

## **Learning To Label: An Investigation into Ways of Conceptualizing Curriculum Diversity in a Korean Unregulated School Choice Area**

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*This study seeks to explore whether unregulated school choice has the potential to diversify the high school curriculum, as elitist conservatives and neoliberals in Korean argue. Making use of qualitative research methods, this paper examines how national curriculum policies are implemented at two selected high schools (high-achievement 1, low-achievement 1) in a non-HSEP area. Elective curriculum and ability grouping, as two core policy measures of the current national curriculum, are intended to overcome the monopolized curriculum implementation that has plagued Korean education. However, the study finds that the term 'curriculum diversity' in the document of national curriculum, rather than indicating inclusiveness, actually means 'curricular variety' and 'differentiation of curriculum' through electives and between-classroom ability grouping. While the mandated elective curriculum appears on the surface to realize students' career aspirations, it actually turns out to emphasize particular subject matters thought to be fruitful for higher college entrance exam scores. In addition, a cream-skimming effect is observed as a result of between-classroom ability grouping that makes it difficult for teachers to implement prepared lesson plans, especially in classrooms with low-scoring students.*

### **1 Backgrounds and Purpose**

The educational discourses of choice and diversity are no longer seen as merely Western concepts; rather, they are viewed as parts of a ubiquitous global phenomenon. Choice proposals from neo-liberal think tanks in South Korea have demanded the dismantling of the HSEP (High School Equalization Policy), the essence of which is the assigning of individual middle school graduates to particular high schools by means of a lottery system. In this manner, high schools admit a student body which is diverse both demographically and in terms of academic ability. At the same time, each high school expects the government to continue its ongoing efforts to equalize educational quality in relation to such things as per capita funding, teachers' ability, and material resources.

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As a result, this lottery system has enabled schools to maintain diversity in terms of students' socio-economic backgrounds. However, after the *31 May Education Reform* in 1995, the discourse of market-based educational reform combined with conservative demands for elite high schools to introduce a market model fostering choice and competition. This ideological combination gained additional social support following the period of economic unrest known as the East Asian Financial Crisis, which accelerated neoliberal solutions for social and educational problems. At the heart of the *31 May Education Reform* was the idea of expanding consumer rights to include the choosing of schools and curriculum. Such pressure to abolish the HSEP in favor of relatively independent school-based management of admissions, governance, and school finance offers striking evidence that, in an increasing number of countries, neoliberal ideas have been connected to "a return of selective practices" (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000) which enable the grouping of students on the basis of achievement test scores.

In the face of this pressure, the following study makes an effort to establish whether non-HSEP as an unregulated school choice has the ability to diversify a high school curriculum that has been strongly criticized in South Korea for its conformity. Reacting to this criticism, the current national curriculum was proclaimed to have two distinctive features: *elective curriculum in high schools* and *differentiated curriculum*, both of which are intended to increase choice and diversity in schooling.

Curriculum and pedagogical activities in Korean classrooms have been gradually improving in numerous ways. However, there has been incessant criticism regarding the uniformity of schooling in Korea (Sung & Apple, 2003). There has been a tendency to think that a solution to this inveterate problem will be synonymous with the task of diversifying the school curriculum. While it's true that changing strongly unified patterns of schooling might result in the promotion of a degree of diversity in the school curriculum, this does not automatically provide us with information regarding how the school curriculum would *actually* be diversified. Hence, more work needs to be done—not only empirical work but also conceptual investigation—into what it means to have a diverse curriculum, and into the ways this will be interpreted in Korean high school settings.

Regardless of one's political position regarding the HSEP, both the pros and cons have a problem in that they tend not to consider the curricular issue. For many conservatives, a competitive high school entrance policy is thought of as more desirable because, in their view, it would provide children of various abilities and interests with a diverse curriculum. Yet this idea has rarely been investigated by means of qualitative research based on the real school curriculum in Korea. Therefore, it is crucial to inquire into whether, and how, diversity, in relation to the curriculum, is promoted at academic high schools in a marketized school choice area. For many years, most debates on HSEP in Korea have been based on supposition or ill-founded conjecture; as a result, it has been pointed out that scholarly discourse based on actual intensive research is sorely lacking. This study is expected to fill that gap in the research by investigating the ways in which curriculum diversity is interpreted—and the extent to which pedagogical diversity is realized—at two sample high schools in a non-HSEP area.

