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## The paradoxical effect of democratisation on the South Korean education system in the 1980s and early 1990s

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### ABSTRACT

Educational grievances made educational democratisation an important issue in the 1980s and 1990s during South Korea's democratic consolidation. Educational democratisers sought to address these through greater freedom and autonomy for teachers, students and parents combined with teacher unionisation. Some of the excesses of the highly centralised, economically utilitarian educational system of the authoritarian period were mitigated in the 1990s, but reformers had to make a coalition with neoliberal bureaucrats to consolidate democracy. As a consequence, educational reforms focused on deregulation and student choice facilitated by diversified autonomous educational institutions, including private schools at all levels. This had the paradoxical effect of meeting some goals of the democratisers for choice and autonomy while eliminating the equalisation of schools that many of the democratisers also favoured.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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The Republic of Korea was set up with the help of the United States in 1948 to be a democratic, capitalist bulwark against communism on the Asian continent. While regular elections were held during the 35 years following the Korean War (1950–1953), authoritarian presidents monopolised power and were periodically interrupted by military coups. The last regime to come to power through a coup, that of Chun Doo Hwan in 1979, was, by the mid-1980s, delegitimised by authoritarian methods and maldistribution of the rewards of economic growth through crony capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Grass-roots activism during this period led to a democratisation process that began in 1987. Since that time South Korea has often been cited as a case of ‘third wave’ democratisation that has been followed by democratic consolidation.<sup>2</sup>

Discontent with an authoritarian educational system set up in the 1960s and 1970s played an important role in the 1980s movement for democratisation that was not simply political but also cultural. Even though successive reformers sent by US and UN aid agencies in the

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Friedman, ‘Democratization: Generalizing the East Asian Experience’, in *The Politics of Democratization*, ed. Edward Friedman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 38.

<sup>2</sup>The first wave was a slow one in the nineteenth century, the second right after the Second World War, and the third beginning in the 1970s. See Samuel P. Huntington, *Third Wave Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 3.

1950s and 1960s had introduced American ideals of progressive education ‘to secure and train Korean teachers in democratic practices in education’,<sup>3</sup> the South Korean government during the period of authoritarian rule had established a centralised, test-based curriculum focused on anti-communism and training the manpower necessary for national economic growth. Democratisers in the 1980s came to criticise this model as inimical to democracy and expected the democratic administration of the first democratic civilian president, Kim Young Sam (1993–1998), to reform education to enhance freedom and equality of teachers and students. The education reforms of the Kim Young Sam administration that came in the 1990s, however, focused largely on diversification and deregulation of schools to address the pressures of globalisation. The increase in student choice, school diversity and a school autonomy that critics hoped would make South Korean education more democratic was accompanied by decreased attention to the equality and teacher curricular autonomy that democratisers also thought essential for democratic education. Paradoxically, memories of the authoritarian Park administration’s high school equalisation policy of the 1970s served as a critique of the ‘democratising’ educational reforms of the 1990s that gave admissions and fee autonomy to private elementary and secondary schools.

The educational changes in the 1980s and 1990s were not wholesale re-imaginings of the educational system, but rather a series of piecemeal reforms introduced by a centralised Ministry of Education (MOE) of structures that had been put in place in the 1960s and 1970s which aimed to foster economic growth. As a consequence, there were substantial continuities with the old authoritarian system. It is necessary, thus, to briefly limn the historical process by which the authoritarian educational model was put in place to understand the continuities in South Korean educational policy from the 1960s to the 1990s in spite of opposition to the authoritarian educational model that appeared among intellectuals and spread to teachers, students and parents. Inspired partly by the *minjung* movement, the civil society organisations devoted to educational democratisation had coalesced in the late 1980s with the trade union and political democratisation movements to become an important part of the successful push for democratisation. Trade union issues thus dominated education reform in the first administration after democratisation, that of President Roh Tae Woo (1988–1993). That is why it was only in the subsequent administration of Kim Young Sam (1993–1998) that democratisation of the political system was accompanied by educational reforms that addressed at least some of the concerns of those in the democratic education movement. The final sections of the paper focus on the question of why these so-called May (1995) Educational Reforms took neoliberal form during the democratising period and why some advocates of democratic education found these reforms inadequate.

## Educational democratisation

There is little agreement on what democratisation is, much less the much more nebulous term of ‘educational democratisation’. Some analysts of democratisation limit the term to the establishment of minimal procedural democracy: moving from autocracy to a political system with regular elections under conditions of relative free speech and

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<sup>3</sup>Edward Grant Meade, *American Military Government in Korea* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1951), 306–7.

association.<sup>4</sup> Others aver that substantive democracy must also include equality before the law, autonomous civil society organisations, widespread citizen participation in governance and substantial equality of opportunity.<sup>5</sup> Procedural educational democratisation might involve only the removal of negative constraints limiting students' and teachers' free speech, association and school choice. Substantive educational democratisation, on the other hand, might require citizen participation in educational decision-making (through, say, local school boards), teacher unionisation and substantial equality of access to quality education.

As Edward Friedman has reminded us, democratisation is not a universal process, but a historically contingent one in which a specific people with a specific culture and grievances demand a more representative form of government.<sup>6</sup> Because the specifics of democratisation are partly determined by the historical grievances the democratising population is trying to overcome, then, democratisation's content cannot be determined a priori on theoretical grounds. In this paper I have thus focused on discovering empirically which grievances South Korean democratisers articulated, how these grievances shaped the demands of activists wanting democratic educational reforms, and whether the reforms put in place have met democratisers' expectations.

Empirical research has shown, in fact, that South Koreans' ideas of democratisation during the late 1980s and early 1990s were quite expansive, focusing on issues of economic distribution, equity, security and fair justice, rather than simply on the elections and representation of procedural democracy (that nominally existed during the period of military dictatorship anyway).<sup>7</sup> As will be related below, demands for educational democratisation were in substantial accord with these substantive ideals: they certainly included demands for removal of authoritarian constraints on students' and teachers' freedoms and more freedom of educational choice, but they also included demands for citizen participation in setting educational goals, and a system less centred on competitively preparing manpower for national development and more centred on humanistic cultivation of student talent and character. Many teachers also focused on an independent teachers' union as a concrete practice of democratic education.

The centrality of education to democratisation in South Korea comes from what Michael Seth calls 'educational exceptionalism', that is, strong egalitarian ideals combined with rank and status consciousness that is partly determined by educational attainment.<sup>8</sup> The seriousness Koreans pay to education is captured by Nancy Abelmann, who wrote about stories of social mobility in South Korea during the period covered in this paper that:

education is shorthand, a Rorschach for, dare I say, almost everything else ... [South Koreans' education] stories reveal the considerable social confusion over class work, namely the work people do to ensure class reproduction or mobility.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Modest Meaning of Democracy', in *Democracy in the Americas: Stopping the Pendulum*, ed. Robert Pastor (New York: Holmes & Meyer, 1989), 11–28.

<sup>5</sup>J. J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract, or Principles of Political Rights: The Essential Rousseau* (New York: Mentor Books, 1974), 57; John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Auckland, NZ: The Floating Press, 2009), 87; Sunhyuk Kim, *The Politics of Democratization in Korea* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup>Friedman, 'Democratization', 19–57.

<sup>7</sup>Doh C. Shin, *Mass Politics and Culture in Democratizing Korea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 47–9.

<sup>8</sup>Michael J. Seth, 'South Korea's Educational Exceptionalism', in *No Alternative? Experiments in South Korean Education*, ed. Nancy Abelmann, Jung-Ah Choi and So Jin Park (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 17–27.

<sup>9</sup>Nancy Abelmann, *The Melodrama of Mobility: Women, Talk, and Class in Contemporary Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 100.

That education is ‘class work’ in South Korea explains why issues of educational access and dissatisfaction with the expensive tutoring and cram schools utilised by those with means to help their students get ahead were central to educational reforms.

