

## Dancing Between Neoliberal and Nordic: Lifelong Learning in South Korea

Jinhee Choi  
*Penn State University*, [juc332@psu.edu](mailto:juc332@psu.edu)

Fred M. Schied  
*Penn State University*, [fms3@psu.edu](mailto:fms3@psu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Choi, Jinhee and Schied, Fred M. (2016). "Dancing Between Neoliberal and Nordic: Lifelong Learning in South Korea," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2016/papers/11>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

## **Dancing Between Neoliberal and Nordic: Lifelong Learning in South Korea**

Jinhee Choi

The Pennsylvania State University

**Abstract:** Lifelong learning in South Korea is not just an extension of neoliberalism nor an adoption of transnational conceptions. The state's role and its history of authoritarians have shaped lifelong learning policy.

**Keywords:** lifelong learning, South Korea

### **South Korea and Lifelong Learning Literatures**

The role and responsibility of government's engagement in lifelong learning is the subject of disputes between North American and European scholars (Jarvis, 2008, 2013) like Rubenson (2006) who framed the debate as a binary between two combining models – the Nordic social democratic model and the neoliberal model of the World Bank. Some studies have tried to discover combinations that incorporate mutually beneficial elements of both models (Mooij & Tang, 2003; Green, 2006). However, most of cases are confined to North American and European countries. Therefore, few concrete representatives exist in the research that connect how lifelong learning debates are manifested and interwoven in an Asian context. Han (2001) compares six Asian countries in two categories: global aspects and local peculiarities, yet the study is bounded to illustrate horizontal commonalities rather than scrutinizing policy and practice more closely. This paper critically analyzes governmental policy and practice of lifelong learning in South Korea.

As knowledge becomes a product, the knowledge economy requires lifelong learning as an operating sub-system (Allee, 1997; Wills, 1998). In this economy, transformation of tacit knowledge, the knowledge as process, into explicit knowledge is counted as creating new economic value. In this system, tacit knowledge represents value practical intelligence (Sternberg, Forsythe, Hedlund, Horvath, Wagner, Williams, & Grigorenko, 2000). Owing to the nature of production that comes out of learning and learning management systems, the development of knowledge capitalism reinforces the evolution of learning capitalism.

In this context, Han (2008) argued that South Korea's lifelong learning has been pursuing the principle of market capitalism; therefore, he argued, the traditional learning ecology has been destroyed. As in example, he discussed the case of private enterprises to explain why and how the South Korean private sector has expanded dramatically. In this economic system, knowledge becomes assets, thus corporations like Samsung, LG, and Hyundai began to build internal training sectors to accumulate their practical intelligence and maintain competency. The author thinks that the size and nature of this private sector has threatened the public learning system since 1980s. As a result, the traditional learning ecology has been distorted. According to Han, this change occurs not only by breaking down of the code of traditional education, but also by reconstructing the learning system to satisfy learning capitalism. Therefore, he maintained that the South Korean case unveils the transformation of the ecosystem of lifelong learning responding to market capitalism.

On the other hand, Lee (2010) brought a different interpretation of the change of lifelong learning in Korea by introducing a different agent of change-transnational organizations like UNESCO. She tried to explicate the main points of UNESCO's lifelong learning discourses, and

she explored how those policies actually affect practice on the national level by examining the case of South Korea. To analyze the case, she took the world society perspective applying the nation-state as a unit of analysis (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997). Basically, this perspective considers that each nation state is influenced by world models or world norms like other nation states, highlighting the role of international organization (Baker, 2009). From this view, Lee argued that South Korea's government accepted and implemented major recommendations from CONFINTEA. One of the examples is the annual lifelong learning festival which was recommended by the 5<sup>th</sup> CONFINTEA in 1997 (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MEST] & National Institute for Lifelong Education [NILE], 2009) and has been integrated in South Korea since 2001.