## 2 Neo-liberal Understanding of Curriculum Diversity

Since the year 2000, when the newly revised national curriculum began to be implemented

in schools, an emphasis on individualized instruction has been replaced by hierarchic differentiation based on students' test scores (Kim, 2004). When the *31 May Educational Reform* proposal was first released, it included two contradictory elements: neoliberalism and open education. According to Kim (2004), initially following this national reform proposal, the term "education for consumers" was supported by those who had made efforts to bring progressive student-centered teaching methods into classrooms. But starting in the late 1990s, when economic depression set in, the government began promoting educational policy measures centered on market-based rationales. Around this same time appeared the idea of school choice based upon consumer needs and the need to diversify education; this idea was then adopted into neoliberal arguments for the abolition of high school equalization policies.

In addition, for many parents and students, who are referred to the neoliberal model as "educational consumers," it is taken for granted that achievement test scores are a product of schooling (Apple, 1996; 2000). A major purpose of the growing resurgence of market discourse in education is to foster the market-based provision of public education, so that public schools are forced to compete with private schools and other public schools, or with for-profit educational service providers. Parents' dissatisfaction with education in Korea is put into circulation in such a way that families have no choice but to spend a burdensome amount of financial resources for private tutoring, with the result that being accepted into preferred colleges depends more and more on family wealth.

These parental complaints are closely connected to the sentiment that existing schools are not responsive to parents' needs for quality school programs that do not require additional excessive expenditures for private tutoring. One way of addressing this responsiveness issue is to make products (e.g., programs or curriculums) diverse so that the market can provide more flexibility on the supply side, after which parents as consumers will have more options to choose from and will play a greater role in the governing of schools. Therefore, the introduction of market forces within education is linked to curriculum issues in terms of both curriculum diversity and curriculum governance. Conservative and neoliberal claims regarding not only social and economic issues, but also educational ones, tend to be represented more by several major newspapers than by any other media. The following newspaper editorial represents this kind of social sentiment:

The government is required to recognize the competition among high schools and the differences between them. It should learn a lesson from the Japanese government, which decided to revive the academic ability test at middle and high schools in a bid to improve the competitiveness of the growing generation. The neighboring country re-introduced the entrance exam for high schools in 2003. The government should conduct a fundamental review of its education policy in such a way as to leave school affairs, including how to recruit students, in the hands of schools (*The Korea Times*, 2005, July 20).

This excerpt presents a general picture of the way in which conservative and elitist discourses in Korea have promoted neoliberal ideas in order to alter commonsense notions of public schooling and the meaning of curriculum diversity. The mechanism neoliberals defend will make it easier for parents to take the lead in directing school curriculum and exercising influence over what content and values their children will learn.

### 3 Data and Method

The following research draws on data sampled from two high schools, *Keewha* and *Chogah*, in the city of *Joonhee*, a representative non-HSEP area. Characteristics of the two schools are distinctive. Out of ten high schools in the selected city area—six of which are academic and four of which are vocational—*Keewha* is ranked number one in terms of academics, while *Chogah* ranks at the bottom of the six academic high schools, but above the four vocational schools. *Chogah*, a low-achievement school, has a greater percentage of students facing financial difficulties, while the students of *Keewha* tend to have parents from higher social and economic backgrounds.

The student allocation system in the city of *Joonhee* is more like a student rationing policy than free school choice. The average middle school class size in the city is approximately 38 people; the cut-off to be eligible to apply to *Keewha* high school is approximately the top six places out of these 38, with little degree of difference between individual schools. Those middle school students who don't make the cut are rationed off to *Chogah* high school in the name of school choice.

