

Education Reform and Competency-Based Education

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The core purpose of this paper is to describe a new educational paradigm as well as possible directions and tasks for education reform in the 21st century. The present-day education system has failed to nurture the kind of creative people who can play leading roles in development or to produce citizens of a good character and democratic tendencies. We need to look at education from the standpoint of expanding the totality of possibilities for national development. The current educational system of Korea can be characterized as one of “manpower-centered education.” In this system, education functions to produce the human resources needed by the nation, and there is a strong belief in the classification and selection of high-quality human capital via the school system. We can think of an educational model that is parallel to the current system of manpower classification and selection and call it “competency-based education.” In this model, the identification of individual ability, talent, and aptitude is deemed to be the most important, and the key task of education is self-actualization through recognition and cultivation of such talents and abilities. What educational values should be pursued within a new competency-based paradigm? First, we can reduce the relative weight of subject-centered education and introduce a competency-based curriculum in order to teach key competences for life. Second, new intelligence theories must be introduced into education in order to foster the development of students’ talents, aptitudes, and potentials. Third, we can make use of positive psychology, which is a newly emerging field, the core concept of which is the belief that happiness in life depends on one’s ability to develop and maintain positive feelings and emotions.

Key words: education reform, manpower-centered education, competency-based education

Introduction

Education is not the consumption or squandering of resources, but a process of production and investment. For the past half-century, Korea has been reticent to expend major financial resources on education. As a result, potential for further growth and progress through education has come to an

impasse. The present-day education system has failed to nurture the kind of creative people who can play leading roles in development or to produce citizens of a good character and democratic tendencies. This is why Korea continues to falter as it approaches the threshold of joining the ranks of advanced countries.

We need to look at education from the standpoint of expanding the totality of possibilities for national development. At this historical juncture, at the beginning of the 21st century and a new millennium, education reform and innovation should include measures to readjust all aspects of current educational practices around a new perspective that “education is meant to identify and develop the potentials of citizens.”

At this desperate and critical time, in which Korea finds

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itself at an impasse as it stands at the threshold of becoming an advanced country, I would like to take this opportunity to reinterpret the distortions of Korean education and consider ways to overcome them. I will then describe a new educational paradigm as well as possible future directions and tasks for education reform in the 21st century.

Two Paradigms of Education

Education possesses, in its very nature, two latent functions. One is that of identifying and cultivating the potential abilities of individual learners (or educatees), while the other is that of producing the manpower needed for the maintenance and development of society as a whole. The former is the self-actualization function of education, while the latter is the function of manpower production (Moon, 1994).

Originally, the two functions were inseparable in education, and existed as one. The proper operation of education meant the development of the unique potentials of individuals and their utilization as human resources for the nation and society. In other words, education aimed to maximize individual abilities and secure the human capital needed by both society and the nation.

With the passage of time, however, these two inseparable functions of education began to diverge. Countries and political leaders with greater interests in the competitiveness of the nation and society tended to emphasize the function of manpower production more than that of self-actualization function in education. For example, in ancient times, Sparta displayed this tendency more than Athens, and during the Cold War era, the Soviet Union did so more than the United States.

The degree of harmony and balance between the two functions of education may be an indicator of the relevancy of a given system of education itself. The term “educational relevancy” describes the key aspect of an education system in which there is a balance between the functions of self-actualization and manpower production such that all students are encouraged to actualize their potentials to the fullest and utilize their abilities in accordance with their talents. The current educational system of Korea is far from having reached a state of educational relevancy. With excessive emphasis given to the function of manpower production, the development of the unique talents, aptitudes, and potential abilities of individual students has been neglected.

The current educational system of Korea can be

characterized as one of “manpower-centered education.” In this system, education functions to produce the human resources needed by the nation, and there is a strong belief in the classification and selection of high-quality human capital via the school system.

We can think of an educational model that is parallel to the current system of manpower classification and selection and call it “competency-based education.” In this model, the identification of individual ability, talent, and aptitude is deemed the most important, and the key task of education is self-actualization through recognition and cultivation of such talents and abilities (Moon, 1993).