Both studies try to illustrate the major aspects that influence lifelong learning in South Korea. However, both of them fail to identify one of the major agents of this change- the government. Han (2008) pointed out that the 1980s market capitalism has destroyed South Korea's traditional learning ecology. However, this perspective dismisses the history of the vocational learning environment which was fostered by the South Korean government since the 1960s. After the Second World War, the government prioritized economic development. Thus, it selectively supported vocational education of the workforce as well as advocated for large corporations to grow even larger.

This paper argues that the government is not a not just a victim of neoliberalism that inevitably allowed the destruction of the traditional learning ecology; government takes an active role to fortify this change. This aspect will be clarified by pointing out South Korea's interwoven aspects of lifelong learning from the both neoliberal and Nordic models.

In addition, Lee (2010) intended to connect the change in lifelong learning in relation with the transnational organization, and he attempted to reveal how global mechanisms play a central role in influencing lifelong learning. I admit that global agencies can give standardized guidelines for building a lifelong learning model to effectively measure the progress of the nation in comparison to other global players. However, that does not mean lifelong learning became a national agenda due to CONFINTEA's recommendation as Lee emphasized. South Korea already had a strong aspiration to connect the national agenda with vocational and basic adult education since the 1960s. Reviewing the political, historical, and economical influence on building South Korea's lifelong learning model, I will explore how diverse internal and external aspects influence the current lifelong learning model in South Korea, and what constitutes the nature of the current model. By doing so, I will place South Korea as an active agent fostering the current lifelong learning model. This paper will help to "re-imagine locality as the embodiment of practices that make possible certain de-territorialized displays of identity" (Carney, 2012, p.347). Though this lens, we can see how policy discourse is locally identified and manifested in the South Korean environment. In this regard, K-MOOCs will be introduced, and reexamined as an example of localized praxis.

### **South Korean Model of Lifelong Learning**

Numerous studies have suggested that no country has made a stronger commitment to lifelong learning as a matter of governmental policy than South Korea. Even though the neoliberalism and Nordic models do not fully capture the situation of South Korea, the country integrates different elements of each model to create a competitive advantage adopting the content of neoliberalism while pursuing the Nordic structure. It emphasizes that 'individual, vocational and self-development' aligns with the spirit of the neoliberal lifelong learning model,

while stressing the strong engagement of the government to accelerate the neoliberal spirit into the existing system

South Korea, an OECD member, is famed for its economic development after the Korean War. Its internal endeavors and external supports collectively contributed to achieving the current economic status. Nowadays, the dramatic economic surge is a role model to many countries in East Asia and Africa (Kim, 2011). Consequently, many foreign government affiliates visit South Korea to learn about its development strategy, which played a role in removing poverty by augmenting the spirit of self-help and increasing governmental intervention. However, the cost of rapid development sacrificed the democratic process. The central government adopted discriminatory policies to prioritize economic development and silenced minor voices. Namely, the government supported superior corporations based on performance, created development-driven culture, ideology, and tradition, and empowered a political leadership that implemented such discriminatory principles (Jwa, 2015). As a result, the country eventually achieved its economic goal, yet it lost its chance to build a democratic and participatory environment.

According to National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE) the global economic trends have shifted from knowledge to creativity that considers individuals as the center of originality (National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2013). Therefore, the institution believes strategic promotion of an individual's creativity would be linked to a national competency. In this regard, the Korean Ministry of Education (MOE) sets a goal from 2013 to 2017 in order to build a strong foundation to sustain the lifelong learning system under NILE's control. In line with increasing learning opportunities, the 3<sup>rd</sup> National Lifelong Learning Promotion Plan is established to advance the current learning system strategically. For the regional level, NILE plans to establish colleges as regional creative learning centers that offer professional learning opportunities. Moreover, MOE tries to foster local cities as activators of creative economy by building 150 creative learning cities by 2017. Additionally, construction of a lifelong learning information network would invite everybody to engage in lifelong learning, anytime and anyplace (NILE, 2015).

