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Learning Systems in the Republic of Korea: Lessons From the School

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Abstract

With technological change and the hastening pace of growth, the way of living is being reshaped, which necessitates reflective changes to occur in the education system of every country. Yet, we stumble in nurturing our students with the requisite skills to steer them through the economy of the future. This paper looks into the education system of the Republic of Korea by providing glimpses from the school visit conducted as a part of the Global Capacity-Building Workshop on Global Citizenship Education (GCED) organised by the Asia-Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding (APCEIU), Korea. The visit, apart from sharing the culture of India with the Korean students, helped in gathering insights into the education system of the Republic of Korea. The classroom observation and visit to their learning labs allowed for gaining information about how skills and competencies are given more importance even at the elementary level of education in the Republic of Korea.

Introduction

The foundation of a country rests on the quality of its citizenry, which is the product of the basic institutions' family, religion, and schools. The learning system determined by its school structure and curriculum is the most comparable, adaptable, and receptive to policy. The PISA 2018 result shows that the 15-year olds in the Republic of Korea score 514 points in reading literacy and 526 points in mathematics, which is better than the average of 487 points and 489 points respectively in the OECD countries (Education GPS, OECD 2020). There is a need to understand the school system, the curricular practices, and

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the infrastructural facilities in order to gain a better understanding of the fundamental strengths of the country.

The School System in the Republic of Korea

The starting age of school education in the Republic of Korea is six, and children aged 6–15 are required to attend school. It follows the pattern of six years of primary school, three years of lower secondary school and three years of upper secondary school. At the upper secondary level, schools may be academic or vocational.

The instruction time per subject in general lower secondary education shows more time devoted to the natural sciences. Practical and vocational skills and technology are also part of the natural sciences. Religion, ethics, and moral education are included in the social sciences. At the primary level, a greater number of hours are placed for other subjects, followed by reading, writing and literature. Other subjects at the primary level also include religion, ethics/moral education, and ICT (OECD, 2019).

Table 1

Instruction time per subject		
Subjects	**Primary**	**Lower Secondary**
Reading, writing, literature	21	13
Mathematics,	14	11
Natural sciences	9	20
Social studies	9	15
Second language	6	10
Physical education and health	7	8
Arts	9	8
Other subjects	25	9
Practical and vocational skills	Included in natural sciences	Included in natural sciences
Technology	As part of natural sciences	As part of natural sciences
Religion, ethics/moral education	As a part of social studies and other subjects	Included in social sciences
ICT	As a part of practical and vocational skills and other subjects	As a part of practical and vocational skills

Compiled from OECD, 2019 Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators - © OECD 2019

The National Curriculum Framework 2015 includes general key competencies as well as key competencies specific to each subject area that reflect twenty-first century skills. Creative Experiential Learning (CEL) is included in the curriculum of both primary and secondary schools. Career exploration starts at the lower secondary level and is provided an hour per week (NCEE, 2020). Students in grade I and II in the primary school, apart from the Korean language and mathematics, have subjects like "Good life", "Wise life", and "Happy life".

The curriculum focuses on creativity and character formation, for which experiential activities are undertaken (KICE, 2012). Creativity and critical thinking skills, along with general and occupation-specific skills, are promoted through its curriculum that will nurture skills for future jobs.

Visit to the Government Elementary School

As we move in the bus through the lanes beautifully covered on the sides with both natural scenes and the modern high-rise buildings towards the school, thoughts of school back at home in India linger around. The bus drops us down the lane and we walk uphill along a narrow, crowded street towards Sangdo Elementary School, Dong-jak, Seoul. A large banner greets us GCED educators as we enter their "Global" school. All of us were so excited to see the Korean kids, who were equally thrilled. The

Figure 1: Sangdo Elementary School, Dong-jak, Seoul

usual sounds, laughter, whispers, loud footsteps, all common in the school environment, reached my ears. I turn around to see a group of children happily moving towards their classes.