## Education for economic development

Park Chung Hee (1961–1979), whose administration is generally credited with initiating South Korea’s rapid industrialisation in the 1960s and 1970s,<sup>10</sup> also instituted a centralised national education system in which the state systematically coordinated educational policy with economic planning.<sup>11</sup> The period of industrialisation under Park has, in fact, been described by Amsden as ‘industrialization through learning’: rather than developing new products and processes as in earlier industrialisations (Great Britain, United States, Germany), industrialisation through learning involves assimilating existing technology to produce known products more cheaply and efficiently than competitors. A core aspect of this industrialisation strategy is ‘the creation of competitiveness on the basis of an abundant, relatively well-educated labour supply’.<sup>12</sup> The Economic Planning Board (EPB) that had been set up in 1961 to coordinate South Korea’s series of Five-Year Plans for economic development thus under Park worked closely with the Ministry of Education (MOE) to ensure the education system produced workers the economy could absorb.

One of the most notable attempts at coordination of educational and economic policy was the creation of a comprehensive technological education system consisting of vocational and technical high schools under the Heavy and Chemical Industrialisation Plan, the 1972–1976 Third Five Year Plan.<sup>13</sup> At the same time access to university education was limited during this period by a dual system of a state-administered Preliminary University Entrance Exam (*taehak iphak yebi kosa*) followed by individual university-administered entrance exams (*pon kosa*). The Preliminary exam had a cut-off score below which students were not allowed to apply to university. This score was managed by the MOE to limit the number of passes to correspond to state-mandated university entrance quotas determined by the EPB’s estimates of the need for university graduates in the economy four years hence. Universities decided whom among the eligible students they would admit through their own individual exams.<sup>14</sup>

During the Park period, care to coordinate the educational system with economic planning was also combined with an attempt to shore up regime legitimacy by minimising the effects of familial disparities on student achievement at the secondary level in large cities.<sup>15</sup> The MOE thus introduced in 1974 an equalisation programme in large

<sup>10</sup>Park took power in a military coup in 1961 but later ruled as elected president during the Third Republic (1963–1971). In 1972 he declared martial law and promulgated a new *Yusin* (renewal) constitution that tightened his authoritarian grip.

<sup>11</sup>Noel McGinn et al., *Education and Development in Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 36.

<sup>12</sup>Alice Amsden, *Asia’s Newest Giant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3–5, 18. One would not, however, characterise South Korea’s industrialisation in the twenty-first century as industrialisation through learning in Amsden’s sense.

<sup>13</sup>Hyung-A Kim, ‘Industrial Warriors: South Korea’s First Generation of Industrial Workers in Post-Developmental Korea’, *Asian Studies Review* 37 (2013): 577–95. By 1987 more than 60,000 students were being graduated each year from technical high schools.

<sup>14</sup>Yi Iryong, ‘Taehak ipsi chedo üi kaehyök e taehan p’yöngga yön’gu’ [A critical study of the university entrance system], *Han’guk kyoyuk munje yön’gu* 12 (1996): 134.

<sup>15</sup>Clark W. Sorensen, ‘Education and Success in Contemporary South Korea’, *Comparative Education Review* 38 (1994): 10–35; Abelmann, Choi and Park, ‘Introduction’, in *No Alternative?*, 5.

cities for public and private high schools (*kodüng hakkyo py'öngjunhwa*) by which teachers were rotated, differences between the quality of school facilities were reduced and students were assigned to high schools by geographical propinquity or lottery rather than examination scores.<sup>16</sup> This policy, combined with the creation of vocational and technical high schools, loosened the stranglehold that a few famous state high schools in Seoul and Pusan and other major cities had on the best teachers, students and facilities.

The model the Park administration bequeathed to following administrations, thus, involved coordinating educational policy with economic plans, but also included a policy of school equalisation to address issues of inequality. As we shall see, subsequent administrations right through the 1990s continued to coordinate educational policy with South Korean economic goals. Questions of college admissions, tutoring and high school equalisation also proved to be enduring issues among those agitating for democratic educational reform, and among the public into the 1990s.

### Democratic opposition and the rise of the *minjung* movement

Although the education system of the Park regime was authoritarian, anti-communist political education provided in South Korean schools always presented democracy as the antithesis of communism. Polls have thus shown that South Korean students at this time accepted democracy as something desirable and characteristic of advanced societies in the Free World and had internalised such democratic norms as freedom of expression, equality and majority rule.<sup>17</sup> The modernisation theory that underlay the rhetoric of development and education during the 1970s and 1980s, moreover, spoke of progress and universality and became a basis for hope. Park Chung Hee's development and education policies also had an egalitarian thrust that appealed to intellectuals.

At the same time, as Namhee Lee has pointed out, rapid social change within a totalising authoritarian system created feelings of alienation: 'feelings of disconnectedness between past and present, between city and countryside, and between the emerging working and middle classes'.<sup>18</sup> While state-sponsored intellectuals were using modernisation theory to mobilise the nation for material wealth to overcome South Korea's poverty-stricken past, then, critical intellectuals sought to recover authentic Korean subjectivity that had been damaged by Japanese colonialism (1910–1945), something that they sought among the *minjung*, the masses, the common people. The *minjung* were not conceptualised as a class in the Marxist sense – a stance that would have branded *minjung* theorists as communists, something that was illegal in South Korea's anti-communist polity – but as 'those who are oppressed in the socio-political system but who are capable of rising up against it'.<sup>19</sup> The movement tended to be sceptical about the sincerity of the United States' support for democracy in South Korea, seeing the United

<sup>15</sup>Clark W. Sorensen, 'Education and Success in Contemporary South Korea', *Comparative Education Review* 38 (1994): 10–35; Abelmann, Choi and Park, 'Introduction', in *No Alternative?*, 5.

<sup>16</sup>Chong Jae Lee, Yong Kim and Soo-yong Byun, 'The Rise of Korean Education from the Ashes of the Korean War', *Prospects* (September 6, 2012): 3–4.

<sup>17</sup>Geir Helgesen, *Democracy and Authority in Korea: The Cultural Dimension in Korea Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 69–73.

<sup>18</sup>Namhee Lee, *The Making of the Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

States as willing to support dictators so long as they supported Cold War alliances. But the *minjung* movement was not solely political, for there were *minjung* theologians who anchored the Christian message among the sufferings of the oppressed, *minjung* historians who sought the agency of national history among the common people, and a *minjung* cultural movement (*munhwa undong*) by which participants cultivated folk arts and promoted open-air political drama (*madang kük*) based on folk models.

When in 1972 President Park introduced a new *Yusin* (renewal) constitution that replaced the directly elected president of the Third Republic (1963–1972) with an indirectly elected one and made the National Assembly partially appointed by the president, university students already instilled with democratic norms became more and more active in demonstrating for the return of democracy. Students soon also embraced the *minjung* movement (as did workers) and engaged in activities based on folk models such as forming drumming groups (*p'ungmulp'ae*) or masked dance drama groups to act out political messages while expressing their authentic *minjung* subjectivity. While during the *Yusin* Republic (1972–1979) central economic and educational planners were the main policy-makers that designed an educational system to train students to meet South Korean manpower needs, there was also push-back against a narrow economic view of education at this time.

### Politicisation of education in the 1980s

After President Park's October 1979 assassination, student activism came to a head in the May 1980 Kwangju Uprising that commenced with demonstrations by students who were joined by working youth in that city against Chun Doo Hwan's 1979 coup d'état and May 1980 declaration of martial law.<sup>20</sup> Following the sanguinary suppression of this uprising, Chun Doo Hwan took the presidency of the Fifth Republic (1980–1987). The manner through which President Chun took power, however, solidified university students' anti-regime orientation. Soon student activists (*hakch'ul nodongkwön*) began uniting with labour activists and *minjung* intellectuals to form what became the potent democratisation movement of the 1980s.<sup>21</sup> Educational policy now became a political football as the Chun administration tried to balance the highly political competing interests of students, parents and teachers while keeping restive universities in check.

