



# South Korean Public Education's Acceptance of and Experimentation with John Dewey's Educational Philosophy

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this article is to clarify the limitations and implications of John Dewey's educational ideas in South Korean education since liberation in 1945. Following liberation, South Korea rectified the demise of its traditional and Japanese colonial period education and pursued Dewey's ideas for a democratic society through new educational perspectives. To this end, we examine how Dewey's ideology developed during three periods. From the period of US military rule of Korea and the decades after (1945–1960), there were nationalistic attempts by a few pedagogists who had studied in the United States to free Korea from the repressive education of the Japanese regime and embrace Dewey's ideas. In the subsequent industrialization period (1961–1994), the state-led Dewey educational philosophy was incorporated into public education policy and served as an alternative to the traditional entrance examination's culture of excessive competition. From the neoliberal period (1995–), South Korean educational policies such as innovative schools, were pursued that sought to democratize school education for the majority. As a result of our analysis, it was confirmed that even though 70 years have passed since Dewey's educational philosophy was accepted in Korea, the country's education field has not realized the desired change. In consideration of Korea's special historical background, it seems necessary to reflect on Dewey's ideas and apply them from a long-term perspective.*

**Keywords:** Entrance exam-centered education, Japanese colonial education, John Dewey's educational ideas, military regime, industrialization, state-led education, US military government period

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## Introduction

In its ancient Three Kingdoms Period, Korea officially embraced Confucianism as an educational philosophy. The objective of pre-modern Korean education was to create moral persons. Education taught students that the most honorable thing was to devote oneself to a moral life. The student was to be enlightened through the reading of Confucian texts containing the wisdom of the sages.<sup>1</sup> The student had to precisely grasp the meaning of every verse and practice these meanings in his daily life. However, traditional education was not practical in reality. It was limited in its ability to counter external aggression, as well as the internal economic, social, and political need for change that faced the late Joseon dynasty (1392–1910).

In 1894, with the implementation of the Gabo Reforms (Gabo gaehyeok 甲午改革), a new education system was established. The Korean government's policy of education reform led to the establishment of the modern school system along with the exclusion of traditional education (J. Park 2020). However, these spontaneous efforts at reform were frustrated during the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945). After the end of World War II and national liberation in 1945, Korea was soon engulfed in the intense ideological battles between the Soviet Union and the United States, which came to occupy the northern and southern halves of the Korean Peninsula, respectively (Kim and Kang 2021). With the establishment of the US military government (1945–1948) in southern Korea, democratic education was initiated in Korean schools. Immediately after liberation, the Korean educational establishment advocated a transition from totalitarian to democratic education. To this end, a new educational ideology and policy were formulated to reflect democracy.<sup>2</sup>

But as one foreigner who experienced South Korea in the 1950s remarked, "To expect democracy in Korea is like expecting roses to bloom

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1. See P. H. Lee, et al. (1996, 35–37).

2. Unlike most Western countries, Korea achieved modernization in the order of educational revolution → industrial revolution → political revolution; thus, democracy education quickly transformed Korea (D. Lee et al. 2015, 123).

in the trash can.”<sup>3</sup> Koreans knew neither the procedures, methods, nor processes of how to live democratically (D. Lee et al. 2015). Although South Korea did not complete its democratic system from the beginning, it has achieved democracy through the continuous resistance and constant struggle of its citizens, including through the June Uprising of 1987 that precipitated democratic elections. There is no denying that the 80-year history of modern education in Korea has been a process of striving to realize democracy. The new educational ideology provided a direction for education and has helped to overcome ideological confrontations and conflicts as democracy matures. At the heart of this effort were a few educators who wanted to put Dewey’s educational philosophy into practice in South Korea. Since the first national curriculum in 1954, which included the consideration of children’s interests and development, autonomy and life-oriented education have been emphasized.

The history of modern Korean education can be said to be an extended experiment in Deweyan thought. In Korea, the study of Dewey’s thought has been fashionable and undertaken with great enthusiasm, but justification for why we need to understand and apply Dewey is too often omitted. Whatever the outcome, examining how Dewey was accepted and applied in Korean education provides a useful reflection on the history of Korean education. Some may find surprising our argument that Dewey was never present in Korean education. There was, instead, merely an imitation of Dewey. This is because the reality outside of Korean education has changed dramatically since liberation, while the school landscape has remained largely the same.

Until now, research on Dewey in Korea has focused on introducing and interpreting his theory.<sup>4</sup> In addition, emphasis has been placed on the

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3. “One step at a time,” *JoonAng Daily*, March 8, 2022. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/03/08/opinion/editorials/voting-day-election/20220308200932006.html>.

4. Thirty-two percent of the papers published in South Korean education-related journals from 1960 to 1991 were Dewey studies, and the Deweyan presence in the Korean education community is overwhelming, accounting for 1 in 10 of the studies on educational thinkers published in South Korean education-related journals between 2011 and 2020 (J. Woo 2021). These studies to date have introduced or reinterpreted Dewey’s education theory to address the lack of understanding of Dewey’s educational philosophy and have explored

application of Dewey's educational ideas to Korean education and the implications derived from this process. However, the perspective of this study differs from that of previous research. The purpose of this article is to critically examine whether Dewey's educational philosophy, following its reception in Korea, has been meaningfully and appropriately applied in the context of Korean education. To do this, we first look at the occasions and processes by which South Korea attempted to implement Dewey's educational philosophy. Our discussion is divided into three periods, as follows:<sup>5</sup> 1) the acceptance of Dewey's educational philosophy in South Korea between 1945 and 1960; 2) the industrialization period from 1961 to 1994; and 3) the period following the May 31, 1995 educational reform. We examine how Dewey's educational philosophy has been negotiated and transformed in line with the challenges and context of the times. This exploration shows how Dewey's concerns about education and alternatives have been embraced and deployed in South Korea. It also helps us address the remaining challenges within Korean education in relation to greater democratization.

