South Korea: Hidden Resistance of Teachers in a Centralized Education System

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Abstract

In this article, I analyze the experience of South Korea - a country that has been considered one of the world's leaders in PISA results for decades, yet faces a profound paradox: a system that demonstrates outstanding academic achievements simultaneously suppresses teacher initiative, generates widespread hidden resistance to reforms, and creates conditions for a deep professional crisis. Relying on Jeonghoon Kim's (2024) research on the "hidden" resistance of teachers in a centralized education system [1], Hong and Youngs's (2016) work on the contradictory effects of curricular autonomy [3], as well as critical analyses of teacher participation in the 2022 reform [2], I show that the South Korean experience is a classic example of how a centralized education system, despite all its external successes, creates institutional conditions in which teachers do not so much implement reforms as resist them - quietly, imperceptibly, but effectively [5]. Paradoxically, Korean teachers do not even welcome the autonomy provided to them, perceiving it as a threat to their professional stability and established relationships within the collective [3]. I also show that the South Korean model, despite all its impressive results, fundamentally diverges from the communicative-cognitive framework of personality (CCFP) model: it remains exam-centric, centralized, and uniform, leaving no room for individualization through unique abilities and failing to realize the epistemological significance of developing thinking [9], [10].

Keywords: South Korea, hidden teacher resistance, centralized education system, curricular autonomy, PISA, examination culture, educational reforms, communicative-cognitive framework of personality.

Introduction: Why South Korea

South Korea is a country that has long been a source of both admiration and concern for me. Admiration - because its education system demonstrates outstanding results in international comparisons. In PISA 2022, 15-year-old Korean students ranked 6th in mathematics, 4th in reading, and 5th in science among 81 countries [7]. This is an achievement any country can be proud of. Concern - because behind these numbers lies a system that, as I will show, paradoxically suppresses the very things that should be at the center of education: initiative, creativity, and critical thinking. A system where teachers, despite all reforms and declarations about "expanding autonomy," remain trapped in centralized structures and examination culture. A system where reforms run into the "hidden" resistance of those who are supposed to implement them.

Here it is appropriate to recall the famous story of the tethered elephant. A baby elephant is tied to a wooden stake. It tries to free itself, but its strength is too small. It tries again and again, but the stake holds firm. Gradually, the baby elephant surrenders. It gets used to the idea that the stake is stronger. Years pass. The baby elephant grows into a massive elephant that could pull the stake out of the ground with a single swing of its trunk. But it doesn't even try. Because the belief is forever imprinted in its mind: the stake is stronger. Korean teachers remind me of this elephant. For decades, they were tied to the stake of a centralized system, examination culture, and bureaucratic control. And even when they are offered freedom - autonomy - they do not try to take it. Because internally, they have resigned themselves to the fact that the stake is stronger.

As Jeonghoon Kim notes in his 2024 study published in the *International Journal of Educational Development*, "in a centralized education system, national curriculum revisions are of great significance as they fundamentally change the direction and character of school education across the country. However, any new reform inevitably meets opposition and resistance from various stakeholders" [1]. And this resistance, as I will show, is not a simple denial. It is deeply rooted in the institutional structure, cultural traditions, and professional identity of Korean teachers [5].

This is what makes the South Korean experience, in my view, one of the most instructive for anyone thinking about the transformation of education.

Historical Context and Reasons for Reforms

The South Korean education system was formed in the post-war period as centralized, uniform, and exam-centric. As the study notes, "Korean education is characterized by a highly centralized management system" [8]. This centralization had its advantages: it allowed for the rapid construction of a mass education system, ensured uniform quality standards, and prepared a qualified workforce for a rapidly developing economy [7]. However, as studies show, "although Korea maintains a highly standardized system that ensures quality consistency, it lacks diversity and flexibility compared to other countries." It is precisely this lack of flexibility and diversity that created the institutional conditions for the phenomenon I will analyze in this article - the hidden resistance of teachers [1].

In 2022, the Ministry of Education of South Korea initiated a new revision of the national curriculum. As Jeonghoon Kim notes, "using the recent 2022 national curriculum revision in South Korea as a reference point, this study draws attention to the fact that, despite the national curriculum revision, teachers' curriculum implementation has not changed as much as expected, and even exhibits antipathy or resistance" [1]. During the development of the 2022 reform, an attempt was made to expand teacher participation. As the study notes, "through the local curriculum network, about 8,000 teachers expressed their opinions on the curriculum revision" [2]. This was a quantitative breakthrough - an unprecedented level of teacher involvement in the reform process. However, as I will show below, this quantitative expansion of participation did not lead to a qualitative change in teachers' influence on final decisions.

