

Factors Contributing To the Success of Korean Education – Valuable Experiences to Vietnam

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SUMMARY: Korea has always been rated as one of the most successful educational countries in Asia. The success of Korean education can be explained by many reasons. Analyzing the reasons for the success of Korean education (1. Determine the right educational philosophy and effort to successfully implement that philosophy; 2. Make big investments and effectively reform education; 3. Appreciate teaching) will draw valuable lessons for Vietnam in the process of educational innovation today.

Key word: education philosophy, experiences, Korean education

After more than a half century of development, Korea has achieved miraculous progress and spectacular development steps that makes the whole world admire. In the 1960s, the per capita income in Korea was less than 100 USD – the lowest level in the world at that time. Korea has become one of the most developed countries in the world now. Korea is also the only country in the world that has changed from being an aid recipient after World War II to being an aid donor. Korea where natural resources are not much, what has made this miraculous development? One of the decisive factors that brought Korea to the position today is the success of Korea's education system with the strategy of human resource development to meet the requirements of building and developing the country in the new period.

The success of Korean education can be explained from many different reasons. Analysing these reasons will draw valuable lessons for Vietnam - a country with many similarities with Korea in culture, at starting point (Both Korean and Vietnam are poor countries and severely damaged by war), in the educational reform process towards improving quality and efficiency.

I. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE SUCCESS OF KOREAN EDUCATION

Firstly, determine the correct educational philosophy and efforts to successfully implement the defined philosophy

One of many reasons for the success of Korean education is the determination of educational philosophy, suitable to the country's specific conditions and requirements, and their endless efforts to bring that philosophy into life. The Second World War put them in a rather difficult and extremely low starting point, therefore in order to escape from their current fate and develop strongly, "Education to change fate" has become the philosophy of the whole Korean education. The goal of Korean education is to change the fate of individuals, families, business and the fate of the whole nation¹.

According to the goal, Korean education's mission to bring their people closer to the necessary knowledge, skills, and qualities to compete and innovate to meet domestic and international requirements. Accelerating the rate of universalization of basic education in a very short time compared to other countries in the region is their starting point, then focusing on higher education and training (undergraduate, postgraduate) to take advantage and unleash high-quality human resources to contribute to the country's socio-economic development. *Asia Society* (a leading educational organization that promotes mutual understanding of Asia in a global context and strengthens partnerships between peoples, leaders, and institutions across the globe, in

¹ According to Viet Lam, *Korea miracle and Vietnam dream*, <https://vietnamnet.vn/vn/ban-tron-truc-tuyen/ky-tich-han-quoc-va-giac-mo-nguoi-viet-204558.html>, updated 30/10/2014.

various fields ranging from arts, business, culture, education, and policy) said in their statement, Korean people have almost made primary and secondary school available to all of their people since 1990²; Higher education also witnessed great progress: in 1945, after Korea's independence was achieved, they had roughly 7,819 students, however by 1998, the university enrollment rate in this country had a tremendous boost to 98%, the highest rate among OECD countries (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). Korean universities slowly began to gain prestige in the international arena. Seoul National University is considered one of the top universities in Asia (ranked 13) and in the world (ranked 124, according to THES rankings). Other universities such as Chungnam, Chonbuk, Chonnam, Pusan, Sogang, and Inha ect have also become respectable universities in the region and the world. Korean universities in both public and private sectors have attracted many foreign students to take part in their courses...³

The investment in higher education based on universal primary and secondary education in a short time has proven to be effective. Korea is proud to have one of the most qualified and skilled workforces in the world. Korea education has made a great contribution to scientific, technological and economic development, and vice versa, high economic growth has helped the State to invest more money in education, science, and technology. Experts call this "the circle of development" that brought Korea out of poverty and backwardness and became a powerhouse both in terms of economy and education in just over half a century (from 1960 to the present).

Reality has proven that the spectacular success of Korea is a typical example of the philosophy of "Education to change fate" - the educational philosophy that Korea has chosen. And it is not exaggerated to assert that the identification of a correct educational philosophy, suitable to the country's circumstances, and efforts to successfully implement that philosophy are the fundamental reasons for Korea's outstanding achievements and acquired amazing progress in every way. Former US President Barrack Obama once expressed: "A country that used to be poorer than even Kenya - my grandfather's hometown, is Korea today is joining the developed countries. The main reason is the burning enthusiasm in education of this country"⁴.