### **The Foundational Period (1945–1960)**

The introduction of Dewey's educational philosophy to Korea was sudden and unexpected. Following its liberation from Japan in 1945, Korea was divided at the 38th parallel; by mutual agreement, the United States occupied the south while the Soviet Union took over in the north. This division of Korea by two great outside powers and the tension between them not only led to the establishment in 1948 of rival and ideologically opposed political governments, but imposed two different education systems—South Korea adopting the philosophies of American education and North Korea adopting those of the Soviet Union.

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the implications of Dewey's thought on Korean education (Ye 2005).

5. No Jin Ho has stated that research on Dewey in Korea gradually spread and deepened through the introductory (before liberation–late 1960s), settlement (late 1960s–1970s), and mature (1980–present) periods (No 1996, 200).

The reasons Dewey's ideas were introduced to South Korea are as follows. The first factor concerns the US Army Military Government in South Korea (USAMGIK) (1945–1948). USAMGIK was responsible for informing and educating Koreans about democracy (D. Kim 2021). In actuality, democracy was not realized in South Korea under the US military administration. However, what is significant is that the USAMGIK administration made the nature of democracy known to South Koreans (D. Kim 2021). Those in charge of this task consisted of both Americans and Koreans.<sup>6</sup> In their thinking, the purpose of democracy was “to attain happiness by guaranteeing the freedom of the individual” (D. Kim 2021). They emphasized human rights and equality of opportunity, with a negative view of monopoly capital and laissez-faire economic systems. Notable among these was James E. Fisher. Fisher taught philosophy and psychology at the Chosen Christian College from 1915 and introduced Dewey's ideas to Korea prior to liberation (Chung 1999).<sup>7</sup> In fact, it is not known when precisely Dewey's ideology first became known in Korea, but it is believed that through various channels Dewey was introduced to Korea before liberation. As is known, Dewey lectured in Tokyo, Japan, from February 25 to March 21, 1919, and in China for about two years from April 30, 1919. China and Japan were thus naturally exposed to Dewey's educational ideas. Dewey's theory of education was introduced to Korea in the 1930s, but could not be actively implemented due to Japanese colonial period circumstances (K. Park 2004). Furthermore, in colonial Korea, there were no texts directly discussing Dewey's theory of

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6. These figures included James Earnest Fisher, Gail Cleland, Han Chi-jin, Choi Bong-yun, and Park In-deok. They were all Christians, educated in the United States, and recruited into the schooling and education administration of South Korea. For further information on this, see D. Kim (2021).

7. James Earnest Fisher studied at Columbia in 1920s and obtained his doctorate in the study of Dewey. As a missionary, he came to Korea and taught pedagogy and psychology at Yon-Hee College for 17 years, from 1919 to 1935. Professor Fisher was forced to return to the US during the Japanese colonial period, but following Korean independence he returned to Korea as an educational advisor in USAMGIK. According to Im Han Young (1977), Fisher introduced Dewey's philosophy of education in his book, *Democracy and Mission Education in Korea* (1925) (Im 1977, 335). In addition, Fisher was able to read and write in Japanese and Korean (D. Kim 2021).

education, and few Koreans living in Japan were exposed to Dewey's writings (K. Park 2004). Following liberation, the ideas of Dewey were naturally introduced to Korea by the United States, which first sought to bring democracy to South Korea.

A form of democratic education was initiated during the USAMGIK administration. More specifically, in the midst of both Korean interest in American democracy and the need to redesign education, Dewey's educational thought was introduced through influential figures in government and higher education.<sup>8</sup> Under the Cold War system, the USAMGIK prioritized curbing the spread of socialism and implanting American-style democracy in the South. It also felt the need to create an American-style education system to make South Korea an American-style commodity market (S. Lee 2000). But in the case of Korean officials, the residual effect of the Japanese colonial period and its education system affirmed their nationalism and emphasis on the importance of the state (D. Kim 2021).

In this regard, we can mention the second factor, the influence of China. Already in the early 20th century, Dewey's ideas had provoked a major effort to reshape Chinese education, and *Democracy and Education* was published in China in 1919 during the May Fourth Movement (E. Choi 2019). Dewey gave more than 200 lectures in 14 cities between his arrival in China on April 30, 1919 and August 2, 1921. Dewey's students, who graduated from Columbia University, were also active in introducing his ideas. A Chinese international student who graduated from Columbia University's Teachers College was responsible from 1909 to 1950 for determining the direction of education in China (E. Choi 2019). The Chinese who studied abroad in the United States to learn Dewey's ideas, especially those at Columbia University, would have had an impact on Koreans who were similarly seeking national sovereignty during this period.

The third factor was the Korean Christians who had studied in the United States. These important figures were considered the fathers of Korea's modern education after liberation. During the Japanese colonial period, German pedagogy was at the forefront of efforts to create government

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8. For informative studies of this process, see B. Park (1972) and G. Lee (1992).

schools and was used by Japan particularly to justify their colonial education policies in Korea (Chung 1999). Thus, those Koreans who opposed Japanese imperialism and militarism and advocated Korean nationalism would have been compelled to choose American pedagogy over German pedagogy.

