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Today and Yesterday in Early Childhood Education in Korea

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education has always been considered important in Korea, with the education of the child valued highly, regardless of the parent's educational background or socioeconomic status. The main social facility for early childhood education outside home in Korea is called "Yoo Chee Won," which means kindergarten. This paper describes the country's approach to early childhood education. The bulk of the paper describes "Yoo Chee Won," including demographic trends fueling its growth, figures on its availability and use, its cost, and the requirements for parent support. The paper details the national kindergarten curriculum and teacher education requirements. A concluding section describes corporate support for early childhood education and the Samsung Center for Early Education and Development. (EV)

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Today and Yesterday in Early Childhood Education in Korea

Introduction

Korea has placed great emphasis on the role of the home in early childhood education. Most married women desire to give up their jobs temporarily until the child enters Kindergarten. Some career women make an arrangement with close relatives (mainly grandparents) for rearing the children. This is still possible in such a family-oriented society as Korea. All family members and the community share the responsibility of educating the youngsters. Korean women believe the child rearing experience is more rewarding than pursuing careers. Therefore, Korean children spend most of their time for the first four years at home with families before kindergarten.

Early Childhood Education has always been considered important in Korea. Historically, Koreans value children and their education regardless of the parent's educational background and socio economic status. Even in an ancient era in Korea, prenatal education for nine months was especially emphasized to pregnant women to make sure having physically, emotionally and mentally healthy babies that are necessary for a solid foundation for upcoming education. There are many DOS and DON'TS for pregnant women. For instance, do not eat fruits that are not round or ripe; Do not have bad thoughts in mind; Do not kill small insects; Speak with nice words; Be kind to others, etc. It is generally believed that if a mother treats others with respect and kindness and consumes food selectively, the child will be born with good health and temperament. They thought the parenting role to train and educate their children began even before they were born. Koreans believe the importance of optimal development in early in life and early childhood is the critical period to form appropriate habits that will affect the rest of the child's life.

The tradition of prenatal care is inherited in the modern Korean society so that pregnant women listen to aesthetic classical music, read beautiful poem and novels, try to see and experience pleasant incidents, and try to keep away from tragedies in the environment. When the new baby is born, the infant and the mother

enjoy the quality times of feeding, diapering, bathing, talking, smiling, touching, singing, and playing together. The loving caring and nurturing activities will be a steppingstone for a strong sense of trust and attachment with the mother. As the child grows, the mother spends a tremendous amount of time in teaching basic concepts on math, science, writing, and reading. The Confucian beliefs (an ethic for governing human relationships) about the primacy and sanctity of family relationships and obligations are also taught before they enter the primary school. The home education during early childhood contributes toward young children maintaining a calm demeanor in public and being prepared to perform well in kindergarten.

Korean parents believe that it is their responsibilities to educate social values, manners, customs, cultures, and traditions to their own children at home.

Yoo Chee Won

The main social facility for early childhood education outside home in Korea is called “Yoo Chee Won” which means kindergarten. Four and five year old children can apply for either private or public kindergarten. Public kindergartens are generally located within the elementary school. Private kindergartens are run as private businesses. Both public and private kindergartens are regulated by the Ministry of Education and have the same curriculum and the same school hours (3-4 hours a day).

The number of “Yoo Chee Won” has been increased with the modernization of Korean society. The first kindergarten in Korea started in 1909. Despite nearly 100 years of history, the first Korean kindergarten curriculum was set up by the Ministry of Education in 1969 and has been revised four times, in 1979, 1982, 1987, and 1993. In 1979, there were only 794 kindergartens in Korea and 26 of them were public and 768 of them were privately owned. The rate of children who attended preschool (program for 3 and 4 year old children) was less than 1% in the 1970s. Less than 3% of the eligible population was enrolled in kindergartens during the same period. Stay-at-home mothers did not feel it was

necessary or right to send kids to the expensive private kindergarten while they could educate them by themselves. The traditional Korean family which consisted of three generations living together also prevented the expansion of kindergarten.