This study employs a critical lens that focuses on qualitative data to provide a thoughtful examination of the school choice and curriculum issues. Making use of this critical qualitative research method, the study seeks to explore how intended national curriculum policies are implemented at two selected high schools in a unregulated school choice area. Qualitative data for this study were collected between April and August 2005 by means of observation and interviews. Several classes taught by each of the three target teachers were observed. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were also conducted with more than thirty teachers, students, and parents, all within fifteen weeks of the observations. This research also involved the careful and cooperative reviewing of data with three KEDI (Korean Educational Development Institutes) researchers in order to gain more insight into the pedagogical curriculum policy by tracing its original intention and its unintended changes.

### 4 Reality Check with Implemented Curriculum Policies: Intention and Result

#### Curriculum diversity intended

Phrases like “curriculum should be diversified” appear often in the current document of national curriculum, but it is difficult to find any specific lines in the text that describe what this “diversity” means. Many parents seem to be in favor of doing away with conformity-minded educational practices, but, again, it is not clear how they define the concepts of diversified teaching and learning. There is little doubt that the issue of school choice for most Korean parents relates more to the kinds of schools that are the most advantageous for college entrance, as opposed to different between-school curriculum options (academic, vocational, science, and special schools). This phenomenon compels us to conceptualize a working definition of “curriculum diversity” before we begin performing a direct analysis of the data drawn from the sampled high schools.

The current national curriculum makes a major effort to include policy measures related to diversity issues through such measures as high school electives and a differentiated curriculum. The phrase “curriculum diversity” is used most commonly in relation to a variety of timetables that accommodate educational consumers' choices. The current national curriculum forces all the high schools to provide the prescribed elective curriculum to 11th and 12th graders. The goal is

for students to be granted access to particular subject matters on the basis of their preferences, provided that these subjects appear on the official list.

Devolution in curriculum governance therefore becomes a prerequisite to promoting the policy of an expanded elective curriculum, since high schools had little chance to operate on their own before the current revision of the national curriculum. Responding to this requirement, the national curriculum identifies itself as diverse in terms of individuals, schools, and locales. The revised curriculum guideline delegates some power to students, schools, parents and local education authorities in relation to determining, within the limits of the state-fixed subject matters list, the kinds of electives that will be available.

It also should be noted that the market-based educational reform proposal promotes the importance of ability grouping for the purpose of providing instruction tailored to the intellectual levels of individual students. In some parts of the official curricular document, then, the term “diverse curriculum” relates to providing individualized learning that has been adapted to students’ interests and needs. However, there has been a metamorphosis in pedagogical language such that the national curriculum now enforces ability grouping in the name of a differentiated curriculum. The national document states that the differentiated curriculum policy is not a tracking system because it merely suggests that the curriculum should be one that accommodates the different interests and aptitudes of students. But with few exceptions, every middle and high school is being forced to implement ability grouping for every math and English class. Students are assigned to particular classrooms (high, intermediate, or low-level) based on of the scores they receive on an achievement test.

### **Results unintended**

Building upon qualitative data, the following section aims to determine whether the system of unregulated school choice has the inherent ability to diversify the curriculum, as neo-liberals proclaim. South Korea is well-known as having strongly regulated curriculum governance, to the extent that she appears as a representative case study in a number of curriculum texts. In particular, time allotment and the kinds of subject matter that will be taught have been strictly regulated by educational law. Reacting to criticism, the government in the era of the sixth national curriculum (1992–1997) declares to implement a devolutionary policy that spread the authority to determine curriculum among the state, regions, and schools. It is proclaimed the national curriculum document was used to outline curriculum standards, but individual schools were allowed to adapt these standards to their own cultural and material conditions, as well as the characteristics of their students. In addition, the measure allowed teachers the relatively autonomous power to reorganize textbooks that would have otherwise been strictly censored, resulting in the delivery of a standardized form of prescribed knowledge. This social trend culminated in the high school elective curriculum policy.