As an example of the adaptation of Dewey's ideas, Oh Chun Suk (1901–1987), Korea's most notable Deweyan philosopher and educator, studied not only with Dewey and his protégé William Heard Kilpatrick (1871–1965), but with William Chandler Bagley (1874–1946), a critic of Dewey.<sup>9</sup> After reading *Democracy and Education* during his undergraduate years, he had moved to Columbia University to further study pedagogy (Oh 1975b). Upon earning a doctorate in philosophy from Columbia in 1931, he returned to Korea and began to teach pedagogy at the Bo Sung College.<sup>10</sup> He devoted himself to the introduction and practice of democratic education with the belief that a democratic society—in which the old education of the Joseon dynasty and the despotism of the Japanese colonial period were swept away and, above all, the individual citizen became master—was impossible without drawing on the power of education (Cho 2014). There can be no doubt that Oh was at the forefront of Korea's adoption of Dewey's philosophy in the reform of its education system.

Oh was born in Pyeongannam-do province, the center of Korean Christianity, as the son of a pastor. Pyeongannam-do, which was subjected to regional discrimination during the Joseon period, was a region that produced a large number of pro-US elite intellectuals following the opening of its port to the introduction of Christianity in the late 19th century and the growth of capitalism (S. Kim 2001). These environmental factors were a

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9. The following is a list of Korean students who studied philosophy or pedagogy at Columbia University between 1904 and 1930, when Dewey was there, and later returned to Korea: Kim Hong Je; Jang Lee Ok; Kim Pil Le; Hwang Sin Dug; Oh Chun Suk; Seo Un Sook; No Jae Myung; Kim Hwal Lan; Kim Maria; Yun Sung Soon; Jang Suk Young; and Kim Suk E. Among these, Kim Hwal Lan and Seo Un Sook taught at Ewha Women College and Oh Chun Suk taught at Bo Sung College. Others tried to promulgate Dewey's ideas in religious circles and the press.

10. Bo Sung College was the first private college in modern Korea. It was originally established in 1905 and became Korea University in 1946.

strong influence on Oh's acquisition of Deweyan ideas. Under the influence of his father, an independence activist, pastor, and founder of a new school, Oh felt a strong compulsion to save Korea through new forms of education.

As he studied in the United States during the Japanese colonial period, Oh was convinced that this new education was democratic in nature. As he experienced an American education system in which teachers and students were equal, and where all professions were treated equally without distinction, he believed that democracy should be the new value of the Korean people and that they should pursue "freedom and fairness" (Oh 1975b). Oh was shocked that in Korean universities, under the influence of Japan, students passively listened to lectures, whereas in American universities, students freely debated with their professors and each other (Oh 1975b). Oh believed that democracy was a way of life fundamentally about people's actions, attitudes, feelings, and ideas (Oh 1975a). He further argued that democracy as a way of life came from believing that democracy was the best way of life, trusting in people's abilities, and believing in the superiority of the popular intellect (Oh 1975a). In effect, democracy as a way of life was a belief in the human intellect and experience (Cho 2014). In the United States, Oh experienced democracy not merely as an ideology, but as a way of living. He was convinced that the core of Dewey's philosophy was individual freedom, and that in this respect, Dewey's philosophy had something in common with democracy (Oh 1975b). Oh returned to Columbia University in 1949 for about 3 months. Though he was convinced that by this time progressive education had come to an end as a deliberate movement, he thought that its spirit and reality were still found everywhere on the American education scene (Oh 1975b).

Under Japanese colonial rule, Oh's efforts in Korea to spread Dewey's philosophy of education, which stressed the importance of freedom and democracy, was significantly limited. Oh called himself a "lonely fighter," reflecting that the situation in Korea at the time was not mature enough to embrace democracy (Oh 1975b). However, appointed the secretary of the Department of Education in the USAMGIK period (1945–1948), Oh, along with other Korean educators inspired by Dewey's works, attempted to implement Dewey's educational philosophy in Korea. A social studies course

was established in public schools as core curriculum for practicing democratic education. And Oh attempted a new educational project called the “New Education Movement.” The New Education Movement opposed oppressive and uniform education, which was presumed to be an evil of colonial education. It respected human individuality and autonomy, which had been ignored in colonial schooling. It also advocated a daily life-centered, child-centered, and not textbook-centered, education. Oh saw the purpose of education to be enriching life, not disseminating knowledge, and insisted on studying human life (Oh 1975b). As American teachers utilized their own best practices, new methods of teaching were disseminated, guided by the principles of collective discussion or problem-solving learning (M. Lee 2001). However, the debating class was implemented at the demonstration-class level and was never actually disseminated in classrooms (S. 2000). A key point, then, is that Dewey’s educational ideas were well received theoretically, but they were difficult to apply on the actual school scene in southern Korea. It is worth noting that this pattern has since repeated within Korean education.

The New Education Movement was introduced mainly through teacher education. Over the three years of the USAMGIK administration, Oh delivered numerous lectures on Dewey and his democratic approach to education, ultimately to thirty thousand teachers in both elementary and secondary schools. The lectures taught a life-oriented, experience-oriented, and child-centered education. In 1946, Oh also published an invaluable book of his own, *The Establishment of Democratic Education* (*Minjujuui gyoyuk-ui geonseol*), the first book in Korean concerning Dewey’s philosophy of education (Im 1977, 20). This book played a pivotal role in introducing democratic educational thought, in general, and Dewey’s ideas in particular, to Korean teachers and educators. Moreover, Oh oversaw the translation of Dewey’s influential work on the philosophy of education, *Democracy and Education*, into Korean—the first half by himself in 1948, and later finishing the book with Im Han Yong (1914–1986) in 1953. Throughout his career, Oh attempted to disseminate and popularize Dewey’s ideas in South Korea through translation, writing, and lectures.