As in many other countries, PISA results have become an important factor shaping educational policy in South Korea. As the study notes, "despite such centralized curriculum and teacher quality decisions, there is an effective system of government power control in educational matters" [6]. However, high PISA results also create a paradoxical effect: they become a kind of "justification" for maintaining the existing system. If the results are high, why change anything? This question, as I will show, lies at the heart of many contradictions in Korean educational reforms.

Content of the Reforms

The central element of recent reforms has been the expansion of curricular autonomy for schools and teachers. As Hong and Youngs note in their study, the new national curriculum "was designed to provide greater autonomy to individual schools and teachers" [3]. The idea was simple and attractive: instead of rigid top-down prescriptions, teachers should have the freedom to adapt the curriculum to the needs of their students. This was supposed to stimulate innovation, increase teacher motivation, and improve the quality of education. As part of the 2022 reform, unprecedented efforts were made to involve teachers in the curriculum development process. As the study notes, "about 8,000 teachers expressed their opinions on the curriculum revision" [2]. However, as critical analysis shows, this participation was largely formal. The study "Voices unheard" revealed a "significant gap between the rhetoric of teacher participation and its practical implementation." Despite extensive efforts to collect teachers' opinions, "their substantive integration into the curriculum was limited." "The decision-making structure often marginalizes the voices of educators due to power imbalances and bureaucratic constraints." "The politicization of the revision process weakened the influence of teachers, as external pressure took priority" [2].

Parallel to the curriculum reform, a reform of teacher education was conducted. As the study notes, "after the COVID-19 pandemic, the South Korean government initiated educational reforms in the national curriculum and teacher education" [6]. Teacher professionalism is considered a central element of these reforms. However, as I will show below, these reforms face the same problems as the curriculum reforms: the centralized nature of the system, examination culture, and the hidden resistance of teachers [8]. For the CCFP model, the South Korean experience is important precisely because of its paradox. The 2022 reform attempted to give teachers autonomy - but teachers did not accept it. Why? Because autonomy without preparation, without tools, without changing the examination culture is not freedom, but a burden. The mental mechanisms discussed in my model are specific tools that allow a teacher to use autonomy productively: to diagnose student development, adapt material to unique abilities, and build individual trajectories [10]. Without these tools, autonomy remains an empty form. South Korea gave teachers freedom, but did not give them the tools to realize it.

Positive Experience and Achievements

Despite systemic problems, the South Korean education system has achievements that cannot be ignored. The first and most obvious is outstanding results in international studies. In PISA 2022, Korean students showed results significantly above the OECD average. As the study notes, "in PISA 2022, South Korea's mathematics results ranked 1st-2nd among OECD member countries and 3rd-7th among all 81 countries" [7]. These results are not accidental. They are the result of decades of purposeful investment in education, the high social status of teachers, and a culture that values education as the primary mechanism for social mobility.

The second achievement is the high level of literacy and education of the population. South Korea is one of the countries with the highest level of education in the world. This creates a solid foundation for economic development and social stability. The third achievement is the state-level recognition of the need for change. The fact that the government initiates reforms aimed at expanding teacher autonomy and decentralization indicates an understanding that the centralized model has its limitations. As the study notes, educational reforms in Korea "aim to create a decentralized, loosely coupled system in which teachers and principals can exercise control to ensure greater freedom" [6].

For the CCFP model, these achievements are not just "positive experience," but conditions of possibility. Outstanding PISA results, a high level of education, and the recognition of the need for change all create an environment in which the formation of mental mechanisms becomes possible [10]. But a condition of possibility is not the same as a sufficient cause. South Korea has created the environment and recognized the need for change, but has not created a system for diagnosing and developing specific mechanisms. Moreover, the examination culture - the central institution of the Korean system - works against these achievements, orienting students toward rote memorization of facts rather than the development of thinking. This is why South Korea's achievements remain fragile: they are held together by cultural tradition and the high status of education, but are not supported by the technology of forming a cognitive apparatus.

Negative Consequences and Challenges

However, behind these impressive achievements lie deep problems. The most important and, in my view, the most alarming is the "hidden" resistance of teachers. As Jeonghoon Kim notes, "resistance in this context does not mean simple denial, but rather a phenomenon that includes and interferes with the interpretive process of new policies and the societal policy that surrounds individuals and schools" [1]. Kim argues that "the reactions of Korean elementary and secondary school teachers to the new national curriculum reflect complex orientations toward the curriculum and resistance to its revision, shaped by personal, organizational, and sociocultural contexts." This resistance is not open and explicit. It is "hidden" - teachers do not openly oppose reforms, but they do not implement them either. They formally agree, but in practice continue to work in the old way. They do not sabotage, but they do not change [5]. As Choi's (2017) study on the "hidden transcripts of teacher resistance" emphasizes, Korean teachers "are engaged in various forms of low-profile resistance that ultimately affected the fate of the reform." The study highlights "the potential impact of resistance on the course of the reform, which is often ignored as insignificant or even mistakenly understood as consent by reform managers and researchers" [5].

