



Childhood and Colonial Modernity: *Kindergarten Education in 1910s Korea*

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Abstract

This study examines kindergarten education in Korea during the 1910s, a pivotal period characterized by cultural transformation and colonial influence. Drawing primarily on missionary educator Edwin W. Koons' 1918 article in The Korea Magazine, this study offers a glimpse into the pedagogical practices, institutional structures, and cultural implications of early childhood education. Kindertartens during this period functioned not only as early learning institutions but also as sites of cultural formation and social discipline. This article examines how missionary-led kindertartens incorporated Western pedagogical principles, especially those derived from Friedrich Froebel and John Dewey, while also promoting values of hygiene, obedience, and moral discipline, aligning with colonial discourse and Christian ideals. By investigating curricular content, student demographics, and gendered access to education, this study reveals how these institutions reflected broader colonial and social dynamics. This research contributes to the historiography of colonial education by highlighting the roles of missionaries not only as agents of Christianization but also as significant figures in shaping Korea's modern educational landscape through early childhood institutions.

Keywords: kindertartens, early childhood education, colonial Korea, Edwin W. Koons, *The Korea Magazine*

This article is based on a section of my doctoral dissertation, "Seongyosa Edwin Wade Koons-ui saengae-wa hwaldong yeongu: Hakgyo gyeongyeong-gwa gyoyuk hyeonhwang josa-reul jungsim-euro" (A Study on the Life and Work of Missionary Edwin Wade Koons: Focusing on School Management and Educational Status Research), completed for my PhD in education at the Academy of Korean Studies. It has been substantially revised and expanded to include new analyses, sources, and perspectives.

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Introduction

The 1910s marked a critical period in the development of modern education in Korea, characterized by the coexistence of diverse educational systems and the emerging stage of early childhood education. Educational institutions during this time included traditional schools, known as *seodang*, mission schools established by Christian missionaries, public schools administered by the Japanese Government-General of Korea (hereafter, Government-General), and private schools founded by Korean individuals and organizations. While *seodang* provided basic literacy training rooted in Confucian principles, their rote memorization approach differed significantly from the concept of kindergartens, which emphasized child-centered learning and early childhood care.

This study examines the state of kindergarten education in Korea during the 1910s through the lens of Edwin Koons (1880–1947), an American missionary and educator. Assigned to Korea in 1913 by the Northern Presbyterian Mission Board, Koons served as the principal of Kyungshin School (also known as the John D. Wells Academy) for 26 years until 1939.¹ Koons' contributions to English-language publications provide a rare window into the Korean education system during this transformative period.²

One of Koons' significant contributions was an educational sketch series in *The Korea Magazine*, in which he explored schools across Seoul. His article from March 1918 on kindergarten offers a valuable glimpse into the educational practices and institutional structures of the early colonial

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1. The spelling of school names varies from the English versions used during the colonial period. This paper will use the current names of the schools throughout. These include Kyungshin for Kyung Sin, Chungshin for Ching Sin, Baewha for Paiwha, Choongang for Chung Ang, and Gyeongseong for Kyung Sung.
 2. Koons wrote articles in magazines, including *The Korea Magazine* (published 1917–1919), *The Korea Bookman* (1920–1925), *The Korea Mission Field* (1905–1942), and *Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1900–present). He also wrote a Korean book on Presbyterian weddings and funeral rituals, published out of concern that superstitions and traditional customs at the time might hinder the propagation of Christianity. Quotes from Koons' writings in this article retain the original orthography.

period.³ Additionally, Koons' data on gender distribution, financial conditions, and enrollment figures enable a rich socio-educational analysis. His work is particularly valuable as research on education during the colonial period has primarily focused on the years after 1920 due to the challenges of accessing records and documents from the early colonial period (Kang 2013).

Minnette E. Norton's article, "Kindergarten Work" in *The Korea Mission Field* is another missionary report on early childhood education in colonial Korea.⁴ Writing from Haeju, Norton offers a personal and evangelical perspective, describing kindergarten as "one of the best modern results of Christianity" and emphasizing its potential for moral uplift and community transformation. She asserted that "Christianity is the only religion that appreciates childhood," framing early childhood education as a uniquely Christian mission (Norton 1912). Although her account includes details on teaching materials and hygiene practices, she largely reflects missionary aspiration rather than a systematic institutional overview. By contrast, Koons' writing offers both qualitative description and contextualized data gathered from surveys, interviews, and on-site visits.

Norton's and Koons' writings, however, share similar views that reflect progressive educational ideals and a missionary belief in the moral discipline of early education. The emphasis on hygiene, obedience, and bodily discipline parallels broader colonial discourses of modernity and moral governance. The concept of hygiene during the 19th and 20th centuries was closely tied to public health and social control, linking it to the notions of racial and social superiority and justifying colonial expansion (Bashford

3. *The Korea Magazine* was an English-language monthly magazine published from January 1917 to April 1919. Enriched with literary elements, it aimed to help missionaries become better acquainted with the Korean people. See *The Korea Magazine's* editorial notes for its aim and scope.

