Early Childhood Care and Education Reform of the Republic of Korea: 
Part 1 -- “Early Childhood School”

In 1997, the then Presidential Commission on Education Reform announced a proposal to reform the country’s early childhood care and education system, introducing the concept of the Early Childhood School (ECS) or Yoo-Ab-Hak-Kyo, an integrated care and education service, and the legislation of an Early Childhood Education Act. Six years later, these reform ideas are still being hotly debated, with little progress in implementation. To learn about the reform and its stalemate, an interview was arranged with Dr. Jung Na, Senior Researcher at the Korean Educational Development Institute, the architect of the proposal. The interview was conducted by Ms. Soo-Hyang Choi, UNESCO HQs., Paris, who prepared the present excerpts focused on the Early Childhood School. The next issue, no. 16, will contain excerpts from the interview on the Early Childhood Education Act. The opinions expressed in this note do not reflect those of the Government of the Republic of Korea or UNESCO.

Choi: Could you tell us about the Early Childhood School (ECS) introduced in the 1997 Reform Proposal? (hereafter the Proposal)

Na: ECS is a full-day, integrated care and education service for children of 3 to 5 years old. It aims to promote the child’s holistic development as well as to satisfy parents’ demand for childcare. Administrative responsibility for ECS, which is to be integrated into the national education system, is to be assumed by the Ministry of Education and Human Resources (MOEHR).

C: Is ECS a new form of service to replace existing services?

N: ECS is not intended to replace existing services. Existing early childhood services – e.g., kindergartens, care services as well as Hakwons – are to be transformed into ECSs by meeting certain standards. So, ECS is a new concept – a “care-based school” for young children – to be implemented within the existing services.

C: Why was such a concept emphasising integration necessary?

N: Korea’s early childhood services for 3-5-year-olds are bifurcated: they are either an education or a care service, rarely both. This has to do with the country’s parallel administrative responsibilities for 3-5-year-olds, with some housed in the MOEHR and others in the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MOHW). The two ministries’ service expansion plans, training and pedagogical frameworks for services for 3-5-year-olds are dovetailed into MOHW’s care services and MOEHR’s kindergarten-based education services, respectively. Wastage of human and financial resources has resulted from this duplication of systems, and the competition between care and education service providers for the same target group of children is enormous.

C: As a label for integrated service, however, ECS does not seem to be the most appropriate, because of its association with education. Was there any reason for which this particular name was chosen?

N: Korea has a cultural propensity to respect learning and schools. Parents perceive schools as an institution to which they must send their children. The word “school” also conjures up the image of a place for serious learning. The name ECS was, thus, thought to be a strategic way of upgrading people’s perception of early childhood institutions and mobilising government attention to early childhood.

C: How did parents react to the name?

N: When surveyed, they indicated ECS as their preferred name for the new service.

C: But their preference for ECS could reflect an expectation that ECS be a serious learning institution; and I imagine such an educational aspiration could pose a problem in the bid to make ECSs an integrated service.

N: One reason why parents like the ECS concept is that it would run as a full-day service to meet their childcare needs. So, they are strongly in favour of a comprehensive service for both care and education. But, one cannot rule out the possibility of ECS’s being assimilated, pedagogically, to that of schools – “school-isation.” Because of this danger, some experts, in fact, suggested that kindergarten could be a better name.

C: Why was that suggestion not considered?

N: First of all, in order to embrace all existing services, we needed a third name that was not associated with any of them. But there was a more realistic reason. In Korea, according to the relevant law, kindergartens are to be recognised as the first form of school, but private kindergartens for profit, which represent 78% of the country’s kindergarten enrolment, are deprived of


2 Young children attend Hakwons for, typically, drawing, piano, dancing, sports, arithmetic, foreign languages, calligraphy, etc. These Hakwons often offer early childhood care and education services, at least in part.

3 For example, many private kindergartens already run on a full-day schedule, but those on a half-day schedule were to extend their services in order to become ECSs; and care services and Hakwons were to follow, even in part, the national kindergarten curriculum, hire certified early childhood education teachers and undergo inspection from the education authorities.