With respect to Dewey and Korean education, another important event

occurred in 1952 amidst the Korean War (1950–1953). This was the establishment of the Korean Society for the Study of Education (Hanguk gyoyuk hakhoe) by 47 influential Korean educators at Seoul National University.<sup>11</sup> The Society's first conference was convened in March 1953, under the title, "John Dewey's Life and Philosophy." In this memorable session, Im Han Yong, who had performed an important role in bringing about this organization as interim president, delivered a lecture on Dewey. Im had studied with William Kilpatrick at Columbia University from 1946 to 1952 through the help of James E. Fisher. Furthermore, educators, including Oh Chun Suk and Im Han Yong, from June 1954, began to hold an annual John Dewey memorial lecture in honor of Dewey and his works.<sup>12</sup> In addition, domestic graduate theses on Dewey began to emerge.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, it was the unique conditions of the USAMGIK administration that allowed those who studied with Dewey or his admirers in America and who could communicate in both English and Korean to hold important positions in Korea's government and universities. This unusual historical circumstance was the most crucial factor in bringing Dewey's educational philosophy to Korea. From its genesis through the 1950s, Dewey scholarship in Korea was largely centered on introducing Dewey and his general ideas to Korean educators and teachers. What the Korean scholars who had studied abroad and returned to Korea attempted was to relate Dewey's thought on democratic education to Korea. During this period, the journal *New Education* (*Sae gyoyuk*) was established. First published in 1948, when it was still under the control of the American military administration, this publication played an important role in spreading Dewey's philosophy of education nationwide. As a result, Dewey's educational thought was not only spread broadly among Korean educators, but a "Dewey boom"<sup>14</sup> also occurred in Korean education, especially elementary schools, with the emphasis on child-centered education.

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11. In 2007, the English name of the society was changed to Korean Educational Research Association.

12. Dewey died on June 2, 1952 at the age of 92.

13. On this, see Chung (1999).

14. On this, see B. Park (1987).

However, a major problem was the disconnect between the actual situation in schools and education theory. The movement promised freedom, equality, and a nurturing and respectful learning environment for students, but it was not felt on the actual school scene; the student who learned about Lincoln in the textbook but didn't do well on tests was punished by the teacher and sent to the corner of the classroom (S. Lee 2000). In this way, students memorized knowledge that was not related to life and were evaluated through a paper exam. In this respect, the classroom was far from a place where students could experience *democracy as a way of life*. Many Koreans were more active in pursuing a successful life by attending prestigious schools and securing good jobs rather than practicing democracy. The perception that *if you want to succeed, you must go to school* was a legacy of colonial education, but after liberation this sentiment grew. In addition, teachers who preferred the pre-liberation method of teaching and learning had no intention of following the new education model outside of the demonstration classes. There was also a limitation in that the Dewey scholars of this period, including Oh Chun Suk, recognized that the education system and atmosphere focused only on the entrance exam hindered the development of democratic education, but they did not adequately address how to overcome this problem (Cho 2014). Nevertheless, it is worth considering that these Dewey researchers helped put American educational thinking into the mainstream of Korean pedagogy.

### **The Period of Industrialization (1961–1994)**

Park Chung-hee seized political power in a military coup on May 16, 1961. The period 1963 to 1979 was the Park Chung-hee era. This was the age of military politics, an era of tight security as well as anticommunist and instrumentalist education for national development. School culture was militaristic (D. Lee et al. 2015). The competitive landscape with North Korea did not allow South Korea to slowly cultivate democracy and democratic education. Outwardly, the New Education Movement was discontinued, ostensibly in order to promote democracy though in actuality for the sake of

social stability and industrialization. But the more the South Korean system stabilized and the more successful industrialization became, the more Korean education would need Dewey's ideas. Compared to the rapid pace of economic growth, democratic consciousness, especially democratic education, came much slower and has still not been fully achieved. The Dewey boom came to an end in the 1960s when Korean elementary education was radically expanded, post-Korean War ideology was infused with education, and academic advancement through the entrance examination was initiated.

At the time of liberation in 1945, 78 percent of Korean adults were illiterate (D. Lee et al. 2015, 47), so the most urgent national task was literacy. From 1945 to 1958, a five-year plan for literacy was implemented in South Korea. From 1962 to 1971, two 5-year plans to expand compulsory education facilities were implemented. It was during this period that a plan of development was pursued that spanned all areas of national life. Education was seen as a means of national development through human reconstruction (D. Lee et al. 2015). As a result, the concept of a deliberate change in human behavior emerged and the role of the nation as the subject of education was emphasized.

In 1968, the National Education Charter was promulgated, laying out the ideology for the type of education to be pursued. It emphasized the aim of education to cultivate a correct view of the nation and to create workers who could contribute to the development of the nation. Since the 1960s, national security education has emphasized the establishment of an educational system for economic development. Educational reforms for industrialization were promoted. President Park Chung-hee advocated the "Scientificization Movement of the Whole People" so that every citizen might learn science and technology individually and exercise its functions. In addition, in 1973, Korea changed the direction of the curriculum from an academic-oriented to an experience-oriented curriculum.

On the other hand, the problem of intense competition due to entrance examinations persisted after liberation. Problems accumulated, such as children's stress, overly intense tutoring, and increased burdens on households due to the socio-economic demands of the entrance exams.