4. Mrs. A. H. Norton (Minnette E. Norton, 1880–1970) was a missionary who served in Heeju and Seoul, in the early 20th century. Alongside her husband, a medical missionary of the United Methodist Church, Norton played an active role in educational and evangelistic activities, including operating a kindergarten and organizing mothers' meetings as part of her outreach efforts. She was a member of a medical and publishing committee and translated three children's books (Hur 2022).

2003; Sen 2005; Tiffin 2001).

Previous studies (Choi 1994; Hee Jung Kim 2001; Sang Geum Lee 1987; Yunjin Lee 2007; Park 1998) have extensively analyzed early childhood education during Korea's colonial period. However, this study centers on Koons' immediate school site observations, detailing their history, organizational structures, student and teacher dynamics, and curricula features, thereby offering a more vivid picture of how early childhood education functioned both ideologically and practically within colonial Korea.

Kindergarten education in Korea was shaped by pedagogical ideas from Europe and America. Friedrich Froebel's child-centered philosophy, which emphasized structural play and group activities, had a significant influence on kindergarten education in Japan (Shirakawa 1996). The Japanese settlers and Christian missionaries introduced these ideas to kindergartens in Korea, embedding practices that continue to influence modern education today. For example, the term "*yuchiwon*," coined during the colonial period, remains the Korean term for kindergarten, and many traditional children's songs from this era are still in use (Jahng 2013).

Unlike primary schools, which were tightly controlled by the Government-General, kindergartens during this period operated with great pedagogical flexibility. This autonomy enabled Christian missionaries to take a leading role in establishing and shaping kindergartens for Koreans, incorporating religious and moral instruction within broader childcare frameworks (Sang Geum Lee 1987; Yunjin Lee 2007). Missionary-led kindergartens integrated religious education while incorporating childcare elements specified in the Joseon Educational Ordinance. Following the 1915 prohibition of religious education in private schools under Revised Private School Regulations, missionary organizations turned to kindergartens as alternative settings for their evangelistic efforts. These institutions not only addressed the developmental needs of young children but also cultivated a sense of cultural and national identity (Yunjin Lee 2006).

Although Koons does not frame kindergarten education in explicitly ideological terms, his descriptions align with Western educational norms that associate childhood discipline with the development of moral character. These values intersected with colonial discourses of bodily discipline and

civilizational progress. While this will be further explored in later sections, it is essential to acknowledge that kindergarten education in colonial Korea was shaped by overlapping influences from Western pedagogical ideas, Japanese educational reform, and Protestant missionary values.

By situating Koons' work, this study seeks to illuminate the multifaceted roles of kindergartens in the 1910s. These include the assimilation policies of the Japanese colonial government, the nationalistic aspirations of Korean founders, and the moral and evangelical missions of Christian missionaries. This analysis contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how early childhood education operated not just as a space of learning, but as a site of cultural production and social discipline in modern Korean history.

The History of Kindergarten Education in Korea

The first legal framework for establishing kindergartens was introduced in April 1908 with the inclusion of a clause in Ordinance No. 22, which permitted higher institutions for girls to establish affiliated kindergartens. Consequently, regulations regarding kindergartens were included in the government-run Hanseong Girls' School (Choi 1994; Park 1998).⁵

Koons provided details on the kindergartens that existed in Seoul in 1917, detailing their numbers, types, enrolled students, teachers, and financial conditions. He noted that despite a clear demand for early childhood education, the lack of financial resources hindered the expansion of kindergartens in Seoul:

Considering the attention this branch of education has received in Japan Proper, one can hardly say that a beginning has been made in Chosen. This is not because there are no children to attend, for the country swarms with youngsters of the proper age. Nor is there any lack of desire for

5. Hanseong Girls' School was the first government-established educational institution under the Girls' High School Act. It was later renamed Gyeongseong Girls' Higher Common School in 1911, and its current name is Kyunggi Girls' High School.

instruction; any visitor will be struck with the zeal and enthusiasm of the children in any of the few kindergartens now in operation. And in most cases, bitter grinding poverty makes it out of the question for parents to furnish any private facilities, and often to take advantage of what the Government provides for the older children, to say nothing of educational luxuries like this. (Koons 1918a, 98)

Koons predicted the following regarding the financial resources and the legal framework necessary for the establishment of kindergartens:

The resources of the Government and of the Missions are already taxed to the limit, and while Primary and Secondary Education is still unprovided for a great share of the population, there seems small chance of any general provision of kindergartens in the near future. (Koons 1918a, 98)

Provisions for kindergartens were eventually made in 1922 when regulations were established based on the second Joseon Educational Ordinance. The second Joseon Educational Ordinance established specific regulations for kindergarten operations. It set the admission age for children from 3 to 7 years, defined the financial responsibilities involved in establishing kindergartens, outlined the requirements and procedures for their establishment, and specified the purposes of childcare (Choi 1994, 46). Despite these regulations, there were few restrictions on educational content, which allowed kindergartens to function as institutions for teaching the Korean language and fostering the national spirit, even during the colonial period when the Korean language was removed from the curriculum (Park 1998, 364).