4 MOHW looks after services for 0-5-year-olds, while MOEHR is responsible for kindergarten services attended by 3-5-year-olds. But as most 0-2-year-olds in Korea stay at home, 3-5-year-olds are the main target group of MOHW’s care services, which intensifies the tension and duplication with the MOEHR. In reaction to MOEHR’s reform proposal for 3-5-year-olds, meanwhile, the MOHW developed and implemented a proposal to subsidise services for 0-2-year-olds.
government support for schools, simply because they are not called schools\(^5\). So, kindergarten was not a strategic name even from this point of view.

C: Understandably, private kindergartens must have welcomed the Proposal. But were they happy about the prospect of extending their half-day services to full-day services in order to become ECSs?

N: The Proposal had a plan to universalise 5-year-olds’ attendance in ECSs, and this was to be applied to both private and public ECSs. Private kindergartens interpreted this as a form of government support that would finally be available to their services. Thus, they were willing to bear any “burdens” incurred in the transformation process.

C: What about care service providers? Because of its affinity with education, the ECS concept may have made them uneasy.

N: Government-subsidised public care services were afraid of losing the government support. But private care services operators welcomed the “social mobility” associated with ECS, since their services would be referred to as a school, and their title would be “principal.”\(^6\) But as time went by, the providers of small-scale or low-quality services began to fear that their services might fail to meet the ECS standards and be “dropped.” This fear was also evident among Hakwon operators whose commercial tutoring services tend not to be well appreciated by early childhood educators. Resistance from these groups has been fierce.

C: Was it, indeed, a groundless fear?

N: Yes, it was. The Proposal made it clear that no existing services would be suppressed to create ECSs; and the Government intended to work on support measures to upgrade existing services so that they could be brought into the ECS framework.

C: What was the reaction of the MOHW to ECS?

N: MOHW interpreted ECS as an educationally oriented service that would be appropriate for middle-class children only. For children in disadvantaged situations, it insisted that a care-based approach would be more suitable. It made a strict distinction between care and education as two different concepts.

C: Was there any prospect that the MOHW’s funding authority might be reduced with the introduction of ECS, which I suppose could have been a more valid reason for its opposition?

N: The MOHW’s budget was not to be reduced in volume, but channelled uniquely to services for 0-2-year-olds, as responsibility for services for 3-5-year-olds was to move to the MOEHR. In the revised Proposal, this initial division of work was further compromised to allow both the MOHW and the MOEHR to keep their funding authority over their respective care and education services, which will have been transformed into ECSs. Meanwhile, the MOEHR was to increase its budget to fulfil its new responsibility for the training of all members of the ECS workforce and for the provision of free ECS attendance to 5-year-olds. An increase in funding was also planned to enable the MOHW to support the creation of new ECSs. In short, the aim was a streamlining of the overlapped funding responsibilities, but not a budget cut of either of the ministries.

C: So, what do you think was the MOHW’s ultimate concern making it resist the Proposal?

N: The MOHW feared that the administrative and funding responsibilities for ECS would eventually be transferred to the MOEHR because of the concept’s intrinsic link to education, and that it would lose its control over services for 3-5-year-olds.

C: Was the MOEHR willing to accept the new and expanded responsibility associated with ECS?

N: It basically agreed with the reform direction including the idea of ECS. With its agreement, the Proposal could be presented, first of all, to then-President Kim and announced. But when faced with opposition from the MOHW and its stakeholders, it did not “fight back.”\(^7\) One reason, I think, is that early childhood education is not a priority for the MOEHR and it would have difficulty raising the budget within the sector to fulfil its new responsibility. This lack of support from the principal line ministry has, in part, contributed to the drifting of the Proposal.

C: What is your advice for other countries attempting to launch a similar reform?

N: Government auspices for early childhood services should be streamlined, first and foremost, to ensure the child’s holistic development. The ideal of putting the child’s interests first should always be borne in mind. If the reform effort is seen as an opportunity for “territorial” expansion or reduction by the concerned ministries, it is most likely to be botched.