

Investing in Foundational Skills First: A Case from South Korea

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In the aftermath of Japanese occupation and the Korean war, South Korea built a schooling system that today is consistently ranked among the top five countries worldwide for reading and mathematics, and in the top ten for science in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2014). Its consistent high ranking against wealthier countries, as well as the role of education in transforming Korea's economy while retaining a relatively low (4.3 percent) level of spending as a portion of GDP (World Bank, 2022), has cemented its reputation among low- and middle-income countries as a model to emulate. As a result, South Korea has transformed itself in a few decades from one of the world's poorest countries at independence, to the world's fifteenth largest economy (Ministry of Education, 2015) with much of this attributed to an educational system which first prioritised a consistent, quality foundation of reading and basic maths for students regardless of gender, wealth, or region.

Key Points

- Foundational learning in the first two decades post-independence was supported by a historical context that cultivated high demand for quality, equitable education;
- Adoption and adaptation of policies from elsewhere took place in an atmosphere of healthy debate between foreign advisors, domestic policy-makers, and educators; and
- A close coupling of educational policies with economic development strategies resulted in cascading investment in successively higher levels of education across multiple decades.

What happened?

Joseon period and colonisation

Following minimal contact outside the Korean peninsula during most of the Joseon period (1392-1897), Korea's early encounters with non-military Western elements came via modern curricula delivered by an estimated 3,000 public, missionary, and private schools by 1910 (Masoner & Klassen, 1979). These educational channels were curbed abruptly that year when Japan declared Korea a colony. A failed 1919 independence movement was led by nationalists who believed that widespread modern education was the only path to regain sovereignty, stoking the fires of what would become known Korea's educational zeal (Sorensen, 1994).

While the Japanese demonstrated a stronger commitment to education than most colonial powers, the structure of Japanese colonial education effectively curtailed learning opportunities for ethnic Koreans beyond the primary level. This was reflected in dramatically higher levels of educational attainment for ethnic Japanese compared to ethnic Koreans on the peninsula, and the outlawing of Korean as a language of instruction.

Nonetheless, the colonial era (1910-1945) saw relatively high levels of primary enrolment, with 35 percent of primary-aged children enrolled in 1939, rising to 58 percent in 1943 (Grajandzev, 1944; Yi, 1947, in Jeong & Armer, 1994). Following elementary education, boys and girls were segregated with boys' schools providing one more year of education at each level over girls' (Sorensen, 1994). A twin-track system in secondary school funnelled ethnic Korean and Japanese students into academic and vocational tracks, with strict limits on Korean access to upper levels of education, and frequent assignment to inferior schools and educational tracks (Seth, 2012).

Independence

The years immediately following Korea's 1945 independence saw the devastation of the 1950-53 Korean war (including the destruction of more than half of the nation's school buildings), the split of the Korean peninsula, and the reconstruction of its educational system. At both the national and family level, the massive infrastructure losses sustained during the Japanese colonial and Korean war eras may have encouraged investment in people rather than physical forms of capital (Kim, 2001).

The Rhee regime (1948 to 1960) established an education ministry in 1948 as an essential step in nation building, backed by extensive American military and civilian aid in the post-war period (Jeong & Armer 1994). The fledgling ministry's goals centred on universal primary schooling and adult literacy. This aligned closely with broader policy efforts which sought to lay the foundation for economic development following colonisation and war, in particular the transition from agriculture to export-based light industry.

Technical assistance to education was driven by a 1971 Florida State University report which outlined the development of a new system for Korea's primary and middle schools, funded by the United States Agency for International Development. The product of foreign research, these recommendations were met with suspicion in some circles. While many recommendations were ultimately adopted, the extensive deliberations that followed highlighted the ability of Korean education leaders to push back on policy recommendations, even when endorsed and funded by powerful international donors (Masoner & Klassen, 1979).