From the point of view of educational professionals in the 1980s, the growing, more diversified South Korean economy was beginning to require workers with quality tertiary education. The expansion of the secondary education system that began in the 1970s was also creating growing numbers of high school graduates who, along with their parents, wanted to have a chance to pursue higher education. From students' and parents' point of view, however, the Preliminary University Entrance Exam (*taehak iphak yebi kosa*) was blocking access to the university education necessary to acquire the best jobs. State expenditure on education was modest by world standards, but this was supplemented by money that affluent parents were able to spend on their children's extracurricular study (*kwaoe*) to help them succeed in the exam system. A 1982 study found that the state

<sup>20</sup>For eyewitness and historical perspectives on this uprising see Donald N. Clark, *The Kwangju Uprising: Shadows over the Regime in South Korea* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988). Eyewitness observers mostly blame the heavy-handed repression of the student demonstrations in Kwangju in May 1980 for the citizens' joining in the uprising.

<sup>21</sup>Lee, *The Making of the Minjung*, 213–39.



provided only 15% of the total cost of education with 85% of the cost of middle and high school being born by families when tuition fees and tutoring were taken into account.<sup>22</sup> An ethnography of mid-1990s Seoul mentions as unexceptional a middle-class housewife who spent US\$ 3000 a month on her children's tutoring.<sup>23</sup> The inequality that this represented began emerging as a political issue during the 1980s as the Chun administration abandoned high school equalisation. On the one hand, the Chun administration, which came to power through a coup, was keenly aware that expanding access to university education would ease social tensions by meeting middle-class parents' desires for their children's access to university. On the other hand, once admitted to the university students traditionally had little to fear from academic failure and so were free to engage in political activity. The centrality of student demonstrations as a precipitating factor in the Kwangju Uprising against martial law in May 1980 thus made the Chun administration wary of unregulated expansion of university enrolments.

That educational policy was politically important to the Chun administration is reflected in the fact that Chun's education policy was initially handled not by the MOE, but directly by the military junta chaired by Chun himself. It was the Special Standing Committee for National Security (*Kukka powi pisang taech'aek sangim wiwönhoe*) that issued Chun's so-called July 30 (1980) Educational Reforms only a month following the suppression of the Kwangju Uprising. These measures bowed to pressure to curb extracurricular study by calling for a 'pan-national movement to drive out extracurricular study' to open from 1 August. Five additional measures prohibited civil servants and leading members of society from sending their children for extracurricular study, prohibited teachers from moonlighting as extracurricular study teachers, called for registration of extracurricular schools and personnel so they would pay taxes, and so forth.

In spite of a media offensive focused on extracurricular study, however, a careful perusal of the reforms reveals that a majority of the seven main measures outlined in the body of the July 30 Reform Measures had to do with university education rather than extracurricular study. A few of the measures involved increasing access to university education through the University of the Air (*Pangsong t'ongsin taehak*),<sup>24</sup> but the main reforms involved the expansion of university admissions by abolishing individual university admission exams and using the state Preliminary Exam combined with high school reports (*naesin söngjök*) for university admission. The university admission quota was increased by 15,000, and a system to limit graduations rather than admissions was introduced to foster student competition. Universities were directed to hold lectures 'from morning to evening' to make maximum use of facilities.<sup>25</sup>

In implementing the new graduation quota system, the South Korean MOE told universities they could admit up to 130% of their graduation quota the first year, and then weed out the academically weak students over four years.<sup>26</sup> If by the final year the

<sup>22</sup> *Korean Education 2000* (Seoul: KEDI, 1985), 126.

<sup>23</sup> Denise Potrzeba Lett, *In Pursuit of Status: The Making of South Korea's 'New' Urban Middle Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 64.

<sup>24</sup> The 'University of the Air' is an institution that broadcasts college instruction on radio and TV and assesses work through correspondence.

<sup>25</sup> 'July 30th educational reform measures'.

<sup>26</sup> Kukka kirogwön (South Korean National Archives), 'Taehak kyoyuk üi kaehyök kwa kyödan—choröp chönwönje üi chöngch'ak ül wihayö (1983.7)' [Reforms and decisions on university education—on anchoring the graduation quota system. July 1983]. <http://www.archives.go.kr/next/search/listSubjectDescription.do?id=003175> (accessed August 8, 2019).



university still had students over the quota, those with grades below a cut-off for the quota would get ‘completion certificates’ (*suryojŭng*), but not a Bachelor’s degree (*haksa hagwi*). The stated rationale for this new system was to raise universities’ quality. The MOE argued that introducing competition within universities would change the university’s atmosphere from ‘if you are admitted you graduate’ to ‘having a studious atmosphere’ (*myŏnhak kip’ung*). Instructors who used to rely on cramming lectures (*chuiipsik kangŭi wiju*) would now become more creative, they asserted.

In the end the evaluation was that our country’s universities are qualitatively lacking compared to the standards of foreign advanced countries making it impossible to discharge outstanding graduates having guaranteed quality, and since we have to depend on the introduction of foreign technology due to inadequate original technical development, our international competitiveness is weakened, which makes it difficult to realise a high-level industrial society.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, however, this new graduation quota system received a host of criticism from professional educators who noted that, far from increasing quality, student/teacher and student/facility ratios deteriorated as universities admitted more students without increasing facilities or faculty. Kang Sint’aek noted that more than 20% of lectures during this period had more than 100 students, making high-level discussion impossible, and that with more responsibilities professors’ research productivity fell.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the pain of finishing without receiving a degree was borne largely by students at South Korea’s best and most prestigious universities that had low ‘natural dropout rates’ because selective admissions made for an able and economically stable student body, rather than at Korea’s second- and third-tier schools with their less able and affluent students who dropped out ‘naturally’ at higher rates.

In fact, while the university quota system was sold as a measure to improve the quality of university education, the political motivation of the Chun Doo Hwan military junta to damp down student protest through introducing all-day classes and competition among students is transparent and was widely understood. Even the conservative *Chosŏn Ilbo* commented in 1986, ‘The slogan “abolish the graduation quota system” always appears at college demonstrations, but this is not whipping up a studious atmosphere but seems to be an added excuse for rough demonstrations’,<sup>29</sup> indirectly acknowledging the link between a studious atmosphere and a hoped-for lack of student political activity. A recent oral history, in fact, has quoted a participant in the reform deliberations in 1980 who lays the responsibility for the graduation quota system squarely on the colonels of the junta, not educational professionals:

The graduation quota system is absolutely not something that came out of KEDI.<sup>30</sup> That thing came out of the National Security Committee. They unilaterally pushed it through. ...<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Ibid

<sup>28</sup>Kang Sint’aek, ‘Taehak chorŏp chŏngwŏnje ūi hyŏngsŏng kwajŏng koch’al’ [A study of the formation process of the university graduation quota system], *Haengjŏng nonch’ong* 24, no. 2 (1986): 116.

<sup>29</sup>*Chosŏn Ilbo* ‘The Graduation Quota System Must End’.

<sup>30</sup>KEDI (Korean Educational Development Institute) is a government educational policy think-tank.

<sup>31</sup>Nam Sindong and Ryu Pangnyang, ‘Taehak chorŏp chŏngwŏn chedo (1981–1987) ūi kusang kwa p’yeji e taehan kusulsa yŏn’gu’ [Oral history research on the University Graduation Quota Policy 1981–1987], *Kyoyuk sahak yŏn’gu* 27, no. 2 (2017): 42.

