

## **Trends, Practices, and Technology Issues in Early Childhood Education in Korea**

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Education for young children has always been valued in Korea. Korean people believe that children should be educated and cherished from the time of conception. Prenatal education thus is greatly valued. During early childhood, character education and the formation of basic, everyday life habits are emphasized. This is well-reflected in a famous Korean saying: "Habits formed at three last until eighty."

Korean early childhood education aims to promote the development of the whole child. In practice, an integrated curriculum with a focus on diverse activities that reflect children's developmental stages, interests, and everyday life is implemented. Respect for children, child-centered educational philosophy, play-oriented activities, interactions with their environments, peers, and teachers are all highly valued. Children are encouraged to actively participate in the learning process with teacher guidance, and diverse educational programs and approaches for young children are adopted and applied.

### **Types of Early Childhood Education and Care Facilities**

There are two major types of early childhood education and care institutions in Korea: kindergartens and childcare facilities. Kindergartens are educational institutions serving children from age 3 to 5 and are under the administration of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. With the legislation of the *Early Childhood Education Act* in January 2004, kindergartens function under this law. Childcare facilities serve children from birth to age 5 (until entrance into elementary school), and are under the administration of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. The *Infant and Child Care Act* regulates childcare facilities.

### **Rate of Attendance**

The kindergarten attendance rate was less than 1 percent before 1960 and less than 3 percent during the 1970s (Lee, 1993). The number of children enrolled in kindergartens started to grow rapidly since the 1980s, while childcare facilities experienced a rapid increase in enrollment between the years of 1990 and 2000. As of 2010, about 40 percent of children between the ages of 0 and 2 eligible for childcare service were enrolled in childcare centers, and 83 percent of children between the ages of 3 and 5 attended either kindergartens or childcare centers. The rate of attendance increased with children's ages: 76 percent of 3-year-olds, 86 percent of 4-year-olds, and 87 percent of 5-year-olds. Breaking down these numbers by children's ages and institutions, more 3- and 4-year olds used childcare facilities, while more 5-year-olds attended kindergartens. The trends in the attendance rates reflect Korean parents' preference for kindergartens when their child reaches the age of 5, which is a year before children enter elementary school.

## **Technology in Early Childhood Education**

The 21st Century is characterized as the Age of Information. In the Age of Information, it is important to enhance children's creativity, problem-solving skills, and ability to work effectively with computers. A computer center is provided in almost all kindergartens in Korea. The computer center is one of the favorite areas of children during their chosen activity time.

Early childhood educational institutions have started to incorporate computers in their curriculum since mid 1990s in Korea. At the beginning, there were hot debates surrounding the introduction of computers to early childhood education. Many teachers and parents were concerned that children might lose opportunities for physical and social development due to the overuse of computers. Research findings, however, have pointed out that children prefer to use computers together with peers rather than alone. Studies report that children teach and help each other in the computer center. When children used computers, they spent a great deal of time talking to others. With proper teacher guidance, computers were found to facilitate children's peer interactions.

Recently, smart phones and tablet PCs have been incorporated into some Kindergarten curricula. With teacher guidance, children use various applications to find information they need. Children easily move between on-line and off-line environments and learn to apply information found on-line to real-life situations.

An intelligence-based robot named Genibo was developed and used in Korean kindergartens. Korean researchers and educators are working together to develop a robot that looks similar to a human being. They are in the process of using the robot in some kindergartens to test the possibility of adapting it in the classroom. The robot is meant to work as an assistant teacher in the classroom as well. Some educators are concerned, however, about the overuse of technology in early childhood education. In Korea, educators have faced the challenge of introducing technology to young children without overemphasizing the power of technology.

## **Family Involvement and Parent Education**

A growing body of research indicates positive influences of family involvement on children, families, and schools (Connors & Epstein, 1995; Epstein, 2001; Swick, 1991). Family involvement takes place in many forms, including volunteering in classroom activities, attending parent education meetings and workshops, and participating in various family gatherings at school.

As children's first and foremost teachers, parents have a great influence on their child's development and learning. In order to maximize the positive effects of early childhood education, teachers need to share with parents their knowledge on child development in general and information about individual children specifically. Parent education activities at kindergartens take place in the form of lectures, workshops, discussion meetings, individual conferences, note and printed material, email and telephone communications, or observations made by parents. Kindergartens also invite parents and other family members to visit classrooms on various occasions. Some activities are provided during the weekends or during evening hours to accommodate working parents.

## **Concluding Remarks**

With the growing awareness of the importance of the early years of life, the field of early childhood education and care in Korea will continue to face new opportunities and challenges for

development. Educators, researchers, policy makers, and parents will continue to work together to provide high-quality education and care for young children, as young children are our future.

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