

**Using Korean Educational Model to Help
Malaysian Primary Schools in Morality and
Human Development**

By

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Abstract

This research aimed at exploring the primary education system in South Korea with focus on morality and healthy body programmes for primary school children. Using a constructivism framework, I applied Vygotsky's social, cultural and historical perspective which was evident in the theory that all learning was first accomplished through the language flowing between individuals. The research was conducted using a qualitative methodology; case study which is seen as a means of gathering data within a real-life context. Data were gathered through observations, interviews, document analysis, journal entry and several other creative ways made possible by technology. One primary school in Suwon was purposively chosen and the whole research was conducted there. Document analysis was conducted in Seoul National University and Kyobo Book Centre. Parents and authorities of non-governmental organisations were also interviewed to understand the Korean education model in building morality and human development in young Koreans. The findings revealed that the Republic of Korea has been using the law since after World War II