The opening of university admissions to a wider array of students, moreover, did not really placate students and parents. The president kept a firm grip on educational policy through his appointed Education Reform Deliberative Council of 1985–1987. Following the end of the graduation quota system the College Entrance Preliminary Exam was changed to an Achievement Test (*hangnyök kosa*) with no cut-off score. Colleges computed entrance scores by combined the Preliminary Exam score with high school grades (*söngjök naesin*) to create a single admissions score.<sup>32</sup> Parents nevertheless still worried about the fairness of high school internal reports (*naesin*), so the custom of tips (*ch'onji*) to teachers in order to secure attention to one's child became exacerbated.<sup>33</sup> James Robinson has also noted that the social background of parents was systematically recorded in student records, and this affected how teachers treated students.<sup>34</sup> The exams that determined who did and who did not make it into high schools and colleges, while seemingly unbiased, left students and parents anxious and uncertain about their educational trajectories, and left students with few educational alternatives. Students chafed at the authoritarian atmosphere of high schools where they bowed to teachers, wore uniforms, did military drills, were subject to corporal punishment and spent much time on rote memorisation. And liberal critics demanded revision of government-issued history textbooks that gave a one-sided account of Korean history.<sup>35</sup>

It was in this context of government worry concerning student political activity consequent to expansion of the tertiary education system, and student and parent worry regarding access to quality secondary and tertiary education, that the citizens' movement for democratisation of education grew. Among the most active reformers were teachers sympathetic to the populist *minjung* and labour movements, who were working for teacher unionisation through the YMCA Secondary Educators' Society (*YMCA chungdüng kyoyukcha hyöphoe*). In May 1985 a group of teachers with literary interests published critical writing on current educational practices through the society in the inaugural issue of *Minjung Kyoyuk* (Minjung Education). Announcing, 'We think our education needs a new beginning starting from the revival of the aspect of [national] subjectivity and the aspect of teacher and students' human quality, breaking up the instrumental view of humanity that considers it fine to sacrifice human beings for some sort of goal', they saw the solution as '*minjung* education for the sake of educational democratisation'.<sup>36</sup> This was a call to focus education on the subjectivity of the common people, rather than elites and pride based on economic growth. Although this issue was well received by educators, a Yöüido high school headmaster petitioned the Seoul City School Board, complaining that the magazine was subversive, and an investigation

<sup>32</sup>Iryong, 'Taehak ipsi chedo', 136–7.

<sup>33</sup>The term *naesin* (internal report) was mostly used to mean the student rankings used in middle and high schools. They could include mid-term and final grades in required courses. Universities used student ranking combined with ranking of schools' competitiveness to make admission decisions. Because schools ranked students into levels (usually 1–5) based on a combined assessment of achievement and personality, students and parents worried about teacher favouritism in assigning ranks, and also about differences between the competitiveness of schools. Even an outstanding student from a low-ranked school might be deemed unworthy whereas a good student from a competitive school might not rise high enough in student rankings to be competitive. In 1995 the record was changed to a broader 'School Life Record' (*hakkyo saenghwal kirokbu*) that included elective courses and even extracurricular activities, though the term *naesin* is still used colloquially by students.

<sup>34</sup>James Robinson, 'Social Status and Academic Success in South Korea', *Comparative Education Review* 38 (1994): 506–30.

<sup>35</sup>Seth, *Education Fever*, 228–9.

<sup>36</sup>"'Minjung kyoyuk' p'ilhwa sagön' [Minjung education subversive writing incident], *Chungang Ilbo*, 30 May 1991, 10.

ensued. A demonstration in sympathy for the 20 teacher/authors under investigation was broken up by the police on 19 July, some of the teachers were rounded up for 'leftist tendencies and pro-communism' and two publishers who had organised the rally were arrested under the National Security Law. Ten of the teacher/authors were fired, seven were forced to retire, two were given pay cuts and one got off with a warning.<sup>37</sup>

Forceful suppression of the journal *Minjung Kyoyuk*, however, ultimately backfired on the government. Small-group meetings of the YMCA Secondary Educators' Society spread throughout the country as the Minjung Education Incident became a *cause célèbre*. A year later, on 5–10 May 1986, the YMCA Secondary Educators' Society was able to organise a First Teachers' Day in which more than 500 participants signed on to a 'Declaration of Educational Democratisation' (*kyoyuk minjuhwa sŏnŏn*). This was the first public attempt for teachers to try to define what democratisation of education could be.<sup>38</sup>

The *minjung* movement *asked* for an end to specific government policies and practices such as the use of schools for government indoctrination and political mobilisation. The drafters of the declaration averred that democratic schools would respect student and teachers' rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association. And so far as organisation is concerned, it envisioned democratic schools to be autonomous, and self-governing, rather than run by a centralised professional educational bureaucracy according to nationwide standards. Some of these demands seem merely procedural – the removal of negative constraints limiting students' and teachers' free speech, association and school choice – yet many teachers understood non-interference in educational rights to include teachers' curricular freedom. The demand for the right to form independent teachers' unions that concluded the document linked education democratisation to the contemporary political democratisation movement in which independent democratic trade unions were considered the main vehicle to bring about fair economic distribution and humane working conditions.<sup>39</sup>

Much political activity followed this declaration as agitation for education reform began to spread from a small coterie of teachers to a larger group of students and parents. Thus, when the Chun administration tried to suppress teachers' attempt to organise a union, sympathetic teachers and students supported the activists, and these were joined by some religious and opposition political organisations. By 1986 a Society for the Realisation of Democratic Education (*Minju kyoyuk silch'ŏn hyŏbŭihoe*) had been organised at the Chungdong YMCA in Seoul.<sup>40</sup> Then on 13 August 1987, in the wake of Roh Tae Woo's June 29 Declaration accepting democratic reforms – the turning point towards democratisation – some teachers met to form the National Teachers Association to Promote Democratic Education (*Minju kyoyuk ch'ujin chŏn'guk kyosa hyŏbŭihoe*).

<sup>37</sup>Kukka kirogwŏn, 'Minjung kyoyukchi sagŏn' [Incident of *Minjung Education* magazine], <http://archives.go.kr/next/search/listSubjectDescription.do?id=003293> (accessed August 1, 2018).

<sup>38</sup>Kukka kirogwŏn, 'Kyoyuk minjuhwa sŏnŏn' [Declaration of educational democratisation], <http://archives.go.kr/next/search/listSubjectDescription.do?id=003292> (accessed August 1, 2018); Seth, *Education Fever*, 229 deals briefly with this declaration as well.

<sup>39</sup>Yoonkyung Lee, *Militants or Partisans: Labor Unions and Democratic Politics in Korea and Taiwan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 105.

<sup>40</sup>Open Archives, 'Ch'am kyoyuk ūl wihan kyosadŭl ūi oech'im—kyoyuk minjuhwa sŏnŏn' [Teachers' cry for authentic education—Declaration of Democratic Education], <http://archives.kdemo.or.kr/contents/view/264> (accessed December 20, 2020).

## Teachers' unionisation struggle during the first democratic administration, 1988–1993

As is well known, the June 1987 demonstrations for restoration of democracy led Chun's hand-picked successor, Roh Tae Woo, who was mindful of the possibility that political instability in South Korea might lead to failure of the long-planned 1988 Seoul Olympics, to issue his June 29 (1987) Declaration accepting demands for freedom of speech and publication, direct election of the president, election of National Assembly members from single-seat constituencies, and for the presidentially appointed National Assembly members to be replaced by members appointed by the political parties in proportion to their vote in the national election. These constitutional reforms were implemented through negotiation by political party elites that excluded the non-institutional opposition, known as *chaeya* ('in the wilderness'), however, so that political exclusion of some sectors of society continued during and after the reforms.<sup>41</sup> Roh, a military colleague of former President Chun Doo Hwan, won the subsequent 1987 election with only 36.6% of the vote because the opposition was split between the three Kims (Kim Young Sam, Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Pil), each of whom won in their respective regional strongholds.<sup>42</sup>

Because of past union repression, 'a full guarantee of union rights [had] emerged as a core democratic reform agenda in post transition politics', so teachers expected their new union to be legalised.<sup>43</sup> Labour law was loosened somewhat under Roh, and among the industrial workforce unions proliferated as membership grew rapidly after 1987, peaking in 1989 at 18.9% of the workforce.<sup>44</sup> Teachers were still legally prohibited from forming a union, however. The National Teachers' Association to Promote Democratic Education thereupon increased its activities, sent letters to the Minister of Education suggesting educational reforms, expanded its membership in the schools and campaigned for revision of the Public Servants Act that limited the organisational rights of teachers. On 18 November 1988 some 13,000 teachers gathered in Yöüido Square near the National Assembly building demanding these changes. The National Assembly passed a revised labour law allowing public sector unions on 9 March 1989, but President Roh vetoed it, setting the stage for confrontation with organised teachers for the rest of his term. MOE officials even likened the spread of reformist ideas about resisting authoritarianism and promoting critical thinking to an infection that would require strong medical treatment.<sup>45</sup>

Progressive teachers nevertheless moved to transform the National Teachers' Association into a National Teachers' Union (*Chön'guk kyojigwön nodong chohap*, hereafter Chön'gyojo).<sup>46</sup> They issued a survey indicating that 84% of the nation's 300,000 teachers wanted a union, and amid rising tension held their founding meeting at Yonsei University on 28 May 1989. Their founding declaration outlined three aspects of 'true education' – that it be

<sup>41</sup>Eric Mobernd, *Top Down Democracy in South Korea* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 50.

