

## **Adult Learning and Education in Korea**

Kim Shinil  
Former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education and HRD  
Republic of Korea

### **Struggles toward a Learning Society**

Everyone gathered here today as well as myself believe that adult learning and education in a lifelong learning perspective is the most important and urgent issue of the twenty-first century. All of us are fully prepared to devoted our wholehearted efforts toward the increase of opportunities to access adult learning and education as well as, if the opportunity presents itself, to increase relevant budgets for this task. However, the majority of political leaders and policymakers of our respective countries do not think this way. Even those Congressmen and high-ranking government officials who do agree that adult lifelong education is important consign lifelong learning-related policies to a lesser position when prioritizing which policies they will devote their efforts to. It is on top of this that other policies are stacked. This is our reality.

There is no political leader who denies the importance of making policy and securing an adequate budget for adult education. It is only that there are few leaders who will give higher priority to policy making and budget securing for adult education than to other issues. According to *The 2nd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (2013), despite commitments by member states to develop policies and programs, increase funding, widen participation and improve the quality of adult learning and education after the 2009 CONFINTEA VI, results were minimal while the majority of member states showed highly unsatisfactory results. There are probably a number of probable causes, but one thing that is clear is that the priority level of policy on adult learning and education is not rising. Four years ago at Belem, we declared that we would move “from rhetoric to action.” The Belem Framework for Action was a declaration for our own actions as adult education activists but at the same time a resolution to force political leaders and policy makers of all countries to establish policy for adult education and force them to secure adequate budgets for this task. It was our attempt to prevent declarations about the importance of adult education in a lifelong-learning perspective from being merely a play of words and to make those in public office show their convictions through actions.

A great deal more effort and systematic strategy is required to make political leaders and policy makers act on adult learning and education. This is, simply put, political action. In other words, it is a situation in which adult education activists must plan and carry out political action. Budget allocation is a political process. Budget is not allocated simply buy stating “adult learning and education is important and urgent” in a loud voice. Public opinion must be manipulated under elaborately planned strategy, political parties must be lobbied, and efforts must be made to persuade politicians individually. However, this does not

guarantee success. If you fail, what is to be done next? Plans must be revised and efforts must be fortified. The success rate of political action increases the more tenacious the political action.

UNESCO's report on the Asia-Pacific region for CONFINTEA VI at Belem, Brazil in 2009 evaluates Korea's efforts to building a learning society as follows:

The Republic of Korea has already crossed the threshold between developing and developed countries, achieving a per capita income of over USD 20,000 in 2007, and already attaining membership of the OECD. The experiences of the Republic of Korea in its development of adult education and lifelong learning may be regarded as the precursor of where other developing countries of the region may expect to be in the future. They may find the premises and approaches underlying the course followed by the Republic of Korea instructive although each country has to adopt the strategies most suited to its unique conditions. (Ahmed, M. 2009. 27)

I am grateful to the UNESCO report for giving a positive critique of Korea's status on adult learning and education, but believe that Korea is not yet ready to be a precursor in this field for other nations to follow. It is true that experts and field workers of Korean lifelong learning are working very hard toward the establishment of a learning society. However, Korea still has a long way to go in order to transform into a learner-oriented learning society. There is much to be learned from the experiences of other countries, and we also need the cooperation of international organizations. Nevertheless, if there is anything worth learning or referencing from Korea's experiences of the past few decades, I would like to take a short while to explain what we have done thus far as a nation.

When Korea gained its independence from its Japanese colonial masters with the conclusion of World War II in 1945, the people lived in the depths of poverty and the adult illiteracy rate was at 78 percent. During the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, what social infrastructure there had been was burned to the ground. Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world in the early 1960s, with GNP per capita at barely 70 USD.

In terms of education, the 1950s and 60s were devoted to increasing opportunities for as many children as possible to attend primary and middle school. The slim state budget made it impossible to cover the expenses for universal primary and middle school education with only public funds, leaving no choice but to rely on private purse strings to pay for education. One characteristic of Koreans is their intense passion for their children's education. Despite the heavy burden of education fees for families, parents refused to give up education for their children even if it meant increasing the household debt. The "education fever" of Korean parents continues unchanged to this day. In the meantime, the gradual increase in the public education budget made it possible to sequentially reduce the private burden on education in the order of primary, middle and high school education. Today, the majority of the cost of higher education is paid by students' families. Because of this, the stand-off between college students and the government on the problem of tuition stands on a razor-thin edge.