Secondly, big investment and effective reform of education

With the philosophy "Education changes fate" - education changes the fate of each individual, family, and the whole nation. The Korean Government and people are extremely aware of the importance of education. Without education, it is impossible to bring the country out of poverty and backwardness, and give people a prosperous and happy life. Because of that, the Korean government in general and each Korean family, in particular pour huge financial resources into education.

The Korean government spends a humongous budget to invest in education and this budget keeps increasing under any circumstances. The Korean Ministry of Education currently possesses a budget of \$29 billion, more than six times in 1990, and accounts for about 20 percent of central government spending⁵. In addition to the large financial investments that the Government has poured into the education sector. From a family perspective, Korean parents are considered to be those who invest more in their children's education than any parents in other countries of the world. On average, parents in the country use 15% of their income to send their children to school, the number sometimes increases to about 25% of the total income (1/4 of what they earn) to invest in your child's education⁶. Even for families in rural areas, who cannot afford to live, they are willing to sell their land, livestock, eat less, wear less etc... just to provide their children's full schooling because they believe that education is the only way to get out of poverty, the only way to change their fate.

Along with the large budget investment in education, people in Korea also have a great interest in the reformation of education. From 1954 until now, Korean education has undergone seven major reforms, step by

²According to Thuy Linh, *The process of reaching the top of the world in Korea education*, <https://vnexpress.net/qua-trinh-vuon-len-top-dau-the-gioi-cua-nen-giao-duc-han-quoc-3837252.html>, updated 11/11/2018.

³ According to Nguyen Van Tuan, *Korea and 40 years lessons for Vietnam*, <https://vietnamnet.vn/vn/tuanvietnam/han-quoc-va-bai-hoc-40-nam-cho-viet-nam-151561.html>, updated 5/12/2013.

⁴ According to Viet Lam, *Korea miracle and Vietnam dream*, <https://vietnamnet.vn/vn/ban-tron-truc-tuyen/ky-tich-han-quoc-va-giac-mo-nguoi-viet-204558.html>, updated 30/10/2014.

⁵ Accordinh to Daniil Balabushkin, *The Success of the South Korean Education System*, https://goodmenproject.com/education-2/the-success-of-the-south-korean-education-system/?fbclid=IwAR1NxD6ToF435iN_s0M6IuGPYuVm8MhLvl1X9yoJi0AjGCSJzOUX8I84Fhw, updated February 7, 2020.

⁶ Accordinh to Daniil Balabushkin, *The Success of the South Korean Education System*, https://goodmenproject.com/education-2/the-success-of-the-south-korean-education-system/?fbclid=IwAR1NxD6ToF435iN_s0M6IuGPYuVm8MhLvl1X9yoJi0AjGCSJzOUX8I84Fhw, updated February 7, 2020.

step coming closer to the ultimate goal of building an open education, creating lifelong learning opportunities for all people so that they can become people who possess sufficient knowledge, capacity and qualities to meet the requirements of the information society and the process of globalization, international integration.

In order to achieve that goal, the reform direction of Korean education is specifically identified as: One, to switch from a teacher-centered education to a student-centered education; Two, to switch from a uniform education to a diversified and specific education; Three, educational management moves from management based on regulations and orders to management based on self-discipline and responsibility; Four, compulsory education shift to free, equal and balanced education; Five, traditional education with blackboard and white chalk switch to open education through information network - digitization based on modern technology applications (Korea is one of the leading countries in the world that successfully integrates modern technology into the educational curriculum, thereby creating a large open educational system that made learning opportunities available for all in Korea, enable everyone to take a full college course without attending to the actual classroom. Various educational contents can be found in online repositories that are accessible to everyone and from anywhere. Tests are also conducted over the internet. Instructors can even assign work and get results from their students through technology apps, without face-to-face meeting⁷. Besides, it is compulsory in all Korean classes to use modern technological equipment and modern technology software in education (computer, internet, LCD screen, smart board, modern teaching and learning software...). This is a great aid, providing advantages for both the teacher and the student in the educational process. Studies have shown that technology can assist children in faster learning and develop deeper fundamental learning skills, and it can also help teachers adjust their lessons to various learner categories with different learning methods in order to improve the quality and efficiency of the teaching and learning process...⁸; Six, to aim for building a high-quality education, reaching the equivalent educational level to those high-developed countries in the shortest time⁹.