<sup>42</sup>Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997), 167–78.

<sup>43</sup>Lee, *Militants or Partisans*, 105.

<sup>44</sup>Byung-Kook Kim and Hyun-Chin Lim, 'Labor Against Itself: Structural Dilemmas of State Monism', in *Consolidating Democracy in South Korea*, ed. Larry Diamond and Byung-Kook Kim (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000), 113.

<sup>45</sup>John P. Synott, *Teacher Unions, Social Movements and the Politics of Education: South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2002), 33.

<sup>46</sup>*Sillok minjuhwa undong, 94: chön'gyojo ch'ulböm'* [Democracy Movement Record 94: The inauguration of the National Teachers' Union], *Kyöngnyang sinmun*, April 16, 2005, 32, [http://news.khan.co.kr/kh\\_news/khan\\_art\\_view.html?art\\_id=200503161632591](http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?art_id=200503161632591) (accessed December 20, 2019).

national, that it be democratic and that it be humanistic. The existing educational system, they noted, damaged both student and teachers' rights by using authoritarian methods and focusing on rote learning for test taking. The union teachers desired educational reforms so they could turn their classrooms into a model of democracy, because 'students must grow up as democratic citizens' (*minju simin ūro charaya hal haksængdŭl*). They also emphasised the importance of teacher participation in curricular substance as something essential to democracy, asserting that unionisation is a concrete practice of educational democratisation:

Our Education Workers Union is a better classroom in which teachers themselves can display a real model of democracy to students who can grow up as democratic citizens. . . Here lies the reason our educators more than anyone else lead the construction of the National Educators' Union that is the concrete practice of the educational democratisation movement.<sup>47</sup>

The government countered this meeting with strong measures. Riot police surrounded the campus where the meeting was held. Violence ensued. Some participants were rounded up by police while a group of union leaders took shelter at the headquarters of the Reunification Democratic Party (led by Kim Young Sam, next South Korean president) where they held a nine-day hunger strike.<sup>48</sup> In the following months, special committees were set up to dismiss teachers who refused to leave the union, and thousands were fired.<sup>49</sup> The following autumn schools faced turmoil as sacked teachers nevertheless showed up for school, and some students staged sit-down protests to get their teachers back, while in other cases principals or parents blocked teachers' entry. This campaign only lasted a week but had a major impact in engaging the sympathies of schoolchildren and their families. The media also took notice and brought many of the issues being raised by Chŏn'gyojo to the nation's attention at this time.<sup>50</sup>

The education democratisation movement that had begun among teachers demanding freedom of expression and association then began to spread to students and parents. On 22 September 1989 parents organised the National Parent Association for True Education (*Ch'am kyoyuk ūl wihan chŏn'guk hakpumohoe*, hereafter Ch'amwihak), after which time the phrase 'true education' (*ch'am kyoyuk*) became the moniker for democratic education. At first the concerns of parents turned out to be distinct from those of the teachers' union, Chŏn'gyojo. Ch'amwihak's first campaign in 1989, for example, was to have compulsory Parent Association fees (*yuksŏnghoebi*) returned, an effort that was rebuffed by the courts in 1992. The following year the organisation launched a campaign to abolish the customary money envelopes parents felt obliged to give to teachers (*ton pongt'u ōpsaegi undong*). Yet in 1990 they also held an assembly to vote on measures guaranteeing autonomous student activity and preventing infringement of student human rights, concerns that overlapped to a considerable degree with those of the teachers.<sup>51</sup>

During Roh's administration certain democratising practices took hold such as the discontinuance of student mobilisation in the schools for political purposes, and the achievement of a modicum of decentralisation.<sup>52</sup> In other respects, however, there was

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<sup>47</sup>'Declaration of Educational Democratisation'.

<sup>48</sup>Synott, *Teacher Unions*, 35.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 20–3.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>51</sup>Sadan pŏbin ch'am kyoyuk ūl wihan chŏn'guk hakpumohoe [National Parent Association for True Education], [http://www.hakbumo.or.kr/gnu/bbs/board/php?bo\\_table=info-history](http://www.hakbumo.or.kr/gnu/bbs/board/php?bo_table=info-history) (accessed July 26, 2018).

<sup>52</sup>Seth, *Education Fever*, 230.

little change. Education policy was still in the hands of MOE professionals. Thus, the main accomplishment of Chŏn'gyojo and Ch'amwihak during the Roh presidency was the creation of discursive space outside the governmental education bureaucracy for compromise and debate concerning the direction and strategy that educational reform should take. These two educational associations came to form a vital part of the South Korean civil society that was emerging along with democracy after 1987. And while now in the twenty-first century there are numerous educational NGOs with a variety of viewpoints, during the first years of democratisation in South Korea in the 1990s it was largely the aforementioned democratising liberals who dominated the stage of educational reform, with the teachers' union Chŏn'gyojo leading the way. Lee Yoonmi has put it this way:

In the case of the citizens' educational movement, it was detonated based on the Chŏn'gyojo movement starting off in the form of an all-front reaction to conservative bureaucratic structures that were the mechanism of reproduction of the authoritarian state. At the beginning, the parents' movement also set out in the form of helping the side of the teachers' movement, and it is no exaggeration to say that the later diverse, differentiated teachers' movements, and all sorts of educational discussions, were also created on the basis of Chŏn'gyojo.<sup>53</sup>

Much of the activity of both Chŏn'gyojo and Ch'amwihak during this period was organisational and consciousness-raising. Neither group was yet prepared to create educational policy from scratch but concentrated more on reducing what they saw as authoritarian and anti-democratic tendencies within the educational system. Publications were also important. Chŏn'gyojo's influential publication *Uri Kyoyuk* (*Our Education*) began in 1990, and Ch'amwihak began *Hakpumo sinmun* (*Parents' Newspaper*) the following year. Educational democratisation had become a true movement. This was part and parcel of a national transformation, brought about through the struggle for democratisation, of South Koreans' pre-1987 subjectivity as dutiful nationals (*ümu innün kungmin*) subject to state mobilisation for national reconstruction into one as rights-bearing citizens (*inkwŏn innün simin*) who can and should participate in public policy formation.<sup>54</sup>

### Kim Young Sam, the 'education president'

Though certain procedural democratising practices had taken hold in education under the Roh administration, in most respects there was little change in education until 1992.<sup>55</sup> Certainly, demands for parent and teacher participation in creating 'true education', or democratising teaching practices by allowing teacher autonomy and teacher-student give-and-take had not been met. Roh, even if democratically elected, had been a previous member of the military clique of Chun Doo Hwan, so it was in fact only when Kim Young Sam, who in 1990 had merged his party into those of Roh Tae Woo and Kim Jong Pil, won the 1992 presidential election that civilian government (*munmin chŏngh'i*) was restored in South Korea for the first time since 1961. Kim Young Sam won

<sup>52</sup>Seth, *Education Fever*, 230.

<sup>53</sup>Yi Yunmi, 'Han'guk kyoyuk simin undong üi hyŏnjesu wa kwaje' [The current place and task of Korea's citizens education movement], *Kyoyuk pip'yŏng* 32 (2013): 11–12.

<sup>54</sup>Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 173–5.

<sup>55</sup>Seth, *Education Fever*, 230.



the presidency with 42% of the national vote out of a field of three major and four minor presidential candidates.<sup>56</sup>

There is no doubt that Kim Young Sam was a sincere believer in democracy. He had been expelled from the National Assembly in 1979 for criticising Park Chung Hee's authoritarianism, and he had been barred from politics and put under house arrest early in Chun Doo Hwan's administration. During his own administration from 1993 until 1998 he is well known for removing the military from politics, freeing political prisoners and trying both Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo for treason for the 12 December 1979 military coup and May 1980 Kwangju massacre.<sup>57</sup> Those advocating democratisation of education thus had high hopes for Kim Young Sam.