Here it is appropriate to recall the Korean concept of "han" - a deep, unexpressed sadness and resentment that accumulates in the soul and finds no outlet. "Han" is not anger or rage. It is a quiet, smoldering pain that seeps through the cracks of everyday life. The "hidden resistance" of Korean teachers is a form of "han." They do not explode, protest, or quit. They simply quietly pretend to implement reforms, but in reality continue to work in the old way. And this "quiet" resistance turns out to be more effective than any open rebellion.

The second paradox, which I find particularly revealing, is that Korean teachers do not even welcome the autonomy provided to them. Hong and Youngs's study revealed a surprising fact: "contrary to the common belief that teachers want greater autonomy to adapt their curricula to students' needs, this study showed that participating teachers did not welcome expanded curricular autonomy and did not believe it would diversify the school curriculum" [3]. Why are teachers afraid of autonomy? Researchers identify several reasons. First, the gap between desired and provided autonomy. Teachers want one thing, but get another. The provided autonomy turns out to be limited and does not give real freedom. Second, the negative impact on relationships between teachers and their professional stability. Autonomy is perceived as a threat to established relationships in the collective and job security guarantees. Third, the prevailing examination culture. In conditions where exams determine everything, autonomy turns out to be illusory. This paradox has profound consequences. It shows that reforms aimed at expanding autonomy cannot be

successful if they do not take into account the real needs and fears of teachers, if they do not change the examination culture and institutional conditions.

The third problem is the negative perception of reforms by teachers. Park and Song's (2013) study showed that "teachers generally experience negative and unconstructive feelings about curriculum reform." "These feelings negatively affect their engagement and commitment to implementing the reform" [4]. The study also identified three key problems in teacher preparation and support: insufficient provision of teachers with professional development programs that support curriculum implementation; lack of opportunities for teachers to work through problems and difficulties of implementation with fellow teachers; and contextual and cultural limitations that hinder the implementation of curriculum reform.

The fourth problem is a deep crisis in the teaching profession. As the study notes, "contemporary Korean teachers suffer from excessive workload, long working hours, and constant stress." "The number of students teachers are responsible for is large, the number of lessons and administrative work are increasing, putting teachers in a situation where it is difficult to focus on core educational activities" [8]. The main causes of stress are: "responding to parental complaints (56.9%), excessive administrative work (46.9%), maintaining classroom order (48.8%), and responding to demands from external administrative bodies such as the Ministry of Education and local education authorities (42.7%)." As the study notes, "many teachers feel that they are treated more as 'service personnel' than as educators." "Teacher morale continues to fall. A significant number of young teachers in their 20s and 30s are considering changing jobs due to pay issues."

The fifth problem is the growing gap between urban and rural areas. As the study notes, "the system faces serious challenges, especially in transitioning from exam-centric practices and addressing regional disparities" [6]. Although South Korea has one of the most centralized and standardized education systems in the world, this does not mean equality. Students in rural areas find themselves at a disadvantage.

The sixth and, in my view, the most fundamental problem is the examination culture, which remains the dominant factor in South Korean education. As the study notes, "in Korea, there are many cases where national curriculum reforms have failed to change the evaluation system." "Students in Korea often start preparing for college entrance exams at an early age" [6]. As long as exams determine the entire content of education, any reforms aimed at developing thinking remain at the level of declarations. Teachers, who are supposed to implement innovations, are forced to prepare students for exams.

For the CCFP model, these negative consequences are not just "problems of the Korean school." They are symptoms of a deeper phenomenon: a reform that changes declarations and structures, but does not change the cognitive apparatus of the participants, inevitably reproduces the old paradigm [9], [10]. Hidden resistance, the paradox of autonomy, negative perception of reforms, professional crisis, the urban-rural divide, and examination culture - all these are consequences of the fact that the Korean reform did not place the diagnosis and development of specific mental mechanisms at the center. It changed the "what" and "how" of education, but did not change the "with what" - the cognitive tool used by both the teacher and the student. Moreover, the examination culture - the central institution of the Korean system - actively reproduces a cognitive apparatus inadequate for solving "hard problems" [10].