During this era, primary education was made compulsory and universal. Primary enrolment grew from 54 percent in 1945 to 95 percent in 1956 (Ministry of Education, 2015; Domjahn, 2013). The Ministry of Education (MoE) budget as a percentage of total government budget rose from 9.3 percent in 1955 to 15.2 percent in 1960 (Ministry of Education 1988, in Jeong & Armer 1994). Class sizes and pupil-to-teacher ratios remained high through this period (65.4 and 62.4, respectively for primary schools in 1965) and primary education was not free to all eligible school-aged children until the late 1960s (Kim, 2002). For illiterate adults, the Five-year Project to Eradicate Illiteracy (1954-58) targeted citizens aged 12 and older who had not attended primary school and resulted in an adult literacy rate that reached 96 percent by 1958 (Ministry of Education, 2015).

While the enactment of this plan saw extensive investment in the expansion of primary education, public investment in post-primary education remained limited (Jeong & Armer 1994). In 1953, comprehensive entrance exams were instituted for middle and high school in an effort to balance demand for higher levels of education against limited secondary provision and the state's desire to regulate the supply of advanced degree holders (Seth, 2012). This lower public investment was and continues to be countered by intense investment by families into test preparation, a practice which creates a highly competitive academic environment that imposes considerable pressure on students from a young age and risks threatening the equality of outcomes valued by South Korean society.

Post-primary investment

The focus on foundational learning began to shift only in 1961, as Korean educational policy set its sights on universalising secondary education and expanding vocational education. The portion of MoE budget allocated to post-primary education doubled from 19 percent in 1960 to 38 percent in 1980 (Economic Planning Board 1955, in Jeong & Armer 1994).

In the 1980s, policies expanding and massifying higher education increased the quota of science and engineering departments in universities and constructed vocational schools to promote science and technology workforce development. These strategies resulted in world-class tertiary education, the benefits of which were felt by a significant portion of South Koreans thanks to the strong foundation laid by quality universal primary education in the preceding decades.

What can we learn?

South Korea's early post-independence emphasis on equitable foundational learning ensured that later investments in post-primary education benefitted students from all backgrounds. Four key takeaways emerge:

The strategic coupling of South Korean educational and economic development strategies sought to control the expansion of an educated workforce to prevent it from growing too fast or too large to be absorbed by Korea's growing economy, while at the same time providing the nation with the skills needed at each stage of industrial growth (Jeong & Armer, 1994; Bermeo, 2014). This was, in part, made easier to implement under a series of more or less autocratic regimes (Domjahn, 2013).

Investment in successively higher levels of education cascaded across several decades as foundational levels of education were consolidated. Additionally, as South Korea opened up access to middle school, secondary school, and eventually post-secondary schooling, the government attempted to expand the education system equitably by increasing capacity at the new level via private education providers who rushed to fill the gaps while public financing and provision caught up (Kim, 2002).

Foreign funds and technocratic support played an important early role, as did the ability of policymakers and educators to push back on recommendations that didn't fit. During this era, South Korea consistently dedicated less than 20 percent of total government budget to education.

The historical context of the late Joseon period and failed independence movements emphasised the importance of education for national self-determination, while limited school access during colonisation and Korean War further stimulated demand for education. South Korea's Confucian legacy, applied to its post-independence realities, regarded the only valid social hierarchy as one which was earned meritocratically (i.e., through hard work toward educational attainment).

While demand for post-primary education remained mostly unmet during the immediate post-independence era, investment in ensuring that primary education was of uniform quality across the country minimised the risk of regional and socioeconomic disparities frequently seen elsewhere (Seth, 2012), and increased the likelihood that students reaped the benefits of secondary and tertiary education more equitably when it was eventually expanded.

Conclusion

South Korea's educational and economic success following its ambitious policy of early investment in foundational learning is all the more impressive considering its commitment to uniformity and quality primary education provision for students regardless of region or background. This commitment is visible in the equality of inputs vis-à-vis foundational learning as well as outcomes at the end of the educational cycle as measured by international assessments. South Korea's success involved the alignment of three critical factors including (i) a historical context that cultivated demand for quality, equitable education; (ii) policy borrowing and adaptation practices that involved international advisors, domestic policymakers, and educators; and (iii) closely coupled educational policies and economic development strategies which resulted in cascading, tightly planned and phased investment in successively higher levels of education across multiple decades. As a result of this early focus on foundational learning, and all that has been subsequently built atop its foundation, South Korea now boasts one of the best-educated populations in the world.

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