Over time, the legal regulations concerning kindergartens became more detailed, and public awareness began to improve. Since some preschool-aged children were already attending traditional private educational institutions, known as *seodang*, the concept of kindergarten education was not entirely new to Koreans. *Seodang* education was teacher-centered and deeply rooted in Confucianism. Its teachings focused on filial piety, emphasizing family harmony, virtue, respect for the elderly, and good

manners (Sook Hee Lee 1999; Park and Yang 2016).

Additionally, with the introduction of Western-style modern education, Christian missionary schools often accepted young orphans and began their education. Many of these schools, referred to as “day schools,” included preparatory or kindergarten classes to accommodate children before they entered primary school (Park 1998). Both Ewha School and Baewha School started as day schools, and it was Protestant missionaries who played a key role in establishing kindergartens during the Japanese colonial period.

Missionaries in Korea also eventually needed to establish an institution for their children after years of living in the country. In the early days, there were few Western children, and formal school was not necessary since many of them were not married. However, as missionaries settled into families and the number of their children in Korea grew, the Seoul Foreign School (SFS) was established in 1912. This school catered to the children of missionaries and English-speaking foreign residents.

Before the establishment of Seoul Foreign School, schools for foreign children in Seoul began in 1901 when Mrs. Homer B. Hulbert taught around fifteen students in her home. For many years, the education of Western children largely depended on their mothers or small groups of families. By 1909, there were 124 missionary children in Korea, and two schools for foreigners were established. Unlike the Pyongyang Foreign School, which was supported by the Northern Presbyterian Mission, SFS was a community school that did not receive mission support. This independence allowed SFS to operate without interference from mission boards, but it also resulted in financial instability (Seoul Foreign School 2012).

By 1912, Christian private schools were operating 53 preparatory or kindergarten programs focusing on early childhood education, including 10 located in Seoul (Sook Hee Lee 1999, 284). Koons acknowledged limited knowledge regarding kindergartens outside of Seoul but suggested that most of the kindergartens for Japanese and Korean children were likely located in the capital:

Outside Seoul there are private kindergartens in some of the larger Japanese centers, and the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society of the

Methodist Church (North) maintains two for Koreans, one in Chinnampo, and one in Chemulpo. There may be others also, concerning which information has not come to the writer. In any case, it is safe to say that the bulk of this work, for Japanese and Korean children alike, is in the Capital. (Koons 1918a, 98)

The history of Japanese kindergartens in Korea began in the early settlement areas, primarily around open ports and Seoul. The first kindergarten in Korea was established by the Wonsan Settlement Association in 1888, located in Wonsan. Following this, kindergartens were set up in various locations, including Busan, where a private kindergarten was founded in 1897, as well as in Seoul, Incheon (Chemulpo), Gunsan, Chinnampo, and Daegu. The primary aim of these institutions was to educate the children of Japanese residents. In Busan, a Froebel-style kindergarten was established, which was the first independent formal educational institution dedicated specifically to young children outside the home. However, since this kindergarten was intended for Japanese children, it is not recognized as part of Korean kindergarten history (Sook Hee Lee 1999, 285).

Among the kindergartens mentioned by Koons, the one located in Chemulpo is believed to be Yeongwha Kindergarten. This institution was established in 1917 by the Christian missionary Margaret I. Hess as a part of Yeongwha Girls' School. Hess managed the kindergarten and prepared necessary educational materials by ordering them or receiving donations from the United States (Choi 1994, 52). Koons noted the following regarding the classification and recognition of kindergartens in Seoul:

The Government reports two classes: Private, and (supported by the Japanese School Association of Seoul) Public. In addition, there are schools doing kindergarten work, though not officially recognized, in connection with three Missions in Seoul. (Koons 1918a, 99)

According to Koons' account, there is only one public kindergarten in Seoul and three private kindergartens officially recognized by the government for Japanese children. The public kindergarten mentioned by Koons is Gyeongja

Memorial Kindergarten. Both Gyeongja Memorial Kindergarten in Seoul and Incheon Memorial Kindergarten were established in 1900 to celebrate the marriage of Japanese Crown Prince Yoshihito 嘉仁 in Seoul and Incheon, respectively (Choi 1994, 55). The three private kindergartens that Koons refers to are Munoe Kindergarten, Sin Yongsan (New Ryuzan) Kindergarten, and Yongsan (Ryuzan) Kindergarten, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

To estimate the number of school-age children, Koons referred to the procession of students who went to pay their respects at the Government-General on the Emperor's Birthday:

On the Emperor's Birthday, the procession of school children of all ages and grades, that went to pay its respects at the office of the Governor-General, was estimated at 12,000 or 15,000. There should be in Seoul fully 30,000 of school age, that is from 7 years to 15, and there might be 6,000 more eligible for the kindergarten. The task of providing school facilities for the growing population of this city is a staggering one. (Koons 1918a, 99)

Koons' interest in this student population data arose from a desire to highlight the shortage of school facilities for Seoul's growing urban population. Throughout his article, he consistently emphasized that educational resources were inadequate compared to the rapidly increasing population. Koons mentioned the following in his description of a notable kindergarten in Seoul:

Any of the schools mentioned above is well worth a visit, but for those who have little time, the most picturesque, and most accessible kindergarten in Seoul is the Kyung Sung Yuchiwon [Gyeongseong Kindergarten], at 34 Insa-dong, immediately behind the Pagoda Park. "Yuchiwon" is the happy translation of Kindergarten, it means literally "Garden of little children." (Koons 1918a, 100-101)

Gyeongseong Kindergarten, which catered to the wealthy, presented quite a spectacle as most children arrived accompanied by four or five nannies or

servants. Prominent figures such as Yi Wanyong and the governor of Gyeonggi-do attended its graduation ceremonies (Sook Hee Lee 1999). However, this kindergarten left a negative impression on many Koreans due to criticisms that it educated young children to become pro-Japanese. As a result, Gyeongseong Kindergarten has not been considered the first kindergarten in Korea. Instead, Ewha Kindergarten, established by missionaries as part of Ewha Girls' School in 1914, is often recognized as the starting point of kindergarten education in the country. Some also argue that Choongang Kindergarten, founded by Park Heedo in 1916 at Seoul's Choongang Church, was the country's first kindergarten. Park Heedo, one of the 33 leaders of the March First Movement, established this kindergarten with the goal of training strong individuals who would work and fight well for the future of Korea, positioning it as a nationalist institution (Park 1998, 351, 346).

Early kindergartens started on a small scale, usually accommodating around 10 children. However, their size grew significantly within a few years. The increasing number of children attending kindergartens led to the establishment of more kindergartens and teacher training programs. In September 1922, a teacher training department was established at Choongang Kindergarten, and by 1926, institutions such as Gyeongseong Childcare School and the childcare department at Soongeui Girls' School had been training kindergarten teachers (Park 1998, 351).

During the 1920s, as admissions to primary schools became more competitive, kindergarten education was viewed as a preparatory stage for primary schools. This shift resulted in a growing public interest in early childhood education. Additionally, Children's Day was established in 1922, further supporting the development of early childhood education (Hee Jung Kim 2001, 44).

Profiles of Kindergarten Education in the 1910s: Students and Teachers

This section provides an overview of the demographic composition of students and teachers in various types of kindergartens in colonial Seoul.

Understanding the gender, financial status, and background of students and teachers is essential to grasp the social dynamics of early childhood education under colonial rule.

Koons visited a Japanese kindergarten preparing for the Dolls' Festival. He recorded statistics about the kindergarten and observed the students. He was particularly impressed by an eight-year-old boy's piano-playing skills:

All the kindergartens but one are Private. That is for Japanese, has a staff of 4 teachers, and enrolls 82 boys and 58 girls. The tuition is ¥1.50 per month, and the running expense totals ¥2,688 a year. The writer visited this school just as they were preparing for the "Dolls' Festival." Some 30 youngsters were gaily decked in ceremonial costumes of various sorts, and practicing diligently a complicated marching figure. The music was furnished partly by a bright lad in his eighth year, whose chubby fingers pounded out a lusty melody on the piano, though to get the volume of the sound, he had to put two fingers together for the sake of strength. How many American kindergartens have a boy pianist of this tender age? (Koons 1918a, 99)

In his writing, Koons did not specify the name of the kindergarten he visited. However, based on the number of students and expenses he reported, it can be inferred that he was referring to the Gyeongja Memorial Kindergarten in Seoul. The figures match those recorded in the 1917 edition of the *Chōsen (Korea) School Directory* (Chōsen sōtokufu gakumukyoku 1917), which includes statistics on kindergartens for Japanese children living in Korea. Koons noted that higher tuition fees were associated with a decrease in the enrollment of girls:

There are 3 kindergartens privately conducted for Japanese children. The total enrollment is 82 boys and 78 girls, with 6 teachers in all. The fee is ¥1.00 per month. It must be more than a coincidence that as the fees are less, the enrollment of girls increases. The annual expense is ¥2,289, and the amount not received from fees is made up by private subscriptions, from patrons and friends of the school. (Koons 1918a, 99)

This observation indicates that even among Japanese residents in Korea at that time, there was less enthusiasm for girls' education compared to that for boys. Table 1 lists Seoul's private kindergartens for Japanese, the number of male and female students, as well as the associated expenses mentioned, which correspond to the above records.

Table 1. Private Kindergartens for Japanese Children in Seoul (1917)

Name	Location	Establishment date	Number of boys	Number of girls	Annual expense (yen)
Munoe Kindergarten	Gang Gijeong	February 1914	33	30	500
Sin Yongsan (New Ryuzan) Kindergarten	Hangangtong	May 1915	24	26	1,152
Yongsan (Ryuzan) Kindergarten	Wonjeong	December 1915	25	22	637
Totals			82	78	2,289

Source: *Chōsen School Directory* (Chōsen sōtokufu gakumukyoku 1917).