Adult education in the 1950s and 60s was focused on literacy programs and short-term school education. Literacy campaigns were carried out in concentrated numbers through the cooperation of schools and local societies under the direction of the government, which

resulted in large accomplishments within a relatively short period of time. I will explain the literacy campaign in further detail later on. Short-term school education was conducted for adults who had never received a formal education mostly in the form of evening classes. One could complete the six-year elementary curriculum in 3-4 years and the middle and high school curricula (three years each) each in two years. Adult education apart from school education was largely ignored by the government, resulting in no policy development in this area. The desire of adults to learn was partially satisfied by commercial institutes paid for with individual means. Therefore, for most adults, there were no opportunities for adult learning and education.

Amidst such circumstances, it is no wonder that organized movements demanding funding and policy for adult education began to emerge in the 1970s. With scholars and experts on adult education demanding the institution of laws to promote adult education, various legal drafts were proposed to the government and National Assembly. In 1976, adult educators from all over the country gathered to form the Korea Adult Education Association, which molded public opinion and continued urging the government and National Assembly to enact laws and develop policies. These were efforts to reform the education system and policies, which at the time only focused on school education, to broaden and include adult education within its boundaries.

These efforts achieved the passing of a constitutional amendment in 1980 that “the state must promote lifelong education.” A decisive step in this direction was the naming of a senior leader of the Korea Adult Education Association to the Constitutional Amendment Committee as a committee member. The constitution’s “promotion of lifelong education” article later became a major cornerstone in the development of Korea’s adult learning and education toward lifelong learning. On the heels of the constitution’s declaration to promote lifelong education came the Adult Education Law of 1982. With the enactment of this law, social recognition for adult education was secured by systematizing the cultivation and qualifications of adult education teachers, various types of adult-oriented education were legally recognized, and the number of university lifelong education programs was increased. Above all, the law became the legal grounds on which the government could establish policies and allocate budgets for the promotion of lifelong education.

The 1990s is a significant turning point in which Korea emerged from the shadow of 40 years of military dictatorship and authoritarian rule to establish a civilian government according to democratic processes. During this time, social debate on education reform was vibrant. After concentrated discussion, the Presidential Commission on Education Reform presented a plan for a new education system in 1995. Because I was a member of that committee, the position of the lifelong education sector was able to be reflected to a significant degree. According to this plan, the Lifelong Education Act was enacted, supporting the development of policies toward the building of a lifelong learning society. In particular, the credit bank system is a system that socially recognizes various types of lifelong learning and confers a professional degree or bachelor’s degree if, after evaluation of accumulated credits, it is determined that they amount to a college-level degree. Therefore, this system continues to provide motive for educational achievement by acting as a middleman between institutional higher education and adult education.

On the other hand, plans to create a lifelong learning city that began in 2001 is a large-

scale citizen-centric activity that aims to build a learning community through the building of learning communities in each local municipality. If a city is recognized as a 'lifelong learning city,' it becomes eligible to receive government funding and professional consultation. Among the currently existing local municipalities across Korea, citizens of over half (approximately 120 cities) are working together with lifelong learning facilitators to create better learning opportunities and environments. I personally hope that this activity can eventually grow into citizens' empowerment.

In addition to these, we are currently working on broadening the role of the university in lifelong learning, establishing vocational education for laborers and the unemployed, broadening and developing programs for the elderly, and of course the further development of literacy programs in a more learner-oriented direction. Also, despite its difficulty, we are pushing ahead with developing a national license & learning certification system that allows a degree and certificate of graduation to be recognized and converted with proof of graduation from a lifelong learning program and/or vocational training certification. In order to better carry out such activities and build a learner-oriented learning society, the Lifelong Education Act was passed in 2007. However, reality always changes faster than it takes the law to catch up with it. This is why discussions about creating an amendment are beginning again.

In reality, budget is an ever-present problem. As stated before, no matter how wonderful the idea or policy may be, it is nearly impossible to carry out if there is no budget allocated for it. Budget is always limited, and the competition to take as much of what is available grows harsher by the day. Korea is no exception to this rule. This is why lifelong education leaders ceaselessly engage in battles with the government and National Assembly to get a budget. Fortunately, the situation this year has improved slightly compared to last year. With the budget for next year soon to undergo evaluation at the National Assembly, I wonder whether we may not be able to get a bit more funding. Nevertheless, we should not rest assured until the end.

## **Literacy Campaign**

Considering the fact that in the Asia-Pacific region, literacy is the most serious problem and the core of adult education, I would like to share with you Korea's experiences in its literacy campaign.