In recent decades, however, early childhood education has rapidly expanded as the government began to realize its importance and its increased demand in Korea. The trends are influenced by several factors and changes in Korean society. Industrialization in Korean society produced small nuclear families. The rapid growth in industry affected the entry of more women into the workforce outside the home. Equal educational and employment opportunities for women attracts mothers to return to the job market. The low birth rate allows parents to pay high tuition for education since only one or two children are in the household. The fear of parents is that the child might be behind academically in primary school and eventually in life if they do not send the child to kindergarten. The access to western ideas and educational philosophies concerning the kindergarten curriculum has also influenced young mothers to accept the value of the experiences in kindergarten. More academic research and extensive government involvement in the educational services for young children has occurred, which influenced the expansion of early childhood education.

Working mothers in Korea tend to substitute blood relatives (61%) or maids (38%) for the caregiver rather than using nursery schools when the child is an infant or toddler. By the time the child is around four, however, working mothers are considering seriously about sending children either kindergarten or social institutions for their children's education. Social specialized institutions such as Math Institution, Korean Institution, Piano Institution, Art Institution, Tae Kwon Do Institution, and Speech Institution are widely spread across the country where children spend about three hours a day learning about the specified subject knowledge. Tuition varies depending on areas but around \$100.00 per month per institution. Some children attend two or three different kinds of specialized institutions which are not located in the same building. They may have to walk a

few blocks to shift from one institution to another. As such, they tend to overemphasize the importance of early childhood education.

Stay-at-home mothers also prefer to send the child either to the kindergarten or institutions, when the child is about 3 or 4, as long as they can afford the tuition to make sure the child does not fall behind. After the child comes home from the specialized institution or kindergarten, the interaction between the mother and the child occur to share the school day, to assist in completion of home work assignments, and to make up the few hours of separation. Korean mothers feel such a strong obligation and responsibility for the education of their children. Due to the strong feeling of the obligation, parents become anxious, fearing their inadequacy in providing the best teaching environment for their children's learning and development.

One Korean stay-at-home mother who has two girls, 6 and 3 years old said "I felt nervous and guilt when my first daughter stayed home with me until she entered kindergarten. Even though I spent lots of quality time with my two girls playing and teaching reading, writing, and math concepts, I still felt that I was doing something wrong when I saw other kids in the neighborhood go to special institutions".

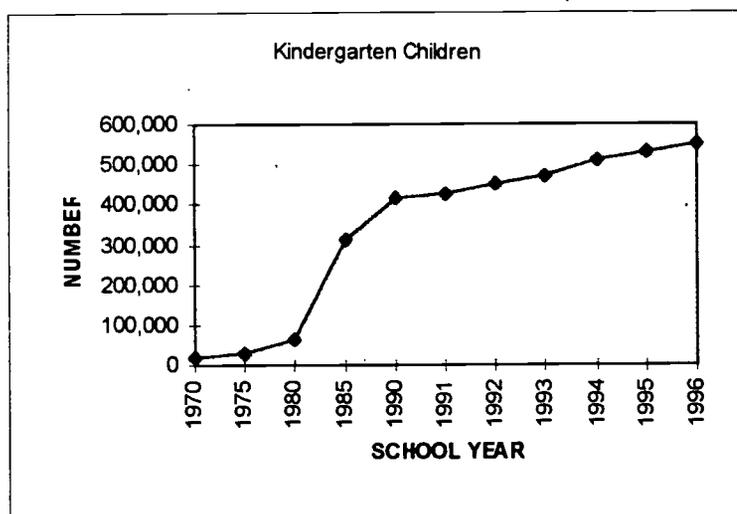
It has been reported that parents in contemporary Korean society go through hardships because of various societal, economic and familial changes. They tend to receive less support in their parenting roles than in earlier years specifically due to the increase of nuclear family type, maternal employment, frequent moves, and enormous influx of western values and ways of thinking (Chung, 1992).

Currently, young children in Korea are exposed to various types of educational opportunities. The learning experiences in the institutions help them prepare for primary school learning, to have smooth transition, and to be able to develop their interests and talents as early as possible.