Accordingly, the government announced in 1968 the reform of the implementation of the middle school no-examination system, and from 1969 onwards, the government proposed abolishing the entrance examination for middle schools in Seoul. The reform was extended to major cities in 1970 and nationwide from 1971. However, the preparatory education for the entrance examination, previously prevalent in elementary schools, did not disappear, but was only transferred to middle schools. The education fever of parents further heated up knowledge-based entrance examination education.

In 1967, the Institute for the Study of the History of Korean Education (Hanguk gyoyuksa hakhoe) was created around the person of Han Ki Un. The aim was to explore Korea's unique educational philosophy by revitalizing the neglected study of Korean history and traditions. Han advocated for a nationalist pedagogy oriented towards the education of nationalities (Chung 1999). In the 1970s, along with the nationalism prevailing in Korean society, there was also a strong attitude regarding the dependence of Korean political and social sciences on Western knowledge.<sup>15</sup> In particular, in 1972, Park Chung-hee declared in a national conference the need for educators to promote the Korean way of education and democracy. Democracy in this context, however, was directed more toward the potential development of the abilities of each citizen than toward individual human rights, freedom of the press, or a democratic political system (D. Lee et al. 2015). In addition, educators, Deweyans or not, began to realize that Dewey's thought was influencing the New Education Movement without having been subject to sufficient critical examination or analysis.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Deweyan educators emphasized the merits of Dewey's influence on Korean democratic education, whereas detractors made harsher critiques, claiming that the New Education Movement since 1945 had failed primarily due to Deweyan educational ideals. The critics of Dewey argued that under his educational philosophy students were led away from intellectual development and began to lose the

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15. See M. Lee (2001).

16. See B. Park (1987).

Korean sense of virtue, ignore Korean tradition, and become egocentric.

Oh Chun Suk welcomed these criticisms as the sign of a healthy democratic society, assuring others that “they are the result of our misunderstanding, misreading, and ignorance concerning the true ideas of Dewey...In Korean education, there are few who truly know Dewey and his thought” (Im 1968, 8).

In response to such criticism, there were efforts by Deweyan scholars in higher education to study Dewey and his philosophy of education in more depth. For instance, in 1967, the Dewey Research Society (Hanguk Dyuuui yeonguhoe) was founded. It was the first to study a particular individual educational thinker (Chung 1999). In 1968, one of the Society's researchers, Im Han Young, published a study of Dewey's educational thought, the first book in Korea dedicated to the educational thought of a single thinker.

The John Dewey Club was founded in May 1968 by South Korean educators aiming for a deeper understanding of Dewey's works. In its monthly meeting, Korean Dewey scholars attempted to read Dewey's original works, such as *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920), *Experience and Nature* (1925), and *Freedom and Culture* (1939), and presented their understanding of Dewey with the purpose of encouraging further discussion and debate. Their activities were based purely on academic interest, independent of the domestic and international political currents of the time. This eventually became a factor that was later criticized by both the left and the right.

In the same year, the Dewey Research Society brought Sidney Hook (1902–1989),<sup>17</sup> head of the Department of Philosophy at New York University, to Korea. During this visit, Professor Hook gave a lecture titled, “The Philosophy of Dewey and the Freedom of Intellectual Knowledge.” Moreover, it was during this period that two other important educators, Park Bong Mok (in 1968) and Kim Jae Man (in 1974), joined the field of Dewey scholarship in Korea. While the former earned his master's degree at Columbia University and his Ph.D. at New York University, the latter

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17. Sidney Hook was a student of Dewey and earned his Ph.D. at Columbia University in 1927. He went on to become a prominent philosopher, especially regarding pragmatism.

received his Ph.D. from Hiroshima University in Japan. They both played a major role in the establishment of the Society for Korean Philosophy of Education (Gyoyuk cheolhak yeonguhoe) in 1977, which has served ever since as an important forum for both the field of educational philosophy and the study of Dewey.

In short, encountering increasing criticism caused by the rise of nationalism under the dictatorial rule of Park Chung-hee (1961–1979), Deweyan scholarship in Korea more or less stagnated through the 1960s and 1970s. In such circumstances, there were efforts among Deweyan educators to overcome this situation by investigating Dewey's ideas and its effect on Korean education in a more critical way (Han 1967; J. Kim 1975; D. Lee 1976; B. Park 1976). Additionally, it was during this period that educators not only became interested in Dewey's conception of "pragmatism" (Im 1968; B. Park 1978) and "experience" (J. Kim 1965; Jung 1967; M. Kim 1969), but also attempted to compare Dewey with other philosophers, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Herman H. Horne, Karl Jaspers, and Confucius (B. Park 1976; Jung 1975; Seen 1976; Ahn 1978).