The success of Korean education has a great contribution from the huge budget invested in education and the educational reform roadmap with specific goals, clear and synchronous directions in line with the development process of the country in each period and also make Korean education become an indispensable part in the development of this country's socio-economic.

Thirdly, respect the teaching profession

Another reason for the success of Korean education is that the teaching profession in Korea is treated as a noble profession, respected by the whole society, and paid well for the effort. The Korean government's investment in education is largely devoted to cover for teachers' salaries. Data published in 2018 by the OECD showed that South Korea's primary school teacher's salary ranks third in the world with a starting salary of \$28,352. High school teacher salary ranks 4th, in which experience and seniority greatly affect income level. In the first year of teaching, the teacher only earns \$27,702, however that figure dramatically increases to \$41,875 after 10 years and can peak at \$77,979. Family spending (private sector) on education including private tutoring accounts for 3.6% of Korea's GDP¹⁰.

It is clearly visible to anyone that teaching is a desirable career in Korea and with great incentives received, this is also a career designed only for the most talented people who possess excellent knowledge and the ability to pass on that knowledge to other learners that meet the requirements of education system for each level and discipline. The expectations of the Government, parents, and students themselves with the desire to "education change fate" also put great pressure on teachers, forcing them to constantly strive to improve and perfect themselves in terms of knowledge, capacity, qualities, and skills to meet the requirements if you do not want to be out of the race in this industry.

Besides the great successes achieved, there also are challenges to be solved, such as tremendous and overwhelming pressure from studying are constantly stressing Korean students to their limits (Young people

⁷Accordinh to Daniil Balabushkin, *The Success of the South Korean Education System*, https://goodmenproject.com/education-2/the-success-of-the-south-korean-education-system/?fbclid=IwAR1NxD6ToF435iN_s0M6luGPYuVm8MhLvl1X9yoJi0AjGCSJzOUX8I84Fhw, updated February 7, 2020.

⁸According to Deva Dalporto, *South Korea's School Success*, https://www.weareteachers.com/south-koreas-school-success/?fbclid=IwAR1ChLySYdr5NOBbWvSXdWiRu7HCze1c_H-cjEXvV2_hl62sWbJaPP27ehU, updated April 5, 2013.

⁹According to Tran Anh Phuong, *Education reform in Korea*, <https://thongtinphapluatdansu.edu.vn/2009/05/31/2980-3/>, updated 31/5/2009.

¹⁰ According to Thuy Linh, *The process of reaching the top of the world in Korea education*, <https://vnexpress.net/qua-trinh-vuon-len-top-dau-the-gioi-cua-nen-giao-duc-han-quoc-3837252.html>, updated 11/11/2018.

spend the first 25 to 30 years of their life to study; Korean students begin to prepare for the “Suneung” exam (a standardized general exam that assesses their ability to gain admission to universities in Korea from 1994). From the age of 13 or 14, or during the first year of high school, all Korean student must attend extracurricular academies and cram schools for many hours a day after regular classes - up to 16 hours of class time everyday ...)¹¹; In Korea, when the philosophy of “Education changes fate” has been applied, it is believed that hard work and diligence are above all, there is no reason for failure if you are hard-working and diligent, talent is not something to be considered... Great pressure is now put on young people in Korea as they are forced to study extremely hard to successfully meet family and societal expectations. In addition, considering education as the only way to change the fate of individuals and families also makes many people consider educational institutions as “convenience stores” to achieve wealth and social status in life. That means people find themselves learning not for their passion but only to achieve fame and wealth. Professor Okhwa Lee of Chungbuk National University said something worth pondering: “Korea has a high graduation rate, but Koreans have a low passion for education”¹²...

Although there are still challenges to be solved, the great achievements that Korean education has made over the past half-century (from 1960 to the present) are worthy of the admire from countries around the world. The basic things that make Korean education successful as mentioned above can become valuable experiences for many countries including Vietnam in the reform process to improve the quality and efficiency of education in the country.