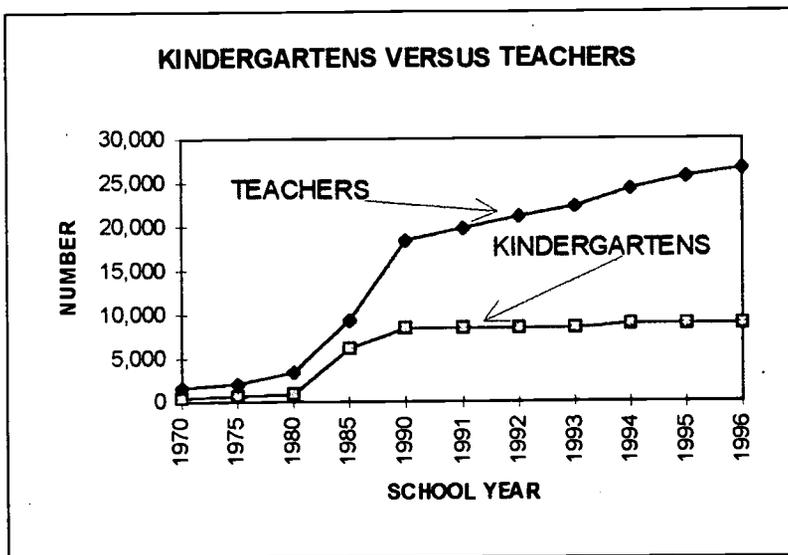
According to 1988 Statistical Yearbook of Education from the Ministry of Education in Korea, there are 4610 public kindergarten and 3328 private kindergarten. The total number of kindergartens grew to 8371 in 1990. Compared to the total of 794 kindergartens available in 1979, it is like a ten fold increase in ten years. According to 1996 report, there are 4393 public kindergarten and 4546 private kindergarten (total 8939). The rate of attendance in kindergarten before entering primary school increased to 67% in 1996, up from 52.4% in 1990. However, the rate of children who are receiving some sort of early childhood education outside the home currently is reaching up to 90% nationwide regardless of whether the children live in rural areas or urban areas.

The following graph 1 and graph 2 show drastic increases in the number of kindergartens, kindergarten teachers and kindergarten children in the last quarter century.

<Graph 1>



<Graph 2>



<Table 1> The number of kindergartens, kindergarten teachers and kindergarten children in the last quarter century.

	Kindergartens	Kindergarten Teachers	Kindergarten Children
1970	484	1,660	22,271
1975	611	2,153	32,032
1980	901	3,339	64,433
1985	6,242	9,281	314,692
1990	8,354	18,511	414,532
1991	8,421	19,706	425,535
1992	8,495	21,107	450,332
1993	8,515	22,207	469,380
1994	8,910	24,283	510,100
1995	8,960	25,576	529,265
1996	8,939	26,621	551,770

One incredible statistic is the increased number of public kindergarten from 26 in 1979 to 4393 in 1996. This amazing increase especially in public institutions for early childhood education was caused mainly by the effort of Korean Government in 1981 when "Semaull Head Start" was established to expand equal educational opportunities for children of low-income families. All children ages three to five can apply to the program but preference is given to children with working mothers. The cost of "Semaull Head Start" program is about \$50.00 a month. All teachers at the Semaull Head Start must hold a kindergarten teaching certificate (Bailey & Lee, 1992). The year 1981 was a very important cornerstone in the field of early childhood education in terms of the support from both central government and local administration such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Health, and Social Affairs and the Rural Development Administration.

Early childhood education is not compulsory so the parents must pay for their children's education. The payment for public kindergarten is \$150.00 every three months and the payment is made four times a year to the school. While the cost of private kindergarten is much more expensive (\$125.00 per month), the quality of the educational services including learning materials and equipment, school environments, and staff qualifications is generally higher than in the public kindergartens. Parents are also responsible for preparing basic learning materials needed for projects and learning activities such as science experiment kits, manipulative math games, construction papers, note pads, markers, crayons, glues, etc.. Mothers are also required to take turns preparing daily snacks once a month. It generally works well since there are about 30 students in kindergarten. This duty is one way to get the parents involved actively in the learning and teaching process.

Korean Yoo Chee Won and Semaull Head Start follow the national kindergarten curriculum set by the Ministry of Education. The "Kindergarten Education Curriculum Enforcement Law" classified five developmental areas; physical, emotional, linguistic, cognitive, and social development. The kindergarten

curricular goal is to further the development of the whole child. To fulfill the goal, the following objectives must be achieved in kindergarten.

