Current State Analysis and Development Plan of Early Childhood Education for Enforcement of Basic Education in Korea*

Boo-Kyung Cho
Korea National University of Education, Korea

Abstract

This paper describes the current situation of Korean early childhood education and then discuss directions for the future. After defining the meaning of 'basic education' in the early childhood education context, the current situation is analyzed in terms of education opportunity, education equality, education excellence, and young children's quality of life. The followings are suggested directions for Korean early childhood education to provide a stronger basic education: integrating the divided administrative system, securing resources for early childhood education, increasing private investment and quality control, securing support for private institution labor cost, establishing the identity of early childhood education, valuing the young child's life itself.

[Key Words] Early Childhood Education Policy in Korea, Basic Education, Early Education and Care System

Correspondence and requests for reprints should be sent to Boo-Kyung Cho, Department of Early Childhood Education, Korea National University of Education, 7 Darakri, Kangneamyon, Cheongwonkun, Chungbuk, 363-791, Korea
E-mail: bcho@knue.ac.kr
* This paper is supported by 2007 research fund of the Korea National University of Education.


INTRODUCTION

Today's society is characterized by rapid changes stemming from advances in cutting-edge science and technology. Knowledge and talent valued during the industrial society are no longer valid. The pace of change will only accelerate. Accordingly, today's education also needs to foster capabilities needed to not only adapt to changing knowledge and information but also to lead in this major social transformation (Cho, Shin, Kim, 2006). Countries around the world have realized that the key to national competitiveness lies with its human resources and are determined to innovate its education system according to this new paradigm.

In particular, several advanced countries are rediscovering the critical impact of the first stage of education i.e. early childhood education. They are reinforcing the role of early childhood education within the entire education lifecycle (UK Secretary of States for Education and Skills, 2004; US Department of Education, 2005). The OECD Policy Proposal for Early Childhood Education strongly recommends an enrollment rate of over 90% for children ages 3 to 5 by 2010 and the provision of free education. In addition to expanding the coverage of early childhood education, many leading education countries are equally interested in providing quality education to the newest members of their society. To strengthen the very foundation of national human resources, their goal is to provide not a simple 'protection and care' of their youths but to use this opportunity to conduct top quality education through various systems. For example, countries such as the U.K., New Zealand and Sweden have reformed their administrative system so that education and welfare service for young children is integrated under its education ministries instead of being divided between education and welfare ministries. They have also developed national level curricula for young children with the government taking the initiative for curriculum improvement. The U.S. has recognized the issues caused by kindergarten focused just on 5 year olds and have strived to establish the Pre-K system for 3-5 year olds and strengthen the curriculum linkage between these two stages (Stipek, 2002).

Unlike these examples, early childhood education in Korea still lacks a firm position as public education. Government financial support is still very low compared to the OECD average. The most serious issue is the divided administrative authority between education and care. This creates inefficiencies in government budget and unnecessary conflict in the field. The lack of an integrated national system is also depriving Korean young children from the right to enjoy an equal opportunity to quality education. Amidst numerous misconceptions about early education and a concerning overdependence on privately hired education services, parents suffer from an excessive financial burden and young children