Without a doubt, illiteracy is one of humanity's oldest problems as well as one of the most urgent. Illiteracy is not only a personal problem but a problem of the nation and ultimately the world. Literacy education is an educational issue as well as a cultural, economic and political issue. Therefore, solutions for illiteracy require a multi-dimensional approach that involves not only the individual and the state but also the entire world. What is needed is a comprehensive approach that includes politics, economy and culture all at once.

The section on literacy in the Belem Framework for Action that was proclaimed at CONFINTEA VI at Belem, Brazil in 2009 points out these characteristics of literacy education in detail:

Literacy is an essential basic skill and a key competence for active citizenship in all

parts of the world. It evolves and is embedded in everyday life, working life and civic life. Literacy is continuously shaped and reshaped by the evolving complexities of culture, economy and society. Adult education definitively extends beyond adult literacy, but adult literacy is imperative for people to engage in meaningful learning. It is a prerequisite for personal, social and political emancipation.

However, despite the call to attention by Belem, the current global situation on illiteracy grows increasingly more depressing. The worldwide reality of illiteracy as noted by the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009 is as follows:

- Illiteracy is receiving minimal political attention and remains a global disgrace, keeping one in five adults (one in four women) on the margins of society.
- Worldwide, 774 million adults lack basic literacy skills, as measured by conventional method (self-reporting). Direct measurement of literacy skills would significantly increase the global estimate of the number of adults denied the right to literacy.
- Of the 101 countries still far from achieving 'universal literacy', 72 will not succeed in halving their adult literacy rates by 2015.
- Most countries have made little progress during the past decade in reducing the absolute number of adult illiterates, with the notable exception of China.
- More than three-quarters of the world's illiterates live in only fifteen countries, including eight of the nine high population countries. In most of the fifteen countries, adult literacy rates have improved since 1985-1994, although continuing population growth translates into increase in absolute numbers of illiterates in several countries.
- Overall, illiteracy rates are highest in the countries with the greatest poverty, a link observed right down to the household level. More generally, for various social, cultural or political reasons, certain populations - such as migrants, indigenous groups and people with disabilities - suffer reduced access to formal education and literacy programmes.

The *Second Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (2013) re-discusses this problem:

Literacy is also vital to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the goals of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). The United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) and UNESCO's Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) have stressed the need for accelerated efforts in achieving EFA Goal 4. However, adult literacy has not received appropriate attention and resources. According to the 2011 Global Monitoring Report, the EFA target for reducing illiteracy rates by 2015 will be missed by a wide margin. This reflects a long-standing neglect of literacy in education policy. The latest Global Monitoring Report (2012) confirms that most countries will not achieve Goal 4. (p. 19)

While international bodies are effective in calling attention to problems, they are not as effective in carrying out solutions. While they lend a loud voice to the importance of literacy

programs, their financial and professional support is always limited. While it may seem obvious that wealthier countries support the activities of poorer countries, no wealthy country is unconditionally generous about giving aid. Therefore, the sad reality of the situation is that there is virtually no hope unless each country actively initiates its own literacy programs.

Just like the age-old maxim “Heaven helps those who help themselves,” concrete results are achieved when local societies and each country takes responsibility for its own programs. Assistance from international bodies and aid countries is only part of the picture: the more that is expected, the larger the disappointment at the end. Even with the help of international bodies and developed countries, what has happened thus far shows the limitations of such help. Although aid from international bodies and developed countries may obviously be utilized, the actual “carrying out” of the literacy program must be done by the country’s government, educational institutions and civil societies. Allow me to introduce Korea’s case.

Korea long ago achieved a high literacy rate. According to a survey conducted by a government organization in 2008, simple illiteracy (cannot read or write) among members of the population between the ages of 19 and 79 was 1.7 percent, while functional illiteracy (inability to fill out basic paperwork required to be a functional social being) was 5.3 percent. However, with a recent increase in migrant laborers and marriage immigrants, the Korean illiteracy of these groups has arisen as a new social problem. The number of foreign laborers and marriage immigrants currently residing in Korea adds up to approximately 1 million. While not all of them are illiterate in Korean, a majority requires literacy education.

Korea’s current literacy program is provided for the domestic illiterate population that largely consists of elderly women, foreign laborers and marriage immigrants. Literacy programs are usually run by civilian groups while receiving financial support from the government. In the case that a government organization is directly in charge of the program, it sometimes engages in competition with civilian-run programs. The majority of literacy programs does not stop at eliminating simple literacy and continue to offer adult basic education that encompasses primary and middle school education. Mandatory education in Korea is up to the first year of high school.