In Japanese kindergartens, there were more male students, while kindergartens run by missionaries had a higher number of female students. This discrepancy was likely related to the fact that most kindergartens established during this period were affiliated with girls' schools. Koons noted that "with one exception, all kindergartens for Korean children were missionary institutions." He provided information on Ewha School, Ching Sin (Chungshin) School, and Paiwha (Baewha) School:

With a single exception, all the kindergartens for Korean children are Mission institutions. The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church has three; one at the East Gate, one at Chong No, one at Ewha Haktang. The first school was opened in January, 1914. Since 1915 the Presbyterian School for Girls, Ching Sin Hakkyo, has maintained a kindergarten. The total enrollment is 50 boys and 40 girls,

with 7 teachers, in addition to the Directress, Miss Brownlee, who gives her full time to this work. The annual expense, including her salary, is ¥2,150. The first school opened in January, 1914, and since then 10 have finished the full course of 2 years, and graduated, while 9 more will graduate this spring. (*The Korea Magazine* 1918, 99–100)

Early kindergartens in Korea were primarily founded by foreign missionaries or notable individuals, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Private Kindergartens for Korean Children in Seoul (1917)

Name	Founder(s)	Establishment year	Location
Gyeongseong Kindergarten	Yi Wan-yong and 4 others	1914	Inside Gyeongseong Girls' High School
Ewha Kindergarten	Charlotte G. Brownlee	1914	Sontag Hotel
Yeondong Kindergarten (Chungshin Girls' School)	Yu Gakgyeong	1915	Yeondong
Choongang Kindergarten	Park Hee-do and 2 others	1916	Insadong
Baewha Kindergarten	Josephine P. Campbell	1917	Inside Deoksugung Palace
Deoksugung Kindergarten	Korean royal family	1916	Nuhadong

Source: Reconstructed from Sook Hee Lee (1999, 291).

Ewha Kindergarten, established in 1914 in the former Sontag Hotel building, was founded by Christian missionary Charlotte G. Brownlee. The kindergarten began with just 16 children in a space that had previously served as a women's hospital, known as Bogu Yeogwan. The principal of Ewha Haktang, Lulu E. Frey, met Brownlee while on vacation in the United States at the Cincinnati Kindergarten Training School. She invited Brownlee to come to Korea to work as a kindergarten teacher. From this point, the establishment of Christian kindergartens expanded throughout Korea. In 1915, Ewha Kindergarten launched a teacher training program, known as

the Ewha Kindergarten Teachers' Department, aiming at training kindergarten teachers. Brownlee established a kindergarten teacher training program within Ewha Haktang, starting with a single student, Jo Alice, who had studied in Japan (Choi 1994, 51–52).

Brownlee had been significantly influenced by Froebel's educational beliefs and pedagogy. She translated Froebel's works, including *The Education of Man* and *Mother-play and Nursery Songs*, and authored several books on early childhood education. As a key figure in developing kindergarten education in Korea, she helped establish early kindergartens that implemented Froebel's play-based curriculum, contributing to institutions such as Ewha Kindergarten and Choongang Kindergarten (Sook Hee Lee 1999). In 1923, the Chosun Froebel Shop opened in Korea, selling Froebel's educational materials (Sook Hee Lee 1987).

Ethel Van Wagoner was another pioneering woman missionary with a background in education. She arrived in Korea to teach children when SFS opened in the fall of 1912. Ethel was the stepsister of Carl Rufus, a Methodist missionary to Korea. For four years, she served as the only full-time teacher at SFS, instructing all grades from kindergarten up. Later, she married Horace Horton Underwood and remained active in the school throughout her life.

The students of SFS were often the children of prominent missionaries and businessmen in Korea. Edward S. Avison, whose father was the founder of Severance Medical College, recalled, "I started the day Ethel van Wagoner opened the doors. I was pretty young, I guess, because I remember her pulling out one of my teeth. I stayed through my junior year" (Seoul Foreign School 2012, 178). Marion Morris also attended SFS; her father, James H. Morris, installed the first streetcar system and managed an agency for the Overland automobile in Korea. In recognition of his support for SFS, the school auditorium was named Morris Hall.

Below is a description of Yeongdong Kindergarten, which was operated by the Presbyterian Church:

Since 1915 the Presbyterian School for Girls, Ching Sin [Chungshin] Hakkyo, has maintained a kindergarten. The organizer and first teacher, a



Figure 1 and 2. Students at SFS in 1913 (left) and students in front of Morris Hall in 1923 (right)

Source: Seoul Foreign School (2012, 189, 190).

daughter of the Vice-Governor of Kyung Keui [Gyeonggi] Province, studied in Peking. She has done much original work, particularly in translating from English to Korean, and has produced material of permanent value, with a freshness of style, and adaptation to the Korean mind, beyond the hope of any but a Korean. The school enrolls 20 boys and 30 girls, with an annual budget of ¥25.00. The two teachers are not paid for their work in the kindergarten as they are also regular teachers in the school itself. (Koons 1918a, 100)

The teacher referred to by Koons, who studied in Beijing before returning, is Yu Gakgyeong. She was the fourth graduate of Chungshin Girls' School and the daughter of Yu Seongjun, who was the head of the Accounting Bureau of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce during the Japanese colonial period. She was also the niece of the reformist Yu Giljun (Yong Suk Kim 2022, 111). After graduating from Chungshin Girls' School, Yu Gakgyeong completed her studies in the Childcare Department of Peking Union Medical College for Women in 1914. She then returned to her alma mater, Chungshin Girls' School, to work as a teacher until 1920. Later, she co-founded the YWCA with figures like Kim Pil-rye and Kim Hwallan, serving as its president. Additionally, Yu Gakgyeong collaborated closely with Ethel Van Wagoner in the Korea Women's Christian Temperance Union, which was established by Protestant women leaders like Hong Ester and Kim Hunsuk. This interdenominational women's organization played a significant

role in the temperance movement, aiming to enhance the well-being of families and the nation (Han 2015, 376).