- a. To foster basic habits essential in daily life, and to cultivate respectful and loving attitudes towards family and neighbors.
- b. To develop good habits of health and safety.
- c. To develop the ability to understand others and express one's opinion verbally.
- d. To help children take interest in various phenomena.
- e. To help children take pride in work and to express feelings and thoughts about their surroundings in a personal way.

Teacher Training

Kindergarten classroom teachers must have a teaching certificate. The teachers are required to have initial Rank II certificates (Regular teacher II). The Regular teacher II certificate can be acquired through the successful completion of training from either four year universities or two year colleges and passing the NTE (National Teacher Exam). Those eligible for Regular Teacher I licenses are those holders of Regular Teacher II licenses who have completed the prescribed amount of on-the-job training (240 hours) in a minimum three years' teaching career. Personnel in early childhood education are revolted by a policy that allows elementary teaching certificate holders to teach in kindergarten. The policy is ironical because kindergarten certificate holders can not teach in primary schools. In fact, only ten percent of all kindergarten teachers complete the four year degree program. Training of early childhood education teachers in Korea, therefore, relies heavily on the vocational training colleges. (Bailey & Lee, 1992). The source from the Ministry of Education (1988) indicates the four year course training programs produced about 810 kindergarten teachers, while the two year programs produced about 7,720 kindergarten teachers.

The curriculum for early childhood teacher training for four year programs tends to require more general education courses and theoretical and philosophical

courses than two year programs. According to the current Education Law, graduates of four year universities and of two-year junior colleges are equally qualified kindergarten teachers.

Kindergarten Curriculum

The primary purpose to educate a child in the traditional society was to make him a person who would provide filial loyalty for parents and ancestors. Currently, the primary purpose in educating a child is to prepare him to adapt to society as an independent and responsible person. However, the family value, moral value and respect toward elders are still emphasized in early childhood education both at home and at school. The foremost concerns of Korean early childhood education are the improvement of strong Korean identity and esteem of the children. The knowledge and love of the Korean heritage is also highly emphasized. The important purposes for early childhood education are building self-help abilities and skills for everyday life such as learning good habits, knowledge on Korean culture, respect toward adults, prosaic behaviors for positive group life, and pride for one's nation. These goals are achieved through three way efforts, parents', teachers', and children's.

One could not, however, ignore the fact that there are two major foreign influences in the curriculum in early childhood education. They are Japanese and American. Japanese influence is for large group instruction and uniformity in the instructional method toward children. America contributed a more individual approach to education considering the individual child's interest. The kindergarten curriculum is, therefore, the mixture of Japanese, American and Korean approaches (Baily & Lee, 1992).

Education methods in kindergarten have also changed from rote memorization of the fact knowledge to understand the function or concept of the environment and the world. The Ministry of Education requires kindergarten to implement developmentally appropriate practices for the age group and the developmental level of individual children.

Daily routine for the typical half-day kindergarten is composed of arriving and planning for the day (8:45-9:00), center time(9:00-9:50), clean up(9:50-10:00), circle time(10:00-10:15), small group(10:15-10:45), snack(10:45-11:10), large group(11:10-11:25), playground(11:25-11:55), preparing for dismissal(11:55-12:00), and ending of the day(12:00). The afternoon activities for all-day kindergarten are composed of lunch(12:00-13:00), brush teeth(13:00-13:20), nap(13:20-14:30), playground(14:30-15:00), large group(15:00-15:15), snack(15:15-15:40), center time(15:40-16:40), clean up(16:40-16:50), preparing for dismissal(16:50-17:00), and ending of the day(17:00).

An integrated thematic curriculum is also required to be implemented in early childhood education. The suggested themes included each month for the kindergarten school year are as follows.