After merging his party with the governing party in 1990, however, he and his fellow Reunification Democratic Party elites had been outnumbered in the government by military authoritarians and statist technocrats who still controlled the allocation of capital through government banks, and enriched themselves through insider real-estate speculation, and deals and kickbacks with the large conglomerates called *chaeböl*. When he was elected in his own right in 1992, Kim and his democracy-favouring political party elites therefore needed to find allies in the bureaucracy to consolidate power. He found them, according to Sungsoo Kim and Shinhee Yu, among a group of economic reformers influenced by Anglo-American neoliberal thought who wanted to use the discipline of the market to wring corruption and inefficiency out of the state-led economy.<sup>58</sup> Through this coalition with neoliberal economic reformers Kim and his political party elites were able to outmanoeuvre the old authoritarian nexus of statist bureaucrats, military authoritarians and big business. Kim published his own personal assets and forced others in the government to do likewise, a move that precipitated the resignation of key corrupt officials. He also forced the retirement of politically ambitious military officers known as the Hanahoe (Society of One). To undermine corruption, he made pseudonymous bank accounts illegal (the so-called 'financial real name system').<sup>59</sup>

The first educational issue the Kim Young Sam administration addressed was the reinstatement of teachers fired during the Roh administration for belonging to Chŏn'gyojo, the Teachers' Union. Suppression of this union had been called out by the International Labour Organization for violating teachers' organisational rights.<sup>60</sup> The administration reinstated teachers on the condition that they withdraw from the union, however. After some hesitation the union accepted this offer with the union sending 1000 applications for reinstatement as a collective action. The tactics of unions in the late 1980s and early 1990s had by now soured the public, and in recognition of this the Teachers' Union now eschewed militant tactics while continuing its push for legalisation. The Roh government had maintained during the dismissals of teachers that private school teachers had the same restrictions as state employees, but now private schools refused to take back dismissed teachers, so the government had to find public posts for

<sup>56</sup>HeeMin Kim, *Korean Democracy in Transition* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky: 2011), 44–6.

<sup>57</sup>'South Korean Chief Removes 2 Generals to Curb Military', *New York Times*, April 2, 1993, A8.

<sup>58</sup>Sungsoo Kim and Shinhee Yu, 'Kim Yŏngsam chŏnggwŏn ūi sinjayujuūi kyŏngje kaehyŏk kisu kwallyo (Technocrat) was chŏngdang ellit'ū ūi sangho kwan'gye rŭl chungsim ūro' [Neoliberal economic reform of the Kim Young-Sam regime: focusing on the interaction between technocrats and political party elites], *Sahoe kwahak yŏn'gu* 10 (2014): 131–57.

<sup>59</sup>Ch'oe Sang-Hun, 'Kim Young-sam, South Korean President Who Opposed Military, Dies at 87', *New York Times*, November 21, 2015, A 20.

<sup>60</sup>Synott, *Teacher Unions*, 35.



them. Top-down authority in schools was even strengthened by a newly introduced daily attendance record, and a review of each teacher's monthly lesson plans by the vice-principal, but the new administration also provided for more flexibility in the classroom and less violent disciplining of students.<sup>61</sup>

Beyond this, Kim had big ambitions for education reform. He has been quoted as saying, 'I want to be remembered as the education president' (*kyoyuk taet'ongnyöng üro kiöktoego sipta*).<sup>62</sup> In August 1993, early in his first year in office, Kim issued a presidential order establishing an Education Reform Commission (*kyoyuk kaehyök wiwönhoe*) appointed by the president. Generally known as the Presidential Education Reform Commission, it was charged thus:

To establish education's basic direction to prepare for the twenty-first century, and in order to induce the people's [*kungmin*] consent for education's long-term development and comply with the President's advice related to promotion of pan-governmental, pan-societal education reform we establish an Education Reform Commission under the president.<sup>63</sup>

While the presidential commission model for reform brings to mind Chun Doo Hwan's illiberal Education Reform Deliberative Council of 1985–1987, Kim Young Sam's committee was more inclusive. Commission members were to be chosen 'from among persons who have firm convictions about educational reform, have abundant scholarship and experience, and represent the opinions about education of all fields and strata'.<sup>64</sup> The commission presented its proposals, moreover, in four rounds, leaving time for discussion and refinement before implementation. As full discussion of the work of this commission is beyond the scope of this paper, however, I will concentrate here primarily on the first-round proposal, the 1995 'Plan for Educational Reform to Establish a New Education System' generally known as the May 31 Education Reform Plan.

By the time the education reform plan was presented, the Kim administration was in mid-term and its governing coalition had changed from its initial orientation. Sometime in mid-1994 Kim Young Sam became more forceful in dealing with labour and student unrest, and substantially distanced himself from workers' distributional demands.<sup>65</sup> The earlier removal of government officials, while faithful to Kim's pledge to civilianise the government, had disturbed some of the conservative political party elites who had supported Kim's merger of his party into the governing party. In addition, the financial real name system had alarmed the middle classes as the *chaeböl*, the media and private research groups spread reports of lack of capital. As he brought more conservative elements back into his coalition the rhetoric of reform that early in his administration had emphasised a break with the past – eradication of corruption, abolition of authoritarian laws, settlement of past injustices and so forth – ended. The regime acknowledged that domestic reform had made its contribution but demands for its continuation were now considered to be clinging to the past (*kwagösa e yönyöghanün köt*).

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 36–9.

<sup>62</sup>Pak Kwangon and Hwang Yonggu, 'Kim Yöngsam Taet'ongnyöng, kyoyuk kaehyök 10 tae kwaje chesi' [Kim Young Sam presents 10 tasks for educational reform]. MBC News Report April 27, 1995, Anchors Öm Kiyöng and Chöng Hyejöng, [http://imnews.imbc.com/20dbnews/history/1995/1951806\\_19450.html](http://imnews.imbc.com/20dbnews/history/1995/1951806_19450.html) (accessed August 6, 2018).

<sup>63</sup>South Korea National Law Information Center, 'Kyoyuk kaehyön wiwönhoe kyujöng, Taet'ongnyöngnyöng che 139555 ho 1983.8.10 chejöng' [Regulation for Education Reform Commission. Presidential Order 13955, August 10, 1993], <http://www.law.go.kr/lsinforP.do?lsiSeq=9907#0000> (accessed August 6, 2018).

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Adrian Buza, *The Making of Modern Korea*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017), 25. Kim and Yu, 'Neoliberal Economic Reform', 131.

Reform now should lead to the next level of ‘strengthening international competitiveness to meet world economic competition’.<sup>66</sup> Deregulation and globalisation to join international economic organisations (such as the OECD) were now the watchwords. This next level (*taŭm tan’gye*) was also manifested in Kim’s educational reform plan.

In an interview with MBC on 27 April 1995, shortly before the release of the May 31 Reform Plan, Kim Young Sam clarified his intentions:

In order for us to approach the twenty-first century as a pivotal world country we must begin with educational reform. We should only do reform standing beside the people who are education’s consumers.<sup>67</sup>

Reporter Hwang Yonggu continued:

Twenty-first century civilisation is characterized by informationalisation [*chŏngbohwa*] and globalisation [*segvehwa*]. In the era of informationalisation, knowledge, that is the extent of knowledge production, determines a country’s strength and individuals’ life... The extent of knowledge production determines victory or defeat in the era of informationalisation and globalisation.

