

Toward One Korea: Examination of Early Childhood Education and Care in South and North Korea

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Abstract

The two Koreas, the South and the North, differ drastically in what seem to be the most fundamental of ways. Many Koreans still, however, hold hope for a unified homeland and therefore important to examine the inevitably problematic issues in early childhood education and care that will be encountered when the two Koreas are unified. The institutions of early childhood education and care on each side of the DMZ evolved under different ideologies and organizational principles each ideology promoted. The issue of early childhood education and care, which is directly linked to every nation's future, will be especially difficult to bridge between a North that uses early childhood education and care as one of its main tools for maintaining its communist system and a South that understands early childhood education and care in a more private context as part of an open competitive system. Given these disparities, preparation for an early childhood education and care post-unification era framework must begin now. Therefore, this research presents a direction for post-unification early childhood education and care by comparing and analyzing how the systems were developed on both sides of the peninsula following the division of Korea. To this end, South Korean and North Korean early childhood education and care ideologies, legal systems, administrative systems, management policies, enrollment rates, costs, early childhood teacher policies and operating practices are scrutinized.

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INTRODUCTION

The Korean peninsula has been divided for more than half a century. The South has moved toward a political, economic and cultural development based upon a freely elected democratic government and maintained pre-1945 culture and traditions that did not try to change the fundamental organization of society. The North, proclaiming a uniquely North Korean style of communism based on the idolization of Kim Il-sung and his son Kim Jung-il, has succeeded in creating a independent set of political, economic and cultural systems that attempts to create a new utopian society. Koreans still hold hope for a unified homeland though the two Koreas differ dramatically and drastically in what seem to be the most fundamental of ways in society. Inspiration comes from the unification of the geopolitically similar and long divided West and East Germany in 1990 following the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. The new millennium ushering in new developments in inter-Korean relations, fans hope for a unified Korea. A historic summit meeting was held between the South and the North and exchanges between the two Koreas is more active than ever. These new developments are expected to have a deeper and broader influence on the future.

As hopes toward unification spiral some of the struggles Germany had in establishing an educational system after unification must be met with proper preparation and sober insight in light of lessons learned. This paper is concerned with the inevitable problematic issues in early childhood education and care that will be encountered when the two Koreas are unified. With a well-founded belief that those issues can be ameliorated by careful preparation before unification, this paper examines current early childhood theories and practices in both Koreas. Koreans have always been united in treasuring children and in recognizing that the future of the Korean identity lies in educational upbringing. Traditional Korean convictions, coupled with the shared knowledge that young children form self-images and are socialized by internalizing significant others who provide them with love and affection, are set forth in this paper.

South and North Korea stress a childhood: physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development from birth to the primary school age of 6. Children are nourished as much by parents as by early childhood education, care institutions such as kindergartens, and