everything that we see, hear, and experience is a sort of mix or a process of cultural hybridization (Burke, 2009).

Korean National Early Childhood and Care curriculum, reveals a hybridization of Korean educational thought with Western views on child development. Through regular revisions, the national curriculum has incorporated state-of-the-art pedagogic thought from the West, such as child-centered philosophy, development stages, neuroscience, while maintaining traditional values and character-based pedagogies.

In the meantime, as in the example of Chinese preschool culture (Tobin et al., 2009), Korean society's introduction to the Western idea of the child did not replace a firm belief in Confucius' point of view on the child. Rather, these two ideas have continuously coexisted in the historical context of Korea. In fact, the Nuri Curriculum emphasizes the need to keep the Korean identity and to include the Korean traditional culture as an essential part of the lesson content, such as traditional stories, Confucian moral values, and so on.

Final Words

Geographically, the Korean peninsula is located in the middle of China and Japan, and historically, Koreans have experienced dynamic socio-economic changes over time. Therefore, due to these geographical and historical influences, Korean institutions and society in general reveal a hybridization of influence that weds traditional Korean culture to that of other cultures that have influenced it from throughout the world. This is notably true in Korean ECEC. In this paper, we provided a brief overview of the history of South Korean ECEC alongside other key historical events. Also, we examined how these historical benchmarks have influenced transformations in ECEC. Finally, we discussed the characteristics of South Korean ECEC through main themes including the centralized system, the human capital approach, care and education in the ECEC, and cultural hybridity.

References

- Chung, S., & Kim, B. (2016). A critical inquiry of the origin and characteristics of Korean modern kindergarten. *Childhood Education Review*, 6(2), 59-82.
- Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (2013) (1999?). *Beyond quality in early childhood*

- education and care: post modern perspectives*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jung, H. (2010). A Study on the present and reform task for national childcare curriculum. *Korea Journal of Child Care and Education*, 19–37. [vol no.(issue no.)]
- Kang, S., Lee, Y., Cho, O., & Namgung, J. (2004). A comparative study on educational effects between kindergartens and childcare centers. *The Korean Journal Child Education*, 24, 119-140.
- Kim, N. (2016). A study about the meaning of children's rights in modern times: Focusing on Dong-A Ilbo from 1920s to 1930s. *Childhood Education Review*, 6(2), 5-26.
- Kim, S. (2019). *Cultural hybridity of South Korean ECEC: Exploring the biographical narrative of Mrs. Kim* (unpublished dissertation). Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.
- Lee, D. (2009). A meaning of early childhood education and care & nurture that appear in change process of a laws and ordinances related to the young children education. *The Journal of Law of Education*, 21(2), 195-216.
- Lee, E., Jung, J., & Choi, M. (2015, January 20). 'Mother's raffles', public childcare centers...Only three childcare centers per 1,000 children in Seoul. *Korea Jungang Daily*. Retrieved from <https://news.join.com/article/16972466>
- Lee, I., Tseng, C., & Jun, H. (2015). Reforming Early Childhood Education as a smart investment for the future: stories from East Asia. In T. Lightfoot-Rueda, & R. L. Peach (Ed), *Global perspectives on human capital in Early Childhood Education: reconceptualizing theory, policy, and practice* (pp. 119-141). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lee, K. (1992). *Early childhood education curriculum*. South Korea, Seoul: Gyomunsa.
- Lee, Y., & Kim, Y. (1999). A study on teacher and peer relationships and child development in kindergartens and in childcare centers. *Journal of the Korean Home Economics Associations*, 37(8), 103-116.
- MacIntyre, A. (2007). *After virtue* (3rd ed.). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Mah, J. (2015, November 17). A lottery day for public kindergartens is coming...Sad mothers. *The Korea Economic Daily*. Retrieved from <http://news.hankyung.com/article/2015111742381>
- Moon, M. (2008). The significance and future challenges of the 2007 kindergarten curriculum notified by the Ministry of Education. *Korean Journal of Early Childhood*