II. VALUABLE EXPERIENCES FOR VIETNAM

Some valuable experiences can be learnt by observing reasons that contributed to the success of Korean’s education

The first, the need to build a Vietnamese-based educational philosophy that is suitable to the specific circumstances and national development requirements

In fact, determining education philosophy that runs through the entire national education system in each period is essential because it is the guideline of all educational activities based on four main pillars: target, objectives, content, and methods of education. It is understandable and explainable that the reason why Korean education has achieved great success is that they have selected and built a correct educational philosophy, suitable for the specific circumstances of the country and the whole Government and people fixed their beliefs and strive for the implementation that philosophy. Meanwhile in Vietnam, if someone asks a very similar question, what is the current educational philosophy of Vietnam, perhaps the exact answer might not be available. Education researchers themselves have not reached a consensus on giving a common philosophy for Vietnamese education today. At the seminar “Educational philosophy and educational philosophy in the revised Education Law”, each participant, based on different approaches and perspectives, gave a variety of opinions on the educational philosophy that Vietnam should pursue now. For example, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dang Quoc Bao, former director of the National Academy of Education Management, believed that the core principles of education are: Nationality/Democracy - Humanity - Modernity/Creativity. This is the principle distilled from President Ho Chi Minh’s teachings on the national education system, teacher-student relationship, personality cultivation...; Professor Ho Ngoc Dai however said that today’s educational philosophy must be “cooperation”. It is a cooperative relationship between school - society, school - family, teacher - student, teacher - teacher, student - student. And when they cooperate, they must follow the principle of agreement, no one imposes anyone; Dr. Giap Van Duong, principal of Vietschool, expressed his opinion on a simple philosophy and purpose to become a freeman¹³...

Thus, we are still struggling to find an educational philosophy tailored for Vietnam, suitable for specific circumstances and the country’s development requirements in the changing period. And as long as we have not determined what the educational philosophy of the country is, then the education system has not given a unified orientation in educational development across all levels and disciplines. Not having identified educational philosophy also means that we have not determined what the purpose of learning. This will bring out the fact

¹¹ According to Crystal Tai, *Why South Koreans are trapped in a lifetime of study*, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/2173414/schools-never-out-why-south-koreans-are-trapped-lifetime-study?fbclid=IwAR3RrHzre3jDs2y3h0Wt_ar_I6WM3o9hSphpK5_IMxNujJcLUEK5psjretc, updated November 15, 2018.

¹² According to Thuy Linh, *The process of reaching the top of the world in Korea education*, <https://vnexpress.net/qua-trinh-vuon-len-top-dau-the-gioi-cua-nen-giao-duc-han-quoc-3837252.html>, updated 11/11/2018.

¹³ According to Vinh Ha – Ngoc Ha, *What is Vietnam education philosophy?* <https://tuoitre.vn/triet-ly-giao-duc-cua-vn-la-gi-20190108084116038.htm>, updated 18/1/2019.

that education is unable to equip people with the required qualifications, capabilities, qualities, and skills to meet the new essential requirements... Lack of educational philosophy is also one of the fundamental reasons for the educational reform over the years of Vietnam has not achieved the desired goal and its effectiveness, even the escaped from the vicious circle when we cannot determine what the real goal of education reform is.

It is essential to hold more conference, seminars, and talks between educational researchers and even opinions polls in order to build an unified and correct educational philosophy, suitable to the current national context in the inevitable trend of globalization and the 4th Industrial Revolution. However, when determining Vietnamese educational philosophy, perhaps we should make our way back to Ho Chi Minh's ideology about the real purpose of learning, as he expressed it in a very simple phrase: "Learn to work, learn to become a human or an officer. Learn to serve the Union, the Class and the People, the Fatherland and the humanity". And to achieve that goal, it is necessary to go through the process of education and self-education to provide training for people with basic qualities: "industrious, economical, integrity, righteous, public - minded"¹⁴.

The second, education reform must be synchronous in all aspects with appropriate roadmaps, steps, and defined goals associated with human resource training to meet the country's socio-economic development requirements.