Ultimately, the agenda ensuring the educational relevancy of an educational system depends on recovering a degree of harmony and balance between the two models of manpower-centered education and competency-based education. All the distortions of Korean education result from the illusion that manpower production is of paramount concern, and the resulting design and implementation of educational policy is based on this illusion.

The educational distortions we witness today cannot be remedied until such beliefs and the system that created them are changed. At present, the direction of education reform is clear. For a clear understanding of what this direction should be, I will now discuss the two models of the educational system in more detail.

Manpower-centered Education and Its Side Effects

In the manpower-centered model, education must meet the requirements of manpower supply and demand as defined by the nation and society, and for this reason, is regarded as part of a national project which is subject to adjustment around economic, political, and social factors. This model has the following characteristics:

1. Education aims to produce the manpower needed by the nation and in so doing, is made subordinate to the rationales of political, economic, and social development.
2. The quality of manpower needed by the nation is evaluated based on the attainment of knowledge and skills transmitted from the older generations, which are reflected in the school curriculum as the “subjects.”
3. The general form of the curriculum posited in this model is that of “subject-centered education.” Thirty to forty school hours per week are assigned to subjects, and teachers are trained, hired, and made to

primarily teach these subjects. 90% of students' learning activities at school involve studying these subjects.

4. The distribution of educational opportunities (scholarships, progression to higher levels of schooling, selection of majors, university admissions, etc.) is based on quantitative measures of academic performance.
5. Elementary and secondary education is oriented for high-performing students, such that middle-to-low performers do not get enough attention from teachers.
6. With excessive emphasis given to quantitative measures of academic performance, students who are talented in areas other than subject studies are alienated from school, teachers, and their fellow students.
7. Because teachers focus on high academic achievers in the classroom, other students and their parents are forced to engage in studies outside the school to foster their academic development. This results in the mushrooming of extracurricular tutoring and enrollments at private educational institutes.

Due to these characteristics, the Korean educational experience is marred by the many deviations and distortions that have become apparent today. High achievement-oriented education, a tendency that is seeded by the manpower-centered model, is representative of the warped state of Korean education.

Competency-based Education and Its Potentiality

In the 21st century, the quantity of manpower is not of such critical importance. What is more important is quality, and for this, it is crucial to cultivate the talents and abilities of all individuals and further develop their potentials.

In the competency-based model, education aims to identify and nurture the unique intellectual, emotional, and physical abilities of all youth, while helping them fulfill their potentials to lead a successful life. The main features of the model include the following:

1. Education is viewed as a set of activities designed to develop the potentials of individual students and help them fully reach them. In such a system, students, teachers and schools possess a great deal of autonomy, as well as the minimal option to intervene in order to meet the nation's demands with a supply of manpower.

2. Students have many opportunities to gain a diverse range of experiences and express themselves in order to develop their potentials. Subject-based study does take place, but mainly as a way to obtain basic knowledge. Potential-developing activities are not interrupted by subject studies.
3. School hours are distributed across experience, expression, and subject-based activities in a harmonious and balanced manner, and a great deal of importance is attached to activities that allow students to gain direct experience and encourage self-expression for the sake of the students' process of subjective self-discovery. We can call this "competency-based education."
4. Educational opportunities (scholarships, progression to higher levels of schooling, selection of majors, university admissions, etc.) are distributed based on students' talents, aptitudes, hopes, interests, and achievements (not just test scores), with quantitative measures of performance being considered merely one of the factors.
5. Schools do not evaluate students by a standardized criterion, that is, performance in subject studies, but utilize diverse criteria such as talent, aptitude, and ability.

The competency-based model of education tries to develop the talents and abilities that youth have in relative advantage, instead of trying to frame them uniformly into a standardized, subject-based evaluation. In the 21st century, it will be not only the academically distinguished but also those performing their abilities to the fullest who will prosper. Of course, students who perform well academically should be educated to the highest possible levels, but those who do not should also be also educated as to how to lead a self-fulfilling life.