It should be noted that, perhaps surprisingly given the pervasive criticism of Dewey, the majority of educators in Korea then considered Dewey to be the most impactful educational philosopher in Korean education since 1945 (B. Park 1987). According to the documentation of Park Bong Mok, in 1976, 79 percent of teachers, among 436 teachers of both elementary and secondary schools, responded that future education in Korea should follow a Deweyan model (B. Park 1987, 67).<sup>18</sup> The translation of Dewey's works expanded opportunities for access to Dewey's thought. Korean educators believed this influence would continue. This fact notwithstanding, Dewey's influence on Korean educational practices remained marginal. Perhaps this was due to Korean teachers' limited understanding of Deweyan ideologies and also the selective application of his thought to Korean schools through an emphasis on instructional

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18. In this paper, Park asked 436 teachers about Deweyan education and summarized the findings in statistical form.

methods over philosophical purposes.<sup>19</sup>

During the last three decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in Dewey's philosophy and its significance for modern Korean schools and education, especially considering concomitant changes in Korean society, such as the growth of democracy, individual rights, and educational equality since the 1987 democratic uprisings.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, both the sharp increase in the number of colleges and graduate schools as well as the growth of Korea's universities, which began producing doctorates in the 1980s, has resulted in a significant increase in the study of Dewey.<sup>21</sup> During this time, the establishment and expansion of graduate schools of education especially has led to more scholarship focused on Dewey and his works.<sup>22</sup>

### **The May 31 Education Reform of the Civilian Government and Its Aftermath**

The educational environment of the 1980s emphasized anticommunist and security education. Through democratic civic education, the cultivation of a sense of order necessary for common life and the minimization of the spirit of consumption were emphasized. Quantitative growth was achieved through the expansion of educational opportunities to provide the manpower needed for economic development. Enrollment rates in elementary, middle, and high schools were now surpassed 90 percent for school-aged children and youth.

In May 1995, the Kim Young-sam government established an Education Reform Commission and announced a total of 4 educational reform

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19. Some argue that educators in Korea who studied Dewey's ideas in the United States but did not transfer them accurately to Korea are responsible for these problems. See B. Park (1987).

20. See G. Lee (1992) and B. Park (2005).

21. See M. Lee (2001).

22. Graduate schools of education were first established in 1963 at Seoul National University, followed by other national universities. But their enrolment remained small throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

measures, together called the May 31 Education Reform. The aim was to revamp supply-oriented education and government-led education operations into a new educational operating system that would be demand-oriented and based on market principles. The Second Presidential Report of the Education Reform Commission formally raised the issue of the open education movement (Im and Shin 2003). Lee Don Hee (b. 1937), a prominent Deweyan educational philosopher who influenced educators to learn more about the open education movement, was a key participant. For example, when Lee became both a member of an education reform committee sponsored by the Kim Young-sam administration in 1994, and then the president of the Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI)<sup>23</sup> in 1995, he assisted teachers in their study of this movement. Further, Lee became South Korea's minister of education from 2000 to 2001, during the Kim Dae-jung administration (1998–2003). Under Lee's leadership, the (seventh) national educational curriculum, unlike the curricula of the past, placed strong emphasis on the importance of individual student talent, aptitude, and creativity in primary schools.<sup>24</sup> Before he took these important government positions, Lee had worked as a professor of the philosophy of education at Seoul National University, and was later the dean of that university's College of Education. He studied at Wayne State University, obtaining his Ph.D. in the philosophy of education and wrote his dissertation on Dewey and his ideas. This influential Deweyan educator served as vice-chairman of the Presidential Education Advisory Committee that helped formulate long-term policies on education, science, and technology.<sup>25</sup> Previously (2003–2008), Lee had also been the principal of the Korean Nation Leadership Academy, arguably the country's most well-known private high school,

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23. KEDI works for the South Korean Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology. It conducts research in the field of educational goals and methods, creating policy solutions.

24. The seventh curriculum, introduced in 1997, was initially applied to primary first- and second-grade students in 2000, and was gradually expanded to 12th-grade students by 2004.

25. In 2008, the new Lee Myung-bak government combined the Ministry of Education with the Ministry of Science and Technology, naming it the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology.

where open education is practiced.

So what was *open education*? It referred to an open education for children and began with Dewey's progressive educational philosophy (S. Choi 1998). If the new education that represented the period of the USAMGIK was the New Education Movement, then open education was implemented as a post-industrial education reform movement. It denounced the previous teacher-centered knowledge-transfer education and memorization education as a closed type of education and aimed at a new education to train voluntary and creative intellectuals. The Korean government now thought the exam-centered education system dominant after liberation was the wrong way to educate. So open education was a state-led educational reform that made teachers the object of reform. Government agencies, like the Ministry of Education, officially provided policy and financial support (Jeong 2020). Teachers were instructed to identify and try student-centered education, discussion-oriented education, and classes that used a variety of materials other than textbooks. In the early 1990s, an advancement project brought about a change in textbook-centric classes with the establishment of school computer labs. With PCs installed in classrooms, teachers were able to create their own teaching and learning materials or student activity materials. This promoted spontaneity in the management of classes.

But at that time, there was no accurate understanding and discussion of open education in Korea. Teachers were simply asked to move away from textbook-based instruction and use new technological tools. With this sudden change, some teachers quit their jobs. Also, open education did not change much in the overall education system, which focuses only on college entrance exams, other than diversifying the teaching method from textbook-oriented to non-textbook activity classes. Open education experimented with teachers' teaching methods, but they did not lead to educational experiments that affected the lives and growth of students.

While efforts to implement Dewey's educational philosophy in South Korean schools have stalled, the academic understanding of Dewey's philosophy has made some progress. With respect to Dewey scholarship, there has also been significant progress over the past three decades in its

specialization and diversification as well as an increase in its quantity.<sup>26</sup> The general themes of Dewey studies during this period included “moral education,” “educational aims,” “educational values,” “knowledge,” and “subject teaching” (M. Lee 2001).