However the problem is that there has been a decided mismatch between the promises of the government and actual conditions. The mandated elective curriculum appeared on the surface to acknowledge students’ differing career aspirations by allowing a greater choice of subject matters. However, an unintended result was to intensify Korean SAT-related subject matter, such as the Korean language, English, and mathematics. The balance between subject matters became at odds with students’ hopes to choose ones that they think are beneficial for their college entrance exams. As a result, the preferences for fine arts and music decreased. The other crucial reason for the failure of the elective curriculum policy is the insufficiency of material and human resources.

Jeesoon Kim, a Korean language teacher, explains both:

In fact, the present national curriculum is a perplexing issue. In the transition to the present curriculum period, the schools are required to implement the electives in an effort to make the school curriculum flexible, in accordance with the policy intention of allowing students to make choices based upon their aptitudes and abilities. But we are not in a condition to accommodate this requirement. All the teachers in high schools know well about the crippled operation of the national curriculum guideline. I am under the impression that students have few strong reasons to actively choose particular subject matters that are not beneficial for their college entrance exams. Even when they have reason, despite this obsession, to choose other subject matters the school is not capable of accommodating those needs because it doesn't have enough classrooms and teachers.

There are few disputes regarding this teacher's analysis of the unintended results of the mandated elective curriculum policy in Korea.

## 5 Learning to Label

With regards to ability grouping, both *Chogah* and *Keewah* high schools initially complied with the differentiated curriculum policy, but now they no longer follow the mandatory guidelines. It is hard to conclude that these schools infringe upon the national curriculum policy, since it is more desirable that ability grouping be based upon the carefully considered characteristics of each school and its students. It is true that some individual teachers are insensitive, whether consciously or unconsciously, to the differences among students. However, the data drawn in this study indicates that the cream-skimming effect is a result of between-classroom ability grouping. Teachers in *Chogah* high school revealed an awareness that ability grouping in different classrooms makes it difficult to lead instruction, especially in classrooms with low-scoring students.

The cream-skimming effect is recognized as a main reason not to comply with the ability grouping guidelines. Most of the teachers at *Chogah* high school point out that non-HSEP is not advantageous to students in lower-scoring schools, since their high-ability peers were already rationed, following middle school graduation, to upper-class high schools. One student, Eun-Jung Park, responds to the question of ability grouping in the name of a differentiated curriculum:

Frankly, I don't feel very good about learning with students whose performances are similarly poor. I might have studied hard to catch up with the so-called smart students. But the class atmosphere is not very motivating. Some guys talk without refraining during the class. They do not pay attention to the lecture.... Another thing, people quite often label us, compared to the students at *Keewha* high school. In case some *Chogah* students are dating, it soon gives people a cue that these couples may go off the rails. In case for *Keewah* guys, they are perceived as being not only smart, but also romantic.

The study also found that there is little difference between the two selected schools in terms of how they are implementing the differentiated curriculum policy. The fact is that these two schools are not actively adapting the national policy. Each school, however, has its own reasons

for not actively following the national curriculum policy. Teachers in the elite *Keewha* high school say that students into different groups is not necessary, since their students have already been selected based on their achievement levels.

Researcher: Aren't you recommended to split students into several groups for teaching math and English?

Teacher *Chung-Jo Lee*: We don't feel the need for it.

Researcher: Because everybody performs well?

Teacher: Students are already singled out for their high levels of achievement. Though the policy is mandatory, we don't think it's fit for our context.

By way of contrast, a *Chogah* teacher, Meeyoung Hah is well aware of the problem of homogeneous grouping in the low-achievement school. She goes on to say that her thoughts on the high school stratification system were not so negative until she actually had the experience of teaching real students at the lower scoring school. She has tried a number of times to share her predicament with other colleagues, but what she has heard in response is that she is not an only person suffering with this problem.