<u>Month</u>	<u>Week</u>	<u>Theme</u>
March	2	School Orientation
	3	Explore school, class, friends, and teachers
	4	Safety in play
April	1	Spring
	2	Garden, Vegetation
	3	Animals
	4	Insects
May	1	Children's festival
	2	Myself
	3	Women and Men
	4	Family
	5	Food
June	1	The neighborhood
	3	Community helpers
	3	Mass Media
	4	Manner

July	1	Summer
	2	Summer Vacation
September	1	My country
	2	Harvest Moonday
	3	World
	4	Sports
October	1	Fall Changes
	2	Fall
	3	Transportation 1
	4	Transportation 2
	5	Transportation 3
November	1	Day and Night
	2	Space
	3	Telephone
	4	TV
December	1	Winter
	2	Winter Vacation
February	1	Korean New Years Holiday
	2	Graduation

The school begins in the second week of February and the first term is over in the middle of July. The fall term begins in September but there is six weeks of break in December and January. The school open two weeks in February to wrap up the year and to say good-bye to each other and to celebrate the graduation which is very important event for both children and parents in Korea.

Conclusion

Early childhood education in Korea has expanded rapidly both in quantity and quality. Current trends indicate that early childhood education will grow even more in the twenty one century in Korea. As early childhood education expands, as

the eligible age moves downward, and as the range of eligible children becomes wider and more diverse, the program in Korea is getting diversified in accordance with the characteristics and the developmental stages of the child. Kindergarten, Semaul Head Start, Unauthorized nursery, University nursery, and Specialized Institution are currently available early childhood programs in Korea. Unauthorized nursery schools have been established recently in many apartment complexes in big cities where one mother keeps neighbors babies (mainly infant and toddlers) of working mothers. As there are no legal regulations governing nursery schools, many unauthorized nursery schools are in operation. Parents use the unauthorized nursery because of locational convenience and trust toward the caregiver. Presently, issues of daycare for children of working mothers and low-income families receive considerable national attention. Although there are many available facilities for half-daycare and half-day kindergarten for 3 to 6 year old children in Korea, there are insufficient educational institutions or programs suitable for children under the age of 3 (Lee, 1992). All-day kindergarten and all-day child care services are increasing to meet the needs of working mothers. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs are aware of the needs of systematic standards and regulations for qualification and preparation of child caregivers to make sure the children are properly cared for in day care centers.

Recently, owners of major corporations in Korea realized the importance of providing high quality care and education to the children. The intention is to return their earnings or profits to the society, especially to expand educational opportunities for low-income family and children of working mother. For example, Samsung established Samsung Welfare Foundation and started its child care project in 1989. The project has greatly influenced Korean daycare which was virtually nonexistent up until that time. The daycare centers are operated directly by the foundation. The foundation has already built six daycare centers and donated all of them to Seoul city. The foundation also supports daycare centers at work sites in the Samsung Group so that employees with children can play an active role in the work place and in the child rearing. They are carefully designed to provide safe and

comfortable place to children and to make them to feel that daycare center is an extension of their own homes.

The Samsung Center for Early Education and Development is responsible for the research, development, and application of new programs as well as for ongoing training for the teachers who work at the daycare centers. The Center was established to support academics and to improve the quality of daycare. To improve child care quality, the Center is constantly cultivating highly qualified teachers. For instance, supplementary training is given to daycare center directors and teachers twice a year within Korea. The training is sometimes given by internationally known scholars for example, Dr. Clark-Stewart from the University of California, Dr. Honig of Syracuse University, and Dr. Rodd from Melbourne University. The Center also regularly participates in international conferences such as OMEP (The World Early Childhood Education Association), ACEI (Association for Childhood Education International), and NAEYC (National Association for Education of Young Children) overseas to improve staff professionalism. In addition, the Center develops educational materials. The center researches developmentally appropriate programs such as the Infant & Toddler Program, Preschool Program, and Kindergarten Program. Currently, the Center is working on a cookbook for child care centers, and a doll family. Two other interesting activities the Center is involved in are sponsoring domestic research projects related to child care and operating a specialized library for early childhood educators and parents. As long as Korea has companies like Samsung, the outlook for early childhood education in Korea is optimistic.

The Korean government, business, community, and parents are working hard together to create healthy and happy environment for the children. Since they believe the children are their future and their hope, they have strived to provide proper care and education to all children especially during early childhood. The effort to accompany both qualitative and quantitative improvement in early childhood education has been attained.

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