Since the 1990s, Korean research streams on Dewey’s educational philosophy have become brisker.<sup>27</sup> This is not only because the number of scholars engaged in Dewey’s philosophy of education has increased, but also because the works of Richard Rorty (1931–2007), an important philosopher of the latter 20th century, influenced Korean philosophers of education as well as their American counterparts to interpret Dewey in new ways. As a result, scholars in Korea after the 1990s have made diverse attempts to study Deweyan thought, including its aesthetic features and neo-pragmatism, and from transactional, qualitative thinking, and ecological perspectives. Furthermore, along with Koreans’ increasing interest in lifelong education, Dewey’s conception of experience and growth has been subject to reinterpretation.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, the IMF bailout of 1997 proved a decisive moment in accelerating the neoliberalization of Korean society. In order to strengthen national competitiveness, the government emphasized excellence in education above all else. This has led to a consumer-centered educational policy, to mean an education that responds to the needs of the person receiving the training (D. Lee 1996). The policy was intended to realize the idea of freedom through education, but the reality was closer to the realization of a uniform desire. It aimed to upgrade the services of public education to meet the desires of parents and students to enter first-class schools. From the consumer’s point of view, the *growth* of the students meant an improvement in their test performance. *Personality* and *experience* are mentioned in the documented curriculum, but concerns about them have been hard to find in the actual schools. Parents were outraged by the thin liberal education policies. Teachers whom parents and students felt

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26. See M. Lee (2001).

27. See Ye (2005).

28. See M. Lee (2001) and Ye (2005).

were effective were not teachers who were democratic, but rather those who had the ability to control students and prepare them well for exams, similar to the repressive teachers of the Japanese colonial period. Open education has led to the phenomenon of parents and students distrusting teachers. In addition, parents who felt that teachers were not properly teaching textbook knowledge relied more on private tutoring. These circumstances have raised greater demands and reflection on Dewey's educational philosophy in Korean education (S. Kim 2013).

As concerns about the marketization of education grew, progressive policies returned to the spotlight. In 2003, the Roh Moo-hyun government (2003–2008) emphasized communitarianism rather than liberalism, focusing on educational equality and the internalization of public education (D. Lee et al. 2015). In this regard, a boom of innovative schools followed. The phenomenon was initiated in 2009 when Kim Sang Gon, the first Minsun Superintendent of the Gyeonggi Provincial Education Bureau, made a pledge about innovative schools. In 2010, a large number of progressive superintendents, supported by the Korean Teachers and Education Workers' Union (KTU) and the Democratic Party, began to emerge, gradually spreading around these areas. Currently, 13 municipal school districts across the country run so-called innovative schools. The educational philosophy behind this movement is progressivism (S. Park 2012).

The innovative school movement began with a critique of public education for educating students competitively and uniformly toward the college entrance examination. It sought to turn the focus toward the ultimate development of students' capacity through democratic schooling, ethical living communities, professional communities, and creative curriculum operations (M. Woo 2020). It proposed that teachers and parents collaborate in the school's decision-making and in the process of accomplishing its goals, thus creating a democratic, autonomous community. Innovative schools thus aim to overcome the limitations and problems of the dominant modes of education.

In the traditional class, the teacher would often transmit the correct answer to what was written in the textbook to the students; the students would only passively accept it. In an innovative school, students interact and

communicate with teachers as well as their fellow students, creating and discovering their knowledge together (Seo 2018). In this process, the student is positioned as an active subject of learning. The teacher is responsible for creating situations that make such learning possible.

In addition, the free-semester system, implemented starting with the Park Geun-hye government (2013–2017), is also an example of applying Dewey's educational philosophy to Korean education. It was introduced in order to allow students to spend one semester in the middle school curriculum free from the burden of exams and to search for their dreams and talents. To this end, schools were to utilize a variety of curricula, such as discussions, practical exercises, and other student-participation-oriented classes, as well as strengthening career exploration (Gyoyukbu 2013). The program launched in 2013 and has operated in all national middle schools since 2016. This policy moves away from textbook-driven indoctrination education and emphasizes experiential activities that link student lives with their knowledge. In particular, in order to avoid wasting time preparing for the students' test-taking future by eliminating exams for a semester, schools are instructed to prepare a variety of experiential activities connecting the outside to the inside of the school. A variety of classes are offered to match student interests. These objectives reflect the student-focused, experience-oriented, and life-centered educational philosophy emphasized by progressivism.

Innovative schools and the free-semester system are ongoing policies, though research is ongoing as to their effectiveness. One major challenge is that parents often criticize the policies. In addition, their success depends on educational attainments of the student recipients of the policy. It is worth noting the 2018 candlelight protest of parents living in Helio City apartments, a place that symbolizes a wealthy Seoul neighborhood. After the news that the Helio City school would be designated as an innovative school, parents there vehemently protested the government's policies. In the end, the government suspended the policy of designating innovative schools. There was only one reason parents opposed the innovative school designation: they worried that their children's exam-taking prospects would decline. In addition, criticism of poor public education and the resulting

decline in educational attainment has risen since the onset of COVID-19. As a result, support for conservative candidates in the national superintendent election in June 2022 increased significantly compared to 2 years earlier. During this period, parents have turned back to conservative policies due to worries about declining educational achievement. In addition, in 2023 Busan announced that it will revive the Diagnostics Assessment of Basic Competency for primary school students.<sup>29</sup> To sum up, in Korean public education the current conflict over standards and values is intensifying, with an emphasis on assessment-oriented educational aims on the one side and progressivist models of education on the other.