Our existing education became the foundation of economic development, and the achievement of democratisation of society makes a contribution but maximising standardised sequenced knowledge production has been criticised as being inappropriate. Due to standardised education, it has been difficult to develop elementary, middle and high school students’ originality and creativity, and through examination hell<sup>68</sup> students and parents fall into excessive extracurricular fees in studying.<sup>69</sup>

As others have noted, the President’s Educational Reform Commission was formed in the year following the deflation of the Japanese bubble economy, and reflected concerns that South Korea, which had to a considerable degree modelled its economic and social development after Japan, might develop economic stagnation like Japan. Accordingly, this television report already exhibits the rhetorical tropes that would characterise Kim Young Sam’s educational reforms: reaching the next level, the treatment of students and their parents as education consumers (*kyoyuk ūi suyoja*), the emphasis on meeting twenty-first-century informationalisation and globalisation (*chŏngbohwa wa segvehwa*), facilitating knowledge production (*chijŏk chasan*) as a way of increasing Korea’s economic competitiveness, and the critique of Korea’s standardised, examination-based educational system as stifling students’ originality and creativity.<sup>70</sup>

When the Commission’s plan was published on 31 May 1995 the bold-type keywords in the proposal used the above vocabulary. The title of the plan pointed not to democratisation and equalisation, but economic competitiveness: ‘A New Education System that Takes the Lead in the Era of Globalisation and Informationalisation’ (*Segvehwa•chŏngbohwa sidae rŭl chudohanŭn sin kyoyuk chedo*). Authoritarian structures were supposed to be eased in favour of ‘education on the basis of [school] autonomy and responsibility’, so that education should be in harmony with diversity and

<sup>66</sup>Kim and Yu, ‘Neoliberal Economic Reform’, 147–9.

<sup>67</sup>Pak and Hwang, ‘Kim Young Sam 10 tasks’.

<sup>68</sup>‘Examination hell’ (*sihŏm chiok*) is a common epithet for South Korea’s (and Japan’s) examination-based education system.

<sup>69</sup>Pak and Hwang, ‘Kim Yong Sam 10 tasks’.

<sup>70</sup>Han Man’gil, ‘1990-nyŏndae Han’guk kyoyuk ūi pansŏng kwa kwaje’ [Reflection and task of Korean education in the 1990s], *Minju simin kyoyuk nonch’ong* 4 (1999): 57–8.

community, and quality would be enhanced with more competition and evaluation of teachers.<sup>71</sup> The specific measures proposed make up nine columns of small print in the July 1995 issue of Chŏn'gyojo's publication *Uri Kyoyuk*.<sup>72</sup> The plan does not address how diversity, autonomy, competition and evaluation of teachers would be reconciled with creating the equality, harmony and community also mentioned in the plan.

On the following day, the reaction to this plan fell along ideological lines. Conservative newspapers like *Chosŏn Ilbo* and *Maeil Kyŏngje* generally ran informational articles that described how various universities planned to react to the abolition of the basic exam (*pon kosa*) each of them used to select students. *Chosŏn Ilbo* described the new Consolidated Life Record Ledger (*ch'ong saenghwal kirok pu*) that would replace the old high school grade reports (*naesin*) as 'half expectation, half worry' (*kidae pan, uryŏ pan*).<sup>73</sup> *Maeil Kyŏngje* (*Daily Economy*) confined itself to description of the programme.<sup>74</sup> *Han'gyŏre Sinmun*, a newspaper sympathetic to the *minjung* movement, on the other hand, had already in January 1995 published a long article criticising the MOE for pushing through cancellation of high school equalisation, ignoring public opinion. Citing a poll by KEDI, *Han'gyŏre* noted that more than 60% of respondents agreed with the answer, 'let's fix and improve problems while maintaining the general framework of equalisation'. The article accused the MOE of supporting competitive high school admissions and of only repeating things that they cannot demonstrate like, 'Since equalised education blocks excellence, we have had equalisation that downgrades academic ability and lowers our economic competitiveness and becomes an obstacle to globalisation'.<sup>75</sup>

On 1 June, the day after the publication of the education reform plan, *Han'gyŏre* published two lengthy articles on the proposal, one of which focused on how autonomy, self-responsibility and the policy of fostering strong independent private high schools would lead to unequal educational opportunity. The article noted specifically that by transforming *chaebŏl*<sup>76</sup> foundation-founded high schools into independent private high schools (*charip sarip ko*) that have the right to select students and set tuition fees autonomously, these schools would change into schools for children of the rich and could give rise to social antagonism, mentioning specific schools supported by the Hyundai, Samsŏng and Chillo Foundations. State high schools that were famous before equalisation, on the other hand, would face decline as they might attract only students who have failed private high school entrance exams, or those who cannot pay high tuition fees. Parents were quoted as expressing doubts that the new college admission system based on Consolidated Life Record ledgers would reduce extra-curricular school activity and wondering if the subjective nature of these records would increase 'skirt wind'<sup>77</sup> as

<sup>71</sup>Kyoyuk kaehyŏk wiwŏnhoe [Education Reform Commission], *Segyehwa Chŏngbohwa Sidae rŭl chudohanŭn Sin'gyoyuk Ch'eje Surip ŭl wihan Kyoyuk Kaehyŏk Pangan II* [Education reform plan to establish a new educational system leading to the age of informationalisation and globalisation ii], <http://theme.archives.go.kr/viewer/common/archWebViewer.do?singleData=Y&archiveEventId=0050754028> (accessed August 20, 2020).

<sup>72</sup>'Sin kyoyuk ch'eje surip ŭl wihan kyoyuk kaehyŏk pangan yoyak' [Summary of the education reform plan to establish a new educational system], *Uri Kyoyuk*, July 1995, 43–5.

<sup>73</sup>'5-31 kyoyuk kaehyŏk' [The May 31st Education Reform], *Chosŏn Ilbo*, June 1, 1995, 31.

<sup>74</sup>'Taehak chŏngwŏn chayurhwa 1997 hangnyŏn esŏ silsi' [College quota autonomy to be implemented from 1997 school year], *Maeil Kyŏngje*, July 10, 1995, 39.

<sup>75</sup>'Ilbangjŏk kyoyuk chŏngch'aek k'ŭn panbal' [Big opposition to one-sided education policy], *Han'gyŏre Sinmun*, January 21, 1995, 21.

<sup>76</sup>*Chaebŏl* are the large business groups that dominate the South Korean economy.

<sup>77</sup>'Skirt wind' (*ch'imapparam*) is a metaphor for the behind-the-scenes influence of women, in this case implying mothers gifting teachers and using other methods to help their students get ahead.

mothers jockeyed to position their children for the new college admissions system. Perhaps the most incisive comments quoted were those of Chŏn'gyojo: 'The reform plan indiscriminately introduces principles of market competition, induces competition between schools, emphasises only the authority of headmasters, and gives rise to adverse consequences'.<sup>78</sup>

## Democratisation and the May 1995 education reforms

The reform of education under the Kim Young Sam administration that was heir to the democratic movement of the 1980s, while real, turned out to be more procedural than substantive. The educational reforms involved the removal of some authoritarian constraints on students and provision of more school choice and autonomy, but did not address demands for citizen participation, teacher unionisation, teacher curricular autonomy or the substantial equality of access to education envisioned by many of the democratisers. The May 31 report of the President's Commission on Education Reform (*Taet'ongnyŏng kyoyuk kaehyŏk wiwŏnhoe*) called for vocational education to be diversified, students be given more choices, educational administration be more decentralised and schools be given more autonomy from the MOE.<sup>79</sup> The report promised an 'open education society, a life-long learning society'. Lip-service was given in the May 31 Reforms to 'education in harmony with freedom and equality' (*chayu wa p'yŏngdŭng i chohwadoen kyoyuk*)<sup>80</sup> and to increasing government spending on public education to 5% of GDP to reduce the burden of educational expenses on parents with limited means, half-measures that ironically made some on the left look back nostalgically on the school equalisation policies of the authoritarian period.<sup>81</sup>

The main effect of these measures was to create a sea change in the relationship of state to private education at the elementary and secondary levels in South Korea. Until the 1990s, state schools with modest tuition fees at the secondary level in South Korea had been generally considered superior and most prestigious, while private schools with their state-limited fees and poorer facilities had tended to operate as overflow schools for those not able to obtain admission to the best state schools. The May 1995 Reforms' emphasis on deregulation and choice to achieve school autonomy meant freeing private education from government regulation and limits to fees and student selection, something that freed those with money to flee public schools for expensive private educational institutions not just at the university level (where private institutions have always been important in South Korea), but also at the primary and secondary levels. Since the 1990s the relationship of state to private schools has been reversed at the secondary level. Now private primary and secondary schools able to set their own admissions

<sup>77</sup>'Skirt wind' (*ch'imapparam*) is a metaphor for the behind-the-scenes influence of women, in this case implying mothers gifting teachers and using other methods to help their students get ahead.