- Education*, 28, 195-224.
- National Law Information Center (2018). *Enforcement of Decree of Local Government Act*. Retrieved November 1, 2018, from National Law Information Center: <http://www.law.go.kr/법령/지방재정법시행령>
- Oh, M., & Kim, H. (2007). Unpacking the 6th National Kindergarten Curriculum through the progettazione of the Reggio Emilia education. *The Journal of Korea Open Association for Early Childhood Education*, 12(2), 93-117.
- Park, J. (1996). A study on the change process kindergarten curriculum in Korea. *Korean Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 6, 1-25.
- Park, Y. (2001). Analysis of history change factors in Korean infant school education. *The Journal of Korea Open Association for Early Childhood Education*, 6(3), 181-202.
- Park, Y. (2014, December 1). *Kindergarten curriculum revisions*. Retrieved from <http://www.archives.go.kr/next/search/listSubjectDescription.do?id=003245>
- Rhee, W. & Kim, M. (2019). Ongoing process of integration of kindergarten and childcare of Korea. *Asia- Pacific Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 13(2), 1-20.
- Shin, C. (2013). *The educational system of Confucianism*. South Korea, Seoul: Korea University Press.
- Shin, E., Jung, M., Park, E., Kwon, J., & Jeon, H. (2008). Review of research on the effects of early childhood education in the U.S. and the U. K. : Implication for Korean early childhood education. *The Korean Society for Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 12(5), 451-471.
- Social Security Committee (2017). *Social security statistics*. Seoul, South Korea: Ministry of Health and Welfare & Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs book? 자료집?
- Soma, N. (2003). The emergence of childcare as a public matter in Korea. *The Women's Studies* 64, 233-264.
- Song, C. & Park, J. (2019). History of early childhood education and care in Korea in terms of separation and integration. *History of Education*, 29(1), 31-52.
- The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology & The Ministry of Health and Welfare (2013). *A compendium of Nuri Curriculum for 3-5-year young children*, Seoul, South Korea: The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology and the Ministry of Health and Welfare.

- The Ministry of Education & The Ministry of Health and Welfare (2019). *A compendium of 2019 revised Nuri Curriculum for 3-5-year young children*, Sejong, South Korea: The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health and Welfare.
- Tobin, J., Hsueh, Y., & Karasawa, M. (2009). *Preschool in three cultures revisited: China, Japan, and the United States*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tobin, J., David, W., & Davidson, D. (1989). *Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China and the United States*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Yang, O. (2008). *Early childhood curriculum*. Seoul, South Korea: Hakjisa.

Special Thanks to Prof. Tobin

From the first author: In the early spring of 2016, the American Educational Research Association annual meeting was held in Washington, D.C. At the conference I attended an early childhood education session in which one of my Korean peers, who studies at the University of Georgia, gave a presentation. After her presentation, I found a short queue toward the back of the conference room where students were introducing themselves to a middle-aged male professor, shaking hands with him. I realized that he was Prof. Joseph Tobin, a globally famous scholar in my field, as well as a renowned author of books that my classmates and I had read and discussed in the early childhood education seminars and educational anthropology classes. Fortunately, as other students did, I got a chance to introduce myself to Prof. Tobin briefly. I was as excited as if I was meeting a rock star. Without thinking, I abruptly said to him, "It would be a great honor for South Korean early childhood education folks if you could illustrate South Korean preschool cultures in your new book."

My conversation with Prof. Tobin lasted for just thirty seconds, and I am sure that he does not remember me from among the many Asian graduate students who introduced themselves that day. But for me, this chance had a major impact on my academic life. Since this time with him, I often imagine Prof. Tobin's reaction to the sudden request of the South Korean graduate student he was meeting for the first time. Did it cause him to wonder: Why should I explore South Korea's preschool cultures? How are their cultures different from those of the Japanese and Chinese? My motivation in writing this paper came from the above story, and this paper aimed to introduce the historical transformations of South Korean Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) to international scholars including Prof. Tobin. As a result, the first author would like to invite Prof. Tobin again to South Korea to study the diversely mixed forms of preschool cultures.