### **What Dewey Education Suggests for Korean Education**

So far, we have examined how Dewey's ideas have been embraced and deployed in Korean education. First, the Dewey idea was cheered between 1945 and the 1960s as an alternative to Japanese colonial period education. However, in actual fact, during this period instrumental education for entering prestigious schools was prioritized, and that colonial-era education was not pushed out. During the industrialization period that followed (1961–1994), democratic education was emphasized against the backdrop of inter-Korean confrontation. However, in reality, instrumental education and anti-democratic education for national development were instead conducted. Finally, after educational reform of 1995, Dewey's educational ideas were actively promoted in the name of individual autonomy, aptitude, and interests. However, though society outside the school was constantly in flux, the evils of colonial education persisted.

To sum up the discussion: First, the first generation of pedagogists to initially advocate Deweyan ideas in Korean education did so as an extension of nationalism. However, they did not advocate blindly following foreign

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29. "Eopsaetdaga buhwal...Busan chodeung gaekgwansik pyeongga 'orakgarak'" (Get Rid of It and Revive It...Busan Elementary School Multiple-choice Evaluation 'Entertainment'), *Busan Ilbo*, March 15, 2023.

ideas. Even to the present, many Korean pedagogists have critiqued what they see as the blind and involuntary acceptance of American-style education in a political and social environment that has been, since national liberation, marked by the overwhelming influence of the United States. Recently, however, a view has emerged that does not view the process of embracing American-style democratic education as either one-sided or uncritical (G. Lee 2017). We concur with this latter sentiment. We regard as inevitable the adoption of Dewey's democratic education as the philosophy of the new education. The case of Oh Chun Suk, who actively embraced Dewey's ideas, is illustrative. He experienced a variety of types of labor and democratic education in the United States, and became convinced that democracy was key to achieving human dignity; a means of survival after emergence from a long period of old customs and oppression. We think his instinctive choices were wise.

Second, in Korea, at the initiative of the government, Dewey's ideas were used to normalize public education through various programs. These program names varied over the years—open education, innovative schools, the free-semester system, etc.—but the motivation and direction of their implementation were the same. These were all alternatives to the entrance examination-oriented educational culture, and promoted experience-oriented, student-centered education.

Third, there has been a great diversity of research on progressivist educators, including Dewey, at universities. Researchers at major universities are convinced that alternatives to Korean education can be found in Dewey and progressive educational thought.

Yet Dewey's democratic education has not easily taken root in Korea. The problem has been the divergence between theory and practice. Through the Japanese colonial period, the military regimes, and the industrial era, many Koreans, including teachers, bureaucrats, and others, became accustomed to the Japanese-style, teacher-centered, and indoctrinating variety of pedagogy. In speech, they emphasized experience-oriented, life-oriented education, but in practice and with the justification of efficiency, they attached great importance to education as indoctrination. Many students graduate from school without learning how to solve personal life

problems or how to grow in life through education. They are merely required to take classes according to the career path that adults have predetermined. In this process, students learn, with little reflection, knowledge unrelated to their lives, so they are less interested in learning at school. Unfortunately, the instrumentalist educational culture, the education-oriented culture, was not something that could be displaced by the efforts of a few pedagogues. Most Koreans believe that a diploma from a prestigious university will bring happiness in life. Even if the college entrance examination system is changed to a discussion and essay format, private education that imparts the most effective tricks to master discussion and essays will be instantly activated. The parental idea that "only my child needs to succeed" is hindering experiments and improvements in public education.

Another alternative is needed. First, it is necessary to analyze and recognize what education is for Koreans. In traditional Korean society, which accepted Confucian ideology as the basis of government-academic education, education was an opportunity to enter officialdom. Anyone from a social class other than that of slave was provided the opportunity to become a bureaucrat through the civil service examination. In reality, it was difficult for commoners to become bureaucrats by studying, but even aristocrats had to study in the civil service examination to become bureaucrats. During the Japanese colonial period, although the status system was abolished, the chance of finding a socially enviable job was only possible after graduating from school. For a long time, education in Korea has served as a tool to obtain enviable careers.

This long historical trajectory has not improved the understanding of various occupations within South Korea; it has functioned mainly to highlight jobs that can be obtained through school study. There are few opportunities to have various interests and interests related to occupation and life. In Korea, Dewey's education cannot be achieved simply by providing students with debate classes. It is necessary to promote the world of various jobs and work related to livelihood, and cooperation between various groups, such as labor, industry, and education should be given priority. In other words, research on Dewey and a detailed analysis of the

historical specificity of Korean education should be conducted together. In addition, education should not be conducted that is indifferent to all political actions under the slogan of maintaining political neutrality. This is because when politics works properly, interest in the diverse world of life and work will arise accordingly.

The second proposal is as follows. Now, we must listen to the voices of each and every one of the educational fields. In other words, various micro-historical studies should be conducted. Teachers, students, and parents, who have been the subjects of Korean education since liberation, should be able to look at what kind of educational lives they have actually lived. For example, a researcher of Deweyan education makes the critique that that no more entrance exam-oriented education should be conducted. What then are the inputs from teachers, students, and parents, who are the subjects of actual education? In most cases, their diverse voices are not reflected in research on Dewey. Ministry of Education officials, especially, uniformly, unilaterally, and abstractly put Dewey's ideas into the schools and create analyses in the same manner. There seems to be little interest in ascertaining the difficulties the subjects of education face in actual education, what they hope for, and what kind of lives they want to live.

In Korea, research on John Dewey's educational thought has steadily expanded. In this process, the Dewey educational ideology has been recognized as a key to solving the evils of Korean education. Now is the time to analyze the light and dark sides of Korean education *as it is*, to consider the voices of various subjects of education when developing education policy, and to reflect on the meaning of Korean education more broadly.

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