In May 1915, Yu Gakgyeong established Yeondong Kindergarten with 12 students, but it closed in 1917. The kindergarten was situated on the lower floor of the former dormitory building of the girls' school within the Yeondong mission district (Yong Suk Kim 2022, 112). Chungshin Girls' School, founded by medical missionary Annie J. Ellers, was initially located in Jeongdong but relocated to Yeondong in 1895, where it was renamed Yeondong Girls' School. In 1909, it was renamed Chungshin Girls' School and officially recognized as a private institution (Yeongdong Church 2015).

Figure 3 depicts a Christmas celebration at Yeondong Kindergarten in 1916. The scene features a decorated Christmas tree and a framed image celebrating the occasion. Christmas was one of the first church holidays to take root in Korea, serving as a window for experiencing Western Christian culture. The photo on the right shows a wedding photograph of Yu Gakgyeong taken in 1917 at the home of John F. Genso. At the time, Genso's wife, Mabel R. Genso, served as the principal of Chungshin Girls' School, from which Yu Gakgyeong graduated.

After discussing Ewha and Chungshin, Koons also presented statistics



Figure 3 and 4. A Christmas party at Yeondong Kindergarten in 1916 (left, Kindergarten Party) and Yu Gakgyeong's marriage in 1917 (right, Yu's Marriage)

Source: Theological Commons Moffett Korea Collection.

on the kindergarten operated by Baewha School:

In connection with Paiwha [Baewha] Haktang, the Southern Methodist school for girls, there is a kindergarten, now in its second year. It enrolls 65 girls, and no boys, with two teachers, and involves an annual expense of ¥480.00. (Koons 1918a, 100)

Josephine P. Campbell was the first female missionary from the Southern Methodist Church to serve in Korea. She arrived in the country and established Baewha School, Jonggyo Church, and Jagyo Church. In 1898, she founded Baewha School, which was initially named Carolina Institute because it was funded by donations from children in South Carolina (Gong 2018, 300). Later, Yun Chiho (1865–1945) renamed it Baewha 培花, which means “a place of learning where women are beautifully nurtured and can blossom.”

Koons noted that only the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society schools charged any fee. He explained:

Only the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society schools mentioned above have any fee. They charge 10 sen per month, and the Directress says of this, “some pay, and more do not.” (Koons 1918a, 100)

Considering that the tuition fees for Japanese kindergartens ranged from 1 to 1.5 yen, this fee was quite modest; however, it is evident that many were unable to afford even this small amount.

Additionally, Koons provided an account of his visit to Gyeongseong Kindergarten. In contrast to other kindergartens for Korean children, Gyeongseong had higher tuition fees, and instruction was conducted in Japanese:

This is a private school, recognized by the authorities as being of the same grade as the public schools. It is maintained for the children of wealthy citizens of Seoul. The fee is ¥2.00 per month, and out of the 60 students, only 9 are girls, one of them a Japanese. All the boys are Korean. There is

an endowment that yields a good sum, and private gifts also help to bring the total annual revenue up to ¥1,910. Of the 3 teachers, 2 are Japanese, and all the teaching is done in the National Language [Japanese]. Some of the little girls are dressed in Japanese style, and the visitor was hopelessly puzzled when he was asked to pick out the one little Japanese girl from among them. (Koons 1918a, 101)

Except for one girl, all the children in the kindergarten were Korean. The institution catered to the children of wealthy families in Seoul. Most of the students were boys since the tuition fees at this kindergarten were significantly higher than those at others. Additionally, there were more Japanese teachers, and all classes were conducted in Japanese. Some children wore Japanese-style clothing, indicating that the students primarily came from pro-Japanese families. This kindergarten clearly aimed to foster a sense of empathy toward Japan through its distinctive Japanese-style educational approach.

The following is a record of children at Gyeongseong Kindergarten singing Japanese songs:

The children came out to the yard and played in the sand. From the nearby government-run Gyeongseong Girls' Higher Common School, the sound of the national anthem of Japan (君が代) could be heard. Upon hearing it, the kindergarten children immediately began singing the anthem as well. (Sook Hee Lee 1999, 289)

Gyeongseong Kindergarten's tuition fees were about double those of kindergartens for Japanese children. Additionally, the student-to-teacher ratio was more favorable, with each teacher responsible for approximately 20 children, whereas teachers in other kindergartens often managed 30 or more.