<sup>78</sup>'5·31 kyoyuk kaehyŏk kakkye panŭng, yumyŏng taehaktŭl sae ipsi chŏngch'aek maryŏn pisang' [All parties react to the May 31<sup>st</sup> education reforms, emergency preparation of new entrance exam policy at famous universities], *Han'gyŏre Sinmun*, June 1, 1995, 24.

<sup>79</sup>Han, '1990-nyŏndae Han'guk kyoyuk', 58–9.

<sup>80</sup>Education Reform Commission, 'Preface to February 9, 1996 Third Presidential Report', <http://theme.archives.go.kr/viewer/common/archWebViewer.do?singleData=Y&archiveEventId=0050754028>. (accessed July 4, 2018).

<sup>81</sup>'5·31 kyoyuk kaehyŏk kakkye panŭng' [Reaction of every field to the May 31<sup>st</sup> education reforms], *Han'gyŏre Sinmun*, June 1, 1995, 24.

standards have begun to attract the students with the highest ability, making many private schools now more prestigious than even the best state schools.<sup>82</sup>

In retrospect, that reform of education under the democratiser and ‘Education President’ Kim Young Sam should take neoliberal form seems overdetermined, because the culture of education for economic development in the MOE made for easy absorption of market-centred approaches to education reform. If the content of democratisation in specific cases is determined by the historical grievances the democratising population is trying to overcome, moreover, then at the economic level the attempt to reform the grievances of corruption and favouritism of authoritarian state-led industrialisation through the discipline of the market made democratic sense for South Korea in the 1990s. The market, at least theoretically, allocates capital and profit on the basis of supply and demand rather than on the basis of connections to powerful political and bureaucratic players. Market reform in the economy thus truly had the potential to break the alliance between military authoritarian politicians, statist bureaucrats and the large-scale industry coddled by them that had maintained the authoritarian state.

Yet the historical grievances of the educational system did not squarely match those of the political and economic system. The national curriculum, examination system, strictly controlled school fees, equalisation of state and private high schools, and limits on school choice in the 1970s had been put in place precisely to *constrain* traditional elites from dominating the educational system. Under authoritarianism the school system was therefore to a degree sheltered from the nexus of bureaucrats, politicians and big business people who maintained the authoritarian state. This is one reason why opposition to the Park and Chun administrations could be so strong in the universities. Admission to prestigious high schools or universities required good exam scores from anyone, and having influential or rich contacts was not by itself sufficient.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, the neoliberal rhetoric of the 1995 educational reform that emphasised education consumers and the creation of diversity by fostering autonomous private secondary schools able to set their own fees did not squarely address the grievances of the democratisers of the 1980s who defined for themselves, as noted earlier, what democratisation of education should entail in the South Korean case. The 1995 education reforms met only some of the democratisers’ demands, while the MOE displayed basic continuity with the authoritarian past in issuing a national plan for enhancing South Korea’s competitiveness in international competition in knowledge production and by focusing on training manpower for economic growth (rather than human or moral development as had been advocated and demanded by the *minjung* movement in the 1980s). This was commented on by Han Man’gil, Chair Research Fellow at Korea Educational Development Institute, who wrote:

At the first stage of educational reform ‘the theory of consumer-centred education’ that concerns consumers, who regard educational qualifications as the centre of education, also

<sup>82</sup>Yi Tu-hyu, ‘P’yŏngjunhwa chiyŏk kodŭng hakkyo iphak chŏnhyŏng esŏ haksaeŋ ūi ssollim hyŏnsang e kwanhan yŏn’gu’ [A study of students’ herding phenomena in equalised areas’ high school entry selection], *Kyoyuk chŏngch’ihak yŏn’gu*, 21, no. 3 (2014): 61–91.

<sup>83</sup>Anecdotal, there were cases of irregular admission to art or music departments where subjective criteria came into play. It is telling, however, that in the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye one of the incidents that created the most outrage among the Korean public was Park associate Choi Soon-sil using her ties to the president to get her daughter into prestigious Ehwa Women’s University and receive good grades (without apparently attending classes). Choi was sentenced to three years in prison for this offence on June 23, 2017.

became the main object of criticism by educators. Furthermore, in order to strengthen competitiveness, they were criticised for marketising education and deepening inequality. The May 31 Education Plan also received criticism that freeing up individual schools to reflect educational consumers' demand is inadequate for issuing an appropriate educational policy.<sup>84</sup>

These criticisms are similar to those aired by Chŏn'gyojo and the liberal newspapers *Han'gyŏre Sinmun* and *Kyŏngnyang Sinmun* in the first days after the May 31 Reforms were announced. Later in the year these same newspapers would comment on the fading prospects for education spending actually being raised from 3.7% in 1990<sup>85</sup> to 5% of GDP.<sup>86</sup> As Ki Su Kim noted, the state's heavy hand on education has continued to mean that 'each government begins with a promise of paradigm shifts but ends up with business as usual'.<sup>87</sup>

Democratisers' dreams of substantive educational democratisation in the 1990s that would combine student freedom of choice and teacher autonomy with enhanced equality of opportunity through increased state spending on education and continuing high school equalisation thus were dashed. Private spending on education in South Korea continues to almost equal public spending.<sup>88</sup>

If freedom and substantial equality are both characteristics of substantive democracy, as J. S. Mill would advocate, the South Korean experience of the 1990s shows that in the realm of education there has been a paradoxical relationship between the two. The authoritarian regime before democratisation had been able to achieve rough equality by limiting freedom: instituting a national curriculum, limiting school autonomy and students' freedom of school choice. The Kim Young Sam administration, in responding to the wide-ranging educational democratisation movement of the 1980s, made schools more democratic by enhancing school autonomy and providing for more school choice both by diversifying the types of vocational state secondary schooling available, and by fostering a strong private school system. This democratic freedom of choice, however, opened the doors for those with financial means to seek opportunities not available to others. It exacerbated inequality of access to the highest quality education.<sup>89</sup> South Korea's experience of democratic school reform in the 1990s shows that freedom of school choice and equality of educational opportunity stand in a contradictory relationship to one another: it is difficult for a school system to achieve both at the same time when society itself is highly stratified.

<sup>84</sup>Han, '1990-nyŏndae Han'guk kyoyuk', 5–63.

<sup>85</sup>KEDI, *Korean Educational Indexes*, 1993, 405.

<sup>86</sup>See O Sŏngsuk, 'Kyoyuk chaejŏng hwakpo ka usŏn kwaje' [Assuring education finance is the first task], *Tonga Ilbo*, August 21, 1995, 7; Sŏngsuk, 'Kyoyuk kyehok 6 kae wŏl ajik "sirhŏmjung"' [6th month of education reform still 'experimental'], *Han'gyŏre Sinmun*, December 18, 1995, 17.

<sup>87</sup>Ki Su Kim, 'Public and Private in South Korea's Education Reform Vocabulary: An Evolving Statist Culture of Education Policy', *International Education Journal* 5 (2004): 521.

<sup>88</sup>In 2005 the OECD reported that South Korean public expenditure on education was 4.2% of GDP, lower than the OECD average, but private expenditures brought the total up to 7.1% of GDP, which is higher than the OECD average. Private expenditures were still 41% of the total. Yonhap News Agency, 'South Korea's Private Spending on Education Highest in OECD', September 13, 2005.

<sup>89</sup>See Insook Jeong and M. Michael Armer, 'State, Class, and Expansion of Education in South Korea: A General Model', *Comparative Education Review* 38 (1994): 531–45 for a general discussion of state and class in Korean education up to 1988 that cites Richard Rubinson's ideas about class formation, politics and schooling.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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