The purpose of NILE is to incorporate national agendas into daily practice by enhancing organizational responsibilities and efficiency. Acknowledging itself as a national service provider, it tries to deliver customer-centered education in six different fields of education encompassing citizenship, culture and arts, general and humanities, career training, basic adult literacy, and extracurricular activities. To execute various missions in each field, NILE runs multiple systems including regional lifelong learning systems, lifelong learning universities, lifelong educator certification systems, academic credit bank systems, bachelor's degree examination for self-education systems, lifelong learning account systems, a lifelong learning portal, and K-MOOCs. It also manages two national centers for multicultural education that include education for parents.

This general development and implementation stages of NILE clearly shows how the South Korean government molds a distinctive lifelong learning model by combining neoliberal content and Nordic structural approaches. Nonetheless, the government uses a neoliberal connotation to describe itself as a 'service provider' to the national 'customers', limiting the role of government and defining its relationship with the public. On the contrary, like the Nordic model, NILE controls the provision of lifelong learning from the planning to the execution stages and dominates every form of lifelong learning by connecting non-formal to the formal systems.

### **Adult Education, Human Rights and Democracy**

While progressing economically after the war, South Korea not only sacrificed volunteerism and diversity, but it also failed to promote human rights and democratic participation. The division of two Koreas, the strong military influence, and a centralized government system hindered South Korea in developing critical perspectives for human rights and democracy in the realm of lifelong learning. Since 1945, Korea has been divided into North and South as a result of the Yalta Agreement between the USA and the USSR to conclude World War II. The division of Korea and military dictatorships from 1961 to 1992 have had a great influence on the current political, economic, and socio-cultural atmosphere (Kang, 2002).

In addition, communist North and capitalist South scarcely communicate, but rather consider each other as an enemy to justify and strengthen their own regimes. "Human rights of teachers and students in school have been ignored, in the wake of the political crisis of national division; and as an efficient means to achieving the goal of economic development; schooling has grown rapidly without there being any democratic process in education...the Korean people, by several stages of authoritarian military government, lost freedom and democracy in the process of rapid economic development" (p. 315-316). Even the terms like 'human rights' and 'democracy' are highly politicized and connected to political prisoners, torture, and censorship. Democratic and emancipatory adult education loses its tradition which had developed during Japanese colonization and military domination (Kang, 2002). Since the 1960s, even Western missionaries' participation in "the emancipation of women as well as to the recognition of human rights and freedoms" (Lee, 2000, p.103) has been subjected to government control, which tries to reduce any potential threat against central government policy.

Since 1993, human rights and democracy movements have arisen within schools and NGOs with an emerging civic government. Recently, distribution of cell phones accelerated discourses about human rights and democracy by revealing unethical treatment in schools and military forces. The mobile technology plays a major role in bringing private mistreatment into the public realm and unveiling ethical issues. Nevertheless, critical thinking about human rights issues and democratic participation are still limited due to the government control and strong neoliberal influences that stress individual success.

### **Korean Lifelong Learning Model**

Considering the cultural, political and economic background of South Korea, the nation has a distinctive lifelong learning model that is neither similar to Anglo-Saxon countries (Australia, Canada, and USA, etc.) nor to Nordic (Denmark, Finland, and Norway, etc.) models. Rubenson (2006) contrasted the different government roles in lifelong learning between Anglo-Saxon and Nordic models. He argued that neoliberalism tries to minimize the role, power, and responsibility of the federal state in order to expand its free-trading markets. On the other hand, the Nordic model emphasizes the role of government to "minimize the social problems and maximize revenue income" (p.333). It is the government that creates employment opportunities, collaborates with the labor market organizations, incorporates popular adult education system, and supports disadvantaged groups publicly. He claimed that with a clear goal, role, and responsibility, the Nordic social democratic model can create better learning opportunities for all.

However, Korea's lifelong learning model combines different elements of each model, adopting the concept of neoliberalism while pursuing the Nordic structure. More specifically, the emphasis on 'individual, vocational and self-development' aligns with the spirit of the current neoliberal lifelong learning model, while the weightier role of government in education and the

market is similar to that of Nordic model. This is distinctly shown in NILE's current website, program provisions, and public reports. In its mission statement, citizens are defined as customers who receive "customer centered lifelong education support service" (NILE, 2015), and the role of government as a service provider is minimized. However, the latter is an oxymoron as the government has such a strong control over the formal and non-formal education in overall lifelong learning programs. In addition, the recently launched K-MOOCs (Korea Massive Online Open Courses) is distinct from other general MOOCs in that it is initiated, executed, and controlled by the government.