The children bring their lunch, as they do in many other schools of the same grade. But there is one feature of this school that all the others lack, a bevy Korean nurses in attendance on the younger children. The building

is a new one, in Korean style, the equipment is lavish, and the children themselves, coming from the best homes of the city, leave nothing to be desired in clothing or appearance. There seems also to be more of personal liberty and attention to the individual than is found in some other schools. This is due partly to the small enrollment as compared with the number of teachers, partly, doubtless, to the fact that the age limit is higher than in the Japanese schools. (Koons 1918a, 101)

This suggests that the educational environment at Gyeongseong Kindergarten was superior. Most kindergartens at the time were operated as part of primary schools and likely had similar facilities; however, Gyeongseong Kindergarten, attended by the privileged class, was considered luxurious even by Koons.

Kindergarten Education: Innovations and Influences

Koons shared his observations of students demonstrating autonomy and initiative during his visit to Gyeongja Memorial Kindergarten:

It was pleasant to note the freedom of action and opportunity for initiative in even this large and crowded school. It seems that there is a movement in this direction, compared with a visit to the same school some time since. The change may make the work of the teacher harder, but surely the advantage of an opportunity to learn by one's own efforts is a distinct gain to the pupils. (Koons 1918a, 99)

This indicates that Koons maintained an active engagement with education affairs, as evidenced by his repeated school visits to observe educational practices. It may further be inferred that he participated in discussions with fellow missionaries regarding the prospective trajectory of schooling in Korea. Friedrich Froebel played a foundational role in shaping kindergarten curricula. In 1839, he founded the Play and Activity Institute, which he later renamed "Kindergarten." Froebel emphasized the importance of children's

interests and play, viewing play as the most effective form of self-activity that offered opportunities for expression and creativity. His objective was to maintain an integrated and activity-centered approach to education (Kyusu Kim 1997, 120).

John Dewey, who was influenced by Froebel's educational philosophy, also recognized the significance of child-centered education and play in nurturing young children's abilities. However, while Froebel viewed human development as idealistic and growth-oriented, seeing it as a natural process of unfolding (Konrad 2009), Dewey adopted a more pragmatic and objective approach. He emphasized the development of potential through social interaction and experience (Kwak and Ryum 2021).

Norton's 1912 account of her kindergarten in Haeju also vividly illustrates the practical application of Froebelian principles. She emphasized "systematic training of the child's power" through structured play, music, and manual activities. Her description of "games" and "occupations" such as weaving and paper folding reflects the Froebelian view of learning through guided activity. The emphasis on teaching the child "to do things" and "to learn by doing" also resonates with Dewey's pragmatic approach, in which knowledge arises through experiential learning (Norton 1912).

In the early 20th century, the New Education Movement in Europe and the progressive education movement initiated by John Dewey in the United States were quickly adopted in Japan.⁶ Key Japanese educators, including Higuchi Kanjirō 樋口勘次郎, Tanimoto Tomeri 谷本富, and Oikawa Heiji 及川平治, played significant roles in advocating for educational reform, shifting away from uniform, rote learning towards an approach that valued children's spontaneity and individuality. This New Education Movement gained support during the Taishō 大正 Democracy era, which lasted from the early 1910s to the late 1920s, promoting democratic and liberal ideals

6. John Dewey published numerous influential books advocating for the role of education in society, including *The School and Society* (1899), *Moral Principles in Education Schools of Tomorrow* (1915), and *Democracy and Education* (1916). According to Dewey, education was the liberation of an individual's capacity to progressively grow toward social ends (Sang Hyun Kim 2020).

(Gil-sang Lee 2013, 114).⁷

During his visits to educational institutions, Koons observed these changes toward child-centered education. He documented his observations of kindergarten teaching practices and the noticeable changes among the children who attended. Introducing *seodang* in his educational sketch series, he remarked:

Unless he is deaf, a walk of 15 minutes through the narrow streets of the residence parts of the city, between 10 of the morning and 3 or 4 of the afternoon, will bring his ear the murmur of boyish voices repeating at desperate speed stately syllables of “Thousand Character Classic” or the “Hundred year Pattern.” (Koons 1918b, 57)

In contrast, the kindergarten experience emphasized play, song, and expression over memorization. Koons noted:

Though the number of graduates from the Mission school is small, their influence is not confined to these. More than a hundred students are reported as having taken part of the course and dropped out, and as shown above, there are now over two hundred in attendance. Even a short contact with the new world of songs and games and directed self-expression cannot fail to make a decided impression on a plastic little mind. The change that comes to the Korean boys and girls while they are attending is marked. Cleaner and better clothing, attention to care of the hands and face, general neatness, and a habit of obedience to authority, are all “outward signs of an inward grace.” The reflex effect they have upon their families and home life is less evident, but possibly more lasting. (Koons 1918a, 100)

7. The New Educational Movement in Japan, which emerged during the Taishō era (1912–1926), was closely tied to the ideals of Taishō Democracy. Both the New Educational Movement and Taishō Democracy sought to empower individuals and promote social equity. This period witnessed the flourishing of mass media and greater access to education, while women’s rights also gained momentum (Meyer 2003; Minichiello 1998).

Koons' assertion that cleanliness and obedience were "outward signs of an inward grace" may appear consistent with colonial discourses where education on hygiene, discipline, and obedience was seen as a civilizing mission aimed at transforming behaviors to reflect colonizers' ideals. However, it is important to contextualize these observations within the evangelical framework of missionary work.