It is unable to achieve success in education in any country if it is not associated with the reformation process mainly because in practice, changes and adjustments are happened regularly, putting new requirements on education. Therefore the education system of every country must also be associated with the process of innovation and reform to meet those requirements and standards. Reality has proven that regularly reforming education (from 1955 to the present, education itself has gone through reformation 7 times in total with a specific roadmap, appropriate and synchronous steps in all aspects, and consistent goals according to the philosophy of "Education changes fate") is one of the reasons for the great success of Korean education.

Vietnam's education is also associated with the reformation and renovation process, however, it seems that the above process in Vietnam has not achieved the desired goals and has not been successful in commensurate with the State's investment budget for education because the system is still struggling to solve its problem: should training be made available with what we have or what we need. In reality, Vietnam's current education system, especially for the higher level, has not been attached to the needs of society, the educational program is heavily based on theoretical aspects, and treated lightly on the practical side, teaching methods are slowly adapted to innovation... and yet it fails to equip learners with the necessary competencies, qualities, and skills... which inevitably leads to a situation where a large number of people have undergone high-level education and training such as graduated students fail to find a suitable job in their major fields.

In addition, another reason why Vietnam's education reform has struggled to make a breakthrough in that we have not yet implemented synchronously in education reformation. For example, education reform in the past has directed its focus on restructuring the school system, expanding the school model, changing the curriculum - textbooks, renewing teaching methods... without taking into account the necessity of reformation in the administrative aspects of education such as the operating mechanism of the education system, the organizational mechanism, and sanctions to limit the power of the leading educational administrative agencies, which is the Ministry in charge of education. It is the necessary reform to create a modern educational administration such as: democratizing the educational administrative apparatus and implementing the principle of decentralization for localities, respecting the autonomy of the local government, schools, and teachers' initiative in content and educational methods. This is also an inevitable path if we want to build a democratic, modern, and humane education in the era of globalization and international integration... Korean education reform has provided valuable experiences with asynchronous and consistent implementation in all aspects according to a defined common goal. In addition, the experience of the success of Korean education also shows that the effective educational reform and innovation process must be associated with the application of modern technology to make the education system more open and improve the quality of the teaching and learning process at all levels, especially in higher education...

The third respect the teaching profession and provide them with a sufficient salary proportional to their contribution.

One of the reasons for the great success of Korean education is that teaching is considered to be a noble profession, respected by the whole society. Teachers always receive high salaries and great incentives from the Government as well as students' parents. Moreover, with the strict selection at the beginning stage, only outstanding people can become teachers in Korea... If Vietnam wants to have a prosperous and successful education, we should take those aspects above into account.

In reality, Vietnamese education still wandering looking for the correct path. A vicious circle is formed starting from an incorrect perception of the importance of the teaching profession. Teachers' salaries are not

¹⁴ Ho Chi Minh (2011), *Full episode, Episode 6*, National Politic publishers Ha Noi, page208.

commensurate with their effort, responsibility and expectation from families and society. This leads to an inevitable consequence of having a low entrance score for universities and colleges, which means that we have not yet recruited people who are qualified and capable to enter the pedagogy industry. Pedagogical students, after graduating from school, become teachers without passion or concentration on the desired profession due to various reasons. The basic reason is the low salary which is not enough to cover the minimum level of living for themselves and their families. Some teachers even maintain a second job alongside their teaching profession just to make a decent income for their life... When the insecurity is constantly stressing their mind, the effort they put in does not line up with the salary they receive, they will gradually lose their motivation to strive to improve themselves in terms of qualifications, capacity, and quality as well as eliminating the loss of dedication to the profession and enthusiasm for students. That causes a direct impact on the quality of teaching since good students cannot be produced if not by an excellent teacher...

That is reason why Korea have a well-developed education, it is essential to have good teachers, dedicated to the profession. "No teacher no student" - one of many Korean education principles is still a valuable lesson for Vietnamese education to observe and adapt in the perspective of changing the behavior and perception of society.

So, analyzing the reasons for the success of Korean education, Vietnamese education can take advantage of lessons from their fundamental and comprehensive reformation at all levels and disciplines. It is necessary to have creative application and diversification based on the actual conditions and requirements of Vietnam with different characteristics of political institutions, culture, and society. And above all, learning from the Korean education experiences also requires good risk management tactics to countermeasure challenges that Korean education itself is facing to avoid falling into the same pattern.

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