### Conclusion

South Korea has demonstrated its potential by achieving economic success in less than three decades. However, South Korea is suffering from other issues like low birth rate, an aging population, and a high suicide level similar to other developed countries. Although physical hunger can be overcome by financial success, life satisfaction cannot be fed by money. That is, focusing lifelong learning provisions on vocational and self-development models will not result in improved quality of life. It is time to diversify the lifelong learning models whose elements were lost or neglected during the rapid development period. As Kim Koo, the 6<sup>th</sup> President of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea, said in his book *The Nation that I Desire* (1947):

What is lacking in humanity of today is neither military force nor economic power. Although the power of natural sciences is infinitely to be desired, the level of scientific progress achieved so far today is already sufficient to enable the entire human race to live comfortably. The root reason for humanity's unhappiness today is that people lack humanity, justice, compassion and love. If the mind of humanity is developed in this positive direction, mankind's present material capacity will be enough to enable all two billion of the world's population to live in comfort. The only thing that can improve the mind of humankind is culture and civilization."

Lifelong learning can play a role to cultivate such a vision.

### References

- Allee, V. (1997). *The knowledge evolution: Expanding organizational intelligence*. Routledge.
- Baker, D. P. (2009). The invisible Hand of World Education in G Sykes, B. Schneider, & D.P. Plank (Eds.) *Handbook of Education Policy Research*. 958-986. American Educational Research Association.
- Carney, S. (2012). Imagining globalization: Educational policyscapes. *World yearbook of education*, 339-353.
- de Mooij, R. & Tang, P. (2003) *Four futures of Europe* (The Hague, Centraal Planbureau).
- Green, A. (2006). Models of lifelong learning and the 'knowledge society'. *Compare*, 36(3), 307-325.
- Han, S. (2001). Creating systems for lifelong learning in Asia. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 2(2), 85-95.
- Han, S. (2008). The lifelong learning ecosystem in Korea: evolution of learning capitalism? *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 27(5), 517-524.
- Jarvis, P. (2008). *Democracy, lifelong learning and the learning society: Active citizenship in a late modern age*. Routledge.
- Jarvis, P. (2013). *Universities and corporate universities: The higher learning industry in global*

- society. Routledge.
- Jwa, S. (2015). Korea's New Village Movement: Success Factors and Implications on Economics. 1–39.
- Kang, S.-W. (2002). Democracy and Human Rights Education in South Korea. *Comparative Education*, 38(3), 315–325. Kim, G.-J. (2011). Education Policies and Reform in South Korea. *Pacific Focus*, 26(2), 260–286.
- Kim, G. J. (2002). Education policies and reform in South Korea. *Secondary education in Africa: Strategies for renewal*, 29-39.
- Kim, K. (1947). The nation that I desire. Retrieved January 1, 2015, from <http://kimkoo.or.kr/02diary/sub.asp?pagecode=m02s02t04b>.
- Lee, J. E. (2010). Implementation of Lifelong Learning Policies in South Korea: A World Society Perspective4.
- Lee, J. K. (2000). Historic factors influencing Korean higher education. Jipmoondang Publ National Institute for Lifelong Education (2013). Periodical Report Issue 2. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002269/226992E.pdf>.
- National Institute for Lifelong Education (2015). Official website. Retrieved from <http://eng.nile.or.kr/eng/>.
- Rubenson, K. (2006). The Nordic model of Lifelong Learning. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 36(February 2015), 327–341.
- Sternberg, R. J., Forsythe, G. B., Hedlund, J., Horvath, J. A., Wagner, R. K., Williams, W. M., & Grigorenko, E. L. *Practical intelligence in everyday life*, 2000. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge.
- Wills, G. (1998). *The Knowledge Game*. Cassell, London.