According to Sonja M. Kim (2014), missionaries made significant efforts to spread the "gospel of hygiene" in churches, hospitals, schools, and women's groups. The "Better Baby Movement" and similar child welfare campaigns were taken up by missionaries in Korea to emphasize maternal education, nutritional care, and disease prevention. Kim argues that Christian ideals of service and domesticity, which emphasize family, home, and childhood, were crucial in shaping how missionaries developed infant welfare programs to achieve their evangelistic objectives.

Norton's writings similarly reflect this view. She emphasized that "Christianity is the only religion that appreciates childhood." She cited an example of how a troubled neighborhood in San Francisco was transformed utilizing a kindergarten, and how children and parents in other cities became strong supporters of the kindergarten and Christianity. Thus, Koons' observations should not be interpreted solely in the context of colonialism; rather, they reflect a blend of Western pedagogical innovation and missionary compassion.

Although records of daily schedules for kindergarten curricula in the 1910s are limited, based on the summary of the curricula from Ewha and Choongang Kindergartens, the following schedule can be reconstructed (Sook Hee Lee 1999, 292–293):

- 9:00–9:30: Arrival, changing into indoor shoes
- 9:30–10:00: Free-choice activities
- 10:00–10:40: Drawing, singing, rhythmic activities
- 10:40–11:10: Snack time, rest, and restroom break
- 11:10–11:50: Storytelling, games or play in the playground
- 11:50–12:10: Cleanup time (singing while waiting for parents)
- 12:10: Dismissal

The curriculum centered on music, storytelling, and creative play. Many of the songs were translated from German and American folk tunes, demonstrating the transnational nature of missionary educational practices. Nevertheless, early kindergartens faced considerable cultural resistance. Parents often expected their children to receive literacy instruction, not games and songs (Sung-Eun Kim 2014, 135). As noted by Brownlee and Wagner,⁸ missionaries organized meetings for mothers to encourage acceptance of unfamiliar educational models (Sook Hee Lee 1999, 293). Despite these challenges, missionary kindergartens grew rapidly, benefiting from church infrastructure and a mission to serve underprivileged families (Sang Geum Lee 1987).

By the 1910s, three distinct types of kindergartens had emerged: those founded by Japanese settlers for Japanese children, those initiated by Koreans for Korean children, and those established by Christian missionaries for Korean children. Each type reflected its founders' goals: colonial assimilation, national awakening, and religious evangelism, respectively, resulting in distinct curricula and philosophies.

Conclusion

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of kindergarten education in Korea during the 1910s, a transformative period when early childhood education began to take root amid diverse cultural and political influences. By examining the insights of Edwin W. Koons, an American missionary who documented the educational landscape in *The Korea Magazine*, this study sheds light on the historical, pedagogical, and sociocultural dimensions of kindergarten education during Korea's colonial era.

One of the key findings is the significant role played by Christian missionaries in the formation and proliferation of kindergartens. Institutions such as Ewha, Baewha, and Chungshin kindergartens served not only as

8. Ellasue C. Wagner was the founder of Hosudon Girls' School in Gaeseong. She operated the city's first kindergarten.

sites of early childhood education but also as platforms for evangelism and social reform. Operating with greater flexibility than government-regulated schools, these kindergartens embodied a pedagogical vision rooted in both Western child-centered theories and Christian values. As shown in Koons' reports, missionaries emphasized hygiene and orderly behavior as visible indicators of personal transformation. This resonates with broader ideological structures of colonial modernity, even if Koons did not consciously endorse them as such.

Equally significant is the socio-economic composition of student populations. Tuition was a crucial factor in shaping gender enrollment patterns. Higher tuition fees often led to a predominance of boys, reflecting societal priorities that favored male education. Conversely, kindergartens with lower fees, such as missionary-run institutions, tended to enroll more girls, providing educational opportunities for a demographic that was often marginalized in the broader societal context of the time. This pattern highlights how economic factors influenced access to education and shaped the gender dynamics within early childhood education.

The curriculum and instructional methods adopted in kindergartens illustrate the influence of contemporary educational philosophies. Koons' observations, along with accounts from Norton, show the application of Froebelian and Deweyan educational principles, including structured play, experiential learning, and attention to child individuality. These approaches marked a clear departure from traditional *seodang* education, which relied on rote memorization of Confucian texts.

Finally, the educational goals and ideological orientations of kindergartens varied based on their founders. Gyeongseong Kindergarten, established by pro-Japanese Koreans, aimed for assimilation by emphasizing loyalty to Japan and promoting imperial values. In contrast, missionary-led kindergartens such as Ewha, Baewha, and Chungshin focused on spreading Christian values, teaching the Korean language, and nurturing moral character. The Korean-run Choongang Kindergarten aimed to foster a sense of pride and aspiration for self-determination.

While these kindergartens were shaped by intersecting forces: colonial governance, Christian mission, and the global circulation of progressive

pedagogy, they also served as spaces where new educational norms, cultural values, and understandings of childhood were formed. They offered visions of moral and personal development, emphasizing cleanliness, cooperation, individuality, and discipline. Kindergartens in the 1910s thus occupied a multifaceted role, contributing to the formation of Korea's educational modernization.

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