Infrastructure and Buildings

The school consists of several classrooms, a gymnasium, dining halls, and a huge library, which makes you feel like spending the whole day in the company of the books. The buildings are well maintained with

Figure 2: Walls and doors decorated with student's work

greenery around them. The whole environment is lovely. The school's playing fields are confined to the indoor stadium. The walls and even the doors are brightly decorated with displays, photographs, and students' artwork. Classrooms are well furnished, especially the lower primary classes, which look very attractive with their colourful hexagon-shaped desks and chairs. All the classrooms have smart boards, and teachers make use of ICT in the classroom teaching-learning process.

Everything about the school, from its building, classrooms, activity rooms to the active use of the library, echoes its rich environment for better teaching-learning. More than marks and grades, the focus is on gaining skills and experiences. The learning labs were full of equipment meant for learning by doing. Even the sick room had things which increased curiosity in the children. A foetus, showing different stages of growth is available along with a weighing machine, which the students can use for weighing each foetus each month. The learning imparted about the growth of the foetus in the womb was quite surprising in an elementary school.

Figure 3: Model showing foetus at different stages of growth

Natural sciences are given more hours, and classes are conducted mostly in the laboratory. All equipment are kept arranged in the cupboards and has several student workstations. Natural sciences also include practical and vocational skills, as well as technology. Large computer labs systematically placed with the latest versions available points to the importance given to technological skills.

The school library is modern and well-developed, providing amble reading spaces and a conducive learning environment. The change of location from the tiny, not lighted, untidy, isolated rooms to a welcoming environment showed the importance given to the library as a learning space in the school.

The school for imparting vocational skills is equipped with beauty labs, cooking kits, 3D printing, etc. Children are introduced to all household equipment, viz., washing machines, ovens, cookery sets, etc.

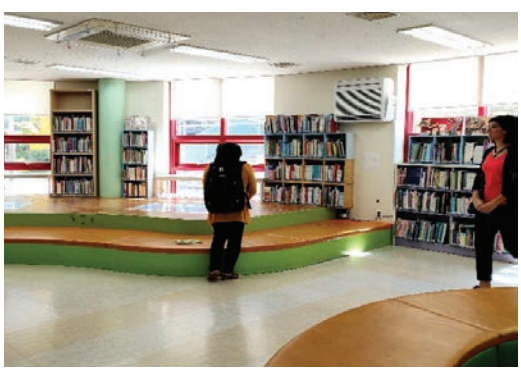


Figure 4 (a): School Library

Figure 4(b): School Library

The care and importance given to instilling the child's mind, both boys and girls, at such a young age about household work and taking care of oneself and others are very evident.

Physical fitness is also given importance, and the school has an indoor stadium and a gym in the building.

Students are served food from the school. At lunch time they diligently enter the neat and clean dining halls after removing their shoes. As is done in our Indian homes, shoes are not allowed inside and are placed in order on the shoe rack. One won't be able to find the washrooms if you can't read the sign boards, as it doesn't stink. There are separate washrooms for boys and girls.

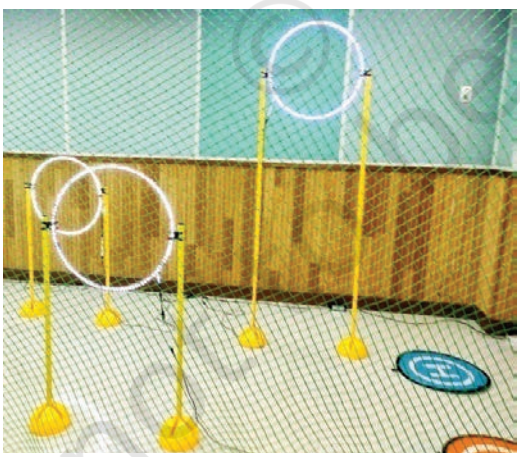


Figure 5: Indoor sports facility

Teacher Education

Teachers occupy a well-respected position in the Korean society. They are regulated by the government, and the national curriculum standards are set by the government. Elementary school teachers need to complete a four-year programme which includes subjects, pedagogy, and a teaching practicum of one week's duration. Teachers are entrusted with the responsibility for counselling students and for children's moral and academic development (Mani, Deepti, 2018). Separate teachers' rooms, teachers' study rooms, and physical fitness rooms are available for teachers' recreation, enhancement of learning, devising activities, conducting experiments, etc.