For this to happen, competency-based education should be implemented as an independent educational paradigm. The manpower-centered education paradigm needs to be complemented by a new paradigm of competency-based education. It is at this point that it would be fruitful to discuss what kinds of values and reform agendas Korean education should pursue towards the foundation of a new educational paradigm.

The Direction of Education Reform

What educational values should be pursued within a new

competency-based paradigm? I think that educators should place value on making sure that a greater number of people receive a better education by developing their talents, aptitudes, and abilities, which will help them lead happy, meaningful lives. However, it is not easy to realize such educational values in the existing education system, because it is constantly hampered by the manpower-centered paradigm that is still dominant today.

The manpower-centered education paradigm inevitably pervades the subject-centered curriculum, restricting learning hours and activities for competency-based education. School hours are already filled by subject classes such as Korean language, foreign language, math, science, social studies, history, and geography, leaving little room for competency development activities. In other words, the subject-centered curriculum hampers the introduction of the competency-based curriculum required by the competency-based model. Therefore, to bring about true education reform, it is necessary to ensure balance by adding the strengths and features of the competency-based curriculum to the subject-centered curriculum in such a way that it maintains an overwhelming influence on current school education.

Korea is not alone in having to deal with this aspect of education reform, since many OECD countries have already experienced this as part of their reform agendas. For this reason, the OECD began the DeSeCo Project in 1997 to address this issue. The project was initiated on the assumption that current school education adheres to the traditional subject-centered curriculum and has failed to cultivate “key competencies” needed for the changing world. Yet, they are not easy to attain in a subject-centered curriculum.

What are these key competencies? The key competencies implied by the DeSeCo Project include interacting in socially heterogeneous groups, acting autonomously, and using tools interactively. Schools must change to teach not just subject-based knowledge but competency in order to impart the necessary strengths required for fulfilled lives that have a direct bearing on quality of life in general.

There are many reform efforts that attempted to realize this idea. The state of Victoria, Australia, tried to overhaul the curriculum by introducing eight key learning areas (KLA), while the Ministry of Education in New Zealand attempted a comprehensive revision of the curriculum. New Zealand is trying to build a new form of competency-based curriculum based on the key competencies of the DeSeCo Project and the Australian KLA system (So, 2006).

Therefore, the attempt to adopt a competency-based

curriculum for education reform is not strange, nor new; it seems only a natural course to take, reflecting as it does, worldwide trends in education reform. That being said, what would be the appropriate direction of education reform in Korea?

Compared to other countries, the framework of the subject-centered curriculum is very strong in Korea, with its side effects being far-reaching and profound. Because school learning is all about the study of subjects, the development of other potential abilities or competencies, talents, and aptitudes are neglected entirely. Students with high scores in subject studies receive favorable treatment and are the focus of attention in the classroom, forcing the lower-performers to the sidelines. Progression to a higher level of schooling, especially college, is determined by academic performance, so students are reluctant to choose majors and colleges that would perhaps more accurately reflect and suit their talents and aptitudes. All these side effects are due to the excessive emphasis on subjects in the curriculum. Hence, it is obvious that changes are necessary.

How can such changes be implemented? First, we can reduce the relative weight of subject-centered education and introduce a competency-based curriculum in order to teach key competencies for life. Similar to DeSeCo and the Australian KLA, Korean key competencies need to be identified and taught to students.

Second, new intelligence theories must be introduced into education in order to foster the development of students’ talents, aptitudes, and potentials. Some possible examples are found in the notions of Successful Intelligence, Emotional Intelligence, and Multiple Intelligence. These concepts provide new insights into human potentiality beyond those made available via existing IQ theory.

Third, we can make use of positive psychology, which is a newly emerging field, the core concept of which is the belief that happiness in life depends on one’s ability to develop and maintain positive feelings and emotions. The Korean education system only allows the teaching of prescribed subjects and overlooks the development of students’ ability to achieve happiness itself. Positive psychology provides many hints and implications for what should be included in the competencies students need to acquire (Moon, 2006).

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