While Korea’s current literacy rate is very high, at the end of World War II just after breaking free from Japanese colonial rule, Korean adult literacy was barely 22 percent. As such, all efforts were focused on literacy programs from the first days of liberation. The programs were stopped by the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 but were restarted with the ceasefire as a nationwide campaign. In a large-scale literacy movement conducted over a decade from the mid-1950s until the mid-1960s, all organizations participated, including the government, local communities, schools and even the military. All organizations that participated in the literacy movement reported the number of illiterate people they had taught throughout the year to a supervisory organization. The government would compile these statistics and present the accomplishments of the year along with the year’s literacy rate. Regions with a low accomplishment rate were chastised by the central government, which gave them plenty of incentive to do better the following year.

The military screened out those among each year’s new recruits who were illiterate. They were included in military training only after being taught to read and write, making all young men literate. Schools held night classes for illiterate adults while during vacations, students had to teach the illiterate members of the village as part of their ‘vacation homework.’ They

even had to receive written confirmation from the village head that they indeed had taught the illiterate. I also did this “homework” when I was in fourth grade. The first illiterate adults I taught to read and write were three women. They were my mother and her two friends.

It is important to remember that the written culture of a country’s citizens is closely interconnected to that country’s linguistic culture and linguistic policies. For example, in the case that the existence of different languages based on region or race prevents the use of a single unified language or a nation uses as its official language not their own language but that and the writing system of their past colonizers, it is more difficult to raise literacy levels than in a country that uses one common folk language. In the case that language use varies widely by social class, the limited opportunities that someone from a lower social class has to learn and use the standard dialect creates obvious obstacles in reducing illiteracy. There are also differences in degree of motivation to overcome illiteracy between societies in which the use of letters is universalized and societies in which this is not the case.

Therefore, a literacy program only reaps actual results when it is carried out in conjunction with the respective country’s linguistic culture and linguistic policies. In other words, rather than simply teaching people how to read and write with the existing linguistic culture and linguistic policies in place, the results of a literacy program are made more fruitful when factors that prevent written culture from being generalized are removed at the same time. Also, from a long-term perspective, policies for the development of linguistic culture can make ground-breaking advances in raising a country’s literacy levels. One example of this is China, which by drastically simplifying the highly complicated structure of its traditional characters, greatly accelerated the speed at which its citizens acquired character literacy.

Within this context, the invention of the Korean alphabet Hangeul in 1446 by King Sejong the Great is a phenomenal accomplishment. Until that time, Korea had used Chinese characters. The traditional Chinese writing system is not a phonetic alphabet but a hieroglyphic format in which each character has its own shape, of which there are hundreds of thousands. Although some characters have simple shapes that are easy to learn, the majority of Chinese characters are highly complex and thus difficult to learn and use. Because almost all characters were simplified after World War II, learning how to read has become much easier compared to the past.

During the rule of King Sejong, there was the issue of Chinese characters being complex, but there was also the problem that it was difficult for ordinary citizens to learn because it was the writing system of the Chinese language and not Korean. In order to solve this problem, King Sejong decided to create a Korean alphabet. In the preface to the explanatory book on Hangeul, the Korean alphabet, he explained as follows. “Because Korean and Chinese are different from one another, it is highly difficult for ordinary people to express their thoughts in the Chinese writing system. Therefore, I have made a Korean writing system that is fit for the Korean language so that the people can be relieved of this difficulty. I hope that from now on, all the people can easily learn to write in and enjoy the use of their own language.”

It is rare for someone to even think about inventing an entire writing system for a particular language. The task itself of creating a new alphabet is, in fact, extremely difficult. However, King Sejong succeeded nevertheless, giving his people a priceless gift that can be

passed down through generations upon generations of Koreans. This is the reason why of all their past kings, Koreans call him “the Great.” In order to commemorate King Sejong the Great, who made it easier for his people to learn to write in a revolutionary new way, and share his unique and revolutionary literacy program with literacy educators, the Korean government proposed to UNESCO the creation of the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize, which is given each year.

I would like to recommend to many countries to reconsider their national writing culture in fundamental and revolutionary new ways. This is, of course, no easy task. However, once successful, there is no greater accomplishment possible for a country’s future. Even if it does not necessarily mean creating a new writing system, it is crucial to have the goal of making the social environment conducive to a written culture. This is why for a literacy campaign to succeed, there must be both an instructional approach as well as a socio-political approach. Not only governments but international bodies must also devote more energy and attention to this problem. It is clear that learning a writing system is of course an individual’s personal responsibility but an even greater social responsibility.