Teachers reported that even good lesson plans don't work, and that their own instructional scenarios do not unfold in the way they're intended to, especially because it is hard to get intelligent responses from unmotivated students. Teachers point out that having some responsive and motivated students in their classrooms could have motivated other students to participate as well. Instead, not having quality performing students in their classrooms obstructs their usage of prepared and effective teaching strategies. One teacher, *Yongchol Park*, recognizes that not having any model students in his classrooms puts him at a loss because it does not allow him to form effective learning environments:

Students in the class do not act in concert with my teaching. And that drives me to think about what I have done for them. I cannot get the problem off my mind. I ask myself whether I should blame my teaching skills or my students' unmotivated attitudes. Experienced teachers feel the same way, so even at this point I do not know how to draw up a plan to deal with this problem.

This teacher believes he could improve his teaching if he had even a few academically-motivated and capable students who could enliven the class by trading pedagogical dialogues. This is a common hope expressed by the teachers at *Chogah* high school. They believe that having some able and energetic students in their classrooms would provide positive peer pressure to incite the remaining students to more actively participate in the class. Personal observation of a number of the above teacher's classes demonstrated that only a few students take active part in the class discussions. About a third of the students talked more than once, but most of their remarks were in response to recitations that the teacher led. For this reason, *Chogah* teachers do not feel the need to implement the mandated the policy of the differentiated curriculum.

## 6 Further Discussion

The research makes a compelling argument that the term *curriculum diversity* in the document of national curriculum actually refers to *curricular variety* and *differentiation of curriculum* through electives and between-classroom ability grouping, as opposed to the inclusion of diverse viewpoints, cultures, or school knowledge. Findings from the qualitative data indicate that although some supporters consider the high school electives of the current national curriculum to be a facilitating factor in overcoming monopolized patterns of instruction, the selected schools are not actively encouraged to utilize this curriculum policy measure. This is partly because—notwithstanding schools' scarce resources—teachers perceive the measure as not being fruitful for curriculum diversity itself; after all, the policy means little compared to high school students' obsession with attending prestigious colleges. In regards to the mandatory differentiated curriculum in math and English, despite the preponderance of arguments that ability grouping is the best way for teachers to handle classroom diversity, the intended scenario was actually transformed in various unintended ways, as shown in the previous section.

Neoliberals assume that if education was provided under market conditions, parents could choose educational options from among a vast array of diverse products. However, what they in fact have in mind is a vertically diverse delivery of curriculum that is far removed from the theories of multicultural curricularists such as Noffke (1998), who advocates for curriculum diversity. She argues that a diverse curriculum should include not only diverse knowledge and viewpoints, but also a consideration of the student's relationship to knowledge and the teacher's role in the diverse and multicultural curriculum (p. 113). She reminds us that a diverse learning experience is more than merely adapting curriculum to individual tastes and preferences.

Noffke goes on to say that a diverse curriculum should lead to greater understanding of one's own and others' cultural values and diverse viewpoints, as well as greater participation in the pluralistic processes of democratic decision-making. In an attempt to counter consumer-driven diversity, I shall call this multicultural type of diversity *inclusive diversity*; this approach advocates that individual differences should be understood in relation to the vast multiplicity of human beings that can be explained by considerations of race, gender, and class.

An examination of an English school site provides a glimpse of the limitations of the neoliberal understanding of diversity. In her case study of a London comprehensive school, Reay (1998) investigates the way in which the prevailing market ethos has increasingly encouraged parents to act in their own and their child's familial self-interests. She observes that teachers' pedagogical decision-making is increasingly pressured by parents' emphasis on test results, and that the change from mixed-ability teaching toward ability grouping has limited teachers' professional judgment and increased school administrators' concerns about schools' market positions. As a result, market-based reform is "commodifying both pupils and schooling, generating an educational marketplace in which white, middle-class children are seen by schools as valuable commodities, and setting is perceived by many middle-class parents as an attractive educational product they want for their children" (p. 552).

In South Korea this situation is apparent in the fact that the current national curriculum, especially at the high school level, is strongly affected by the test-driven school culture. The foremost reason for the distorted phenomenon of curriculum implementation is that the high school curriculum is subject to the high-stakes college entrance exam. Parents, as school choice actors in the sampled non-HSEP area, base their decisions on a given school's historical reputation; this

plays a key role in sustaining cultural capital for social connections as a means of gaining admission to prestigious colleges.