Teaching–Learning in the Classroom

The liveliness and passion shown by the students inside and outside the classrooms points to the enjoyment they get from the school. The smart classroom has a small class size and children are comfortably seated. In the English class, there are two teachers — one who speaks English and the other who is the Korean interpreter. The students need the instructions to be translated into Korean. Otherwise,

they are not able to follow any of the instruction given in English. When prompted, the students' replies are crisp and clear. Activities are planned and executed well. The teaching in the smart classroom is well supported by audio-visuals, which generates interest of the students in the learning process.

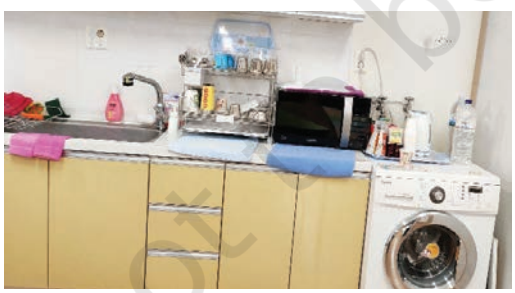
The topic was on making sentences: "Where did you go for vacation? 'I went to....'. At grade VI, it was quite surprising to hear such simple sentences being taught over and over again, and reinforced with various activities. The english language seemed to be very difficult for the students, and none of them could understand without the help of an interpreter.

Imparting Skills and Competencies

Nurturing a creative and integrative learner being at the central of its goals, the National Curriculum Framework 2015, focusses learning on key competencies to raise intellectual students, who can lead the future creativity-based society (Ministry of Education, 2015). The basic life skills, such as the traditional 3 Rs, foreign language, literacy in information technology, and interpersonal skills are on focus. The students start learning English language from grade III in primary schools. The focus in the classroom is on developing communication skills. Audio-visual aids and activities are conducted with this purpose in mind.

(a)

(b)



(c)

(d)

Figure 5(a)(b)(c)(d): Learning Labs in the School

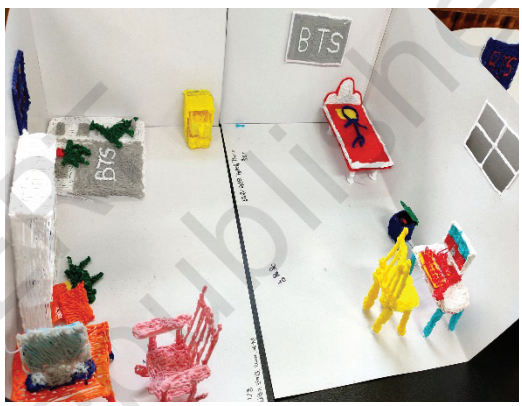
The philosophy of learning by doing is actually put into practice. A terrace garden is maintained by the students, which helps in promoting the culture of growing agricultural products within the limited space.

Figure 6: Terrace garden

The 3D printer and the models prepared and designed by the students were amazing. The instructors said that the children, once they develop innovative models, supply these to the industries for large-scale production. In this way, the creativity of the learner is enhanced and supported by the system.

No wonder, the Korean education system has produced hardworking, skilled employees who are capable of bringing in marvels on the economic front. Moving down the hill, all of us spoke of the education system keeping the traditional values and at the same time remaining committed to modernisation, enhancement of competencies and skills, which impacts the students' way of learning.

(a)



(b)

Figure 7(a) and (b): 3D images designed by students

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