Contradictions with the CCFP Model

Now I want to move on to what is most important to me: the fundamental differences between the South Korean model and the communicative-cognitive framework of personality (CCFP) model [9], [10]. The first and most fundamental difference: the South Korean model is built on centralization, while mine is built on participation [2], [10]. In South Korea, decisions are made "from above" - by the Ministry of Education, national experts, and politicians. Teachers, even when "involved" in the process, remain on the periphery. As the study shows, "the decision-making structure often marginalizes the voices of educators due to power imbalances and bureaucratic constraints." My model, on the contrary, assumes that teachers should be active co-authors of change, not passive recipients of ready-made solutions. The participatory approach I propose requires not just "collecting opinions," but real influence of teachers on decision-making [10].

The second difference: the South Korean model remains exam-centric, while mine offers dynamic diagnostics [6], [10]. In Korea, everything is determined by exams - from school admission to career. As the study notes, "national curriculum reforms have failed to change the evaluation system." Teachers and students are trapped in the

examination culture. My model proposes replacing exams with dynamic diagnostics of mental mechanism development [10]. This means assessing progress rather than a static level; assessing thinking rather than facts; individualization rather than uniformity.

The third difference: the South Korean model is a model of uniformity, while mine is a model of individualization [8], [10]. In Korea, all students study the same things, take the same exams, and meet the same standards. As the study notes, "Korea maintains a highly standardized system that ensures quality consistency, but it lacks diversity and flexibility." My model, on the contrary, is built on individualization through unique abilities [10]. Every child is unique, and their unique abilities should become the "entry point" for the development of all other mental mechanisms.

The fourth difference: South Korean teachers are afraid of autonomy, while my model assumes professional freedom [3], [10]. As Hong and Youngs's study showed, Korean teachers do not welcome expanded curricular autonomy, perceiving it as a threat to professional stability and established relationships in the collective [3]. My model, on the contrary, assumes that professional freedom is a necessary condition for the development of thinking [10]. Teachers must have the freedom to experiment, adapt, and create. But this freedom must be backed by trust, support, and adequate preparation.

And finally, the most important difference. The South Korean model, like most other educational models, does not realize the epistemological significance of developing thinking [9]. As I substantiated in the article "Epistemological Recursion in Cognitive Science," modern neuroscience is stuck in the "trap of correlations": we record the results of brain activity, but we do not understand the mechanism of its self-organization. The way out of this dead end lies not in the plane of creating even more powerful scanners, but in the plane of the evolution of the knowing subject itself. The South Korean model does not set itself this task [6]. It does not understand that the development of mental mechanisms in children today is the preparation of the very cognitive apparatus that tomorrow will be able to deconstruct the logic of its own brain. It remains within the framework of pedagogy, without reaching the level of epistemology [10].

Conclusions and Lessons

What can we take away from the South Korean experience? The first lesson: high PISA results are not a guarantee of the quality of education [7], [10]. South Korea demonstrates outstanding academic achievements, but at the same time, its system suppresses teacher initiative, creates conditions for hidden resistance to reforms, and does not develop critical thinking in the sense that I understand it. The second lesson: centralized "top-down" reforms do not work, even when they proclaim the expansion of autonomy [2]. As the "Voices unheard" study showed, teacher participation in the 2022 reform was largely formal. Without real influence on decision-making, teachers remain passive recipients of ready-made solutions. The third lesson: autonomy without adequate preparation and support is not freedom, but a burden [3]. Korean teachers do not welcome expanded curricular autonomy because it is not accompanied by a change in examination culture, teacher retraining, and the creation of conditions for real freedom.

The fourth, and most important lesson for me: without a systemic approach to the development of thinking, any reforms remain superficial [10]. South Korea changes curricula, expands autonomy, involves teachers - but without a clear understanding of which specific thinking mechanisms must be developed, without a system for their diagnosis, without individualization through unique abilities - all these changes remain at the level of form, not content.

The South Korean experience shows that educational reforms are not just a matter of changing curricula and expanding autonomy. It is a change in the culture of education [5]. And this change requires not centralization, but participation; not exams, but dynamic diagnostics; not uniformity, but individualization; not fear of autonomy, but professional freedom; not just pedagogy, but epistemology [10].

The CCFP model offers this path. It answers the questions that South Korean reforms have left unanswered. Which specific thinking mechanisms should we develop? Eleven mental mechanisms, each of which is operationally defined [10]. How will we diagnose their development? Through dynamic diagnostics, evaluating progress rather than a static level. How will we take into account the uniqueness of each child? Through individualization, where unique abilities become the "entry point" for the development of all other mechanisms. Why do we need all this? Not only for "high PISA results," but so that humanity can solve the "hard problems" of the 21st century, including the mystery of consciousness [9].

South Korea has shown us that educational reforms without a paradigm shift are doomed to fail - even in a country with the highest academic achievements [7]. And this lesson, in my view, is one of the most important for anyone thinking about the future of education [10].

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