In this sense, educational consumers have no actual rights, because middle school graduates are systematically rationed into individual schools that are part of the larger hierarchical structure. Parents are more sensitive to a school's social reputation than to the kinds of curriculum that it offers. As it turns out, market proponents in Korea were overly short-sighted in dealing with the fact that school choice patterns are rarely related to the diversifying of educational activities. In this sense, neoliberal diversity may from afar appear to be diverse, but when viewed up close it appears highly segregated. The present study, along with Reay's case study, implies that neoliberal reforms often result in *differential diversity*, in which cultural, developmental, and individual difference are understood only within the particular ideological vision of market advocates and, in turn, diversity comes to mark the differences between affluent and poor children, or able and less able children. The differing school uniforms of *Keewah* and *Chogah* symbolize the visibility of this demarcation, enacted in the name of educational diversity and the right to school choice.

The emergence of popular sentiment espousing market responsiveness as an indicator of educational diversity induces the public to see parents and students as automatized decision-makers (Whitty, Power, & Halpin 1998). This concern leads us to Garrett Hardin's (1968) famous *tragedy of the commons* as an illustration of *prisoners' dilemma*, in which the irrationality of collective actions results from a situation in which a group shares common goods, and yet, because of self-interest, each individual fails to cooperate for the shared goal of the common good. In Hardin's story, herdsmen, for the sake of the "long-desired goal of social stability," agree that, in order to preserve their common resources, they will not to add any animals to their herds; *the tragedy of the commons* points to the fact that, as rational beings, each herdsman seeks to maximize his gains and therefore, despite his pledge, adds animals to his herd. As a result, "the inherent logic of the commons" generates the tragedy (p. 1244). The corollary application of this lesson is that since curriculum has been thought of as a common good, the neoliberal proposals cannot avoid the tragedy of the commons and cannot guarantee a cooperative and democratic curriculum.

Unintended results in *Keewha* and *Chogah* high schools occur in relation to parents' school choice patterns as market actor behaviors produced in consideration of their children's preparation for the superheated SAT competition and their preoccupation with higher GPA scores. The present study's qualitative data indicates that the establishment of a non-heterogeneous school system fails to result in curricular diversification, despite such official policy measures as the elective curriculum and differentiated ability grouping. It is hard to support the argument that non-regulated school choice promotes a classroom curriculum which allows teachers to adopt diverse instructional methods to match the needs of individual students. Furthermore, it is also clear that the phrase "curriculum diversity," in official documents as well as in real practices, is rarely interpreted as meaning a curriculum that includes such issues as human rights, peace, multiculturalism, and justice. A great deal of other empirical research (Adnett & Davies, 2000; Lauder & Hughes, 1999; Whitty 1998; Lipman, 2004) also does not support the neoliberal idea that the marketized control of curriculum is associated with a more democratic and more diverse delivery of curricula.

Despite a great deal of criticism of the neoliberal proposals for education reform, there has been little attempt to pursue questions about the relationship between neoliberalism and curriculum. Even insightful opposition to school choice, emerging from substantive studies, rarely provides a comprehensive basis by which to assess the potential of this choice to do enormous damage to democratic school knowledge and the multicultural curriculum. Neoliberals do not conceptual-

ize diversity in the same way that multicultural and critical educational theorists do. Instead, neoliberals have changed the public perception of education so that parents' pressure on teachers and public schools is now based on self-interested customers' rights. The present study demonstrates that the neoliberal concept of diversity fails to promote horizontal diversity, even though it pretends to promote individual diversity within the context of a market-based school choice area in Korea. This general finding suggests that, because this new vision of consumer roles takes such a jaundiced view of the issues of pedagogical diversity and curriculum governance, the neoliberal encouragement of ability grouping and high school choice not only fosters consumers' rights, but also calls into question whether the current conceptualization of curriculum diversity in Korea is enough to oppose the educational uniformity that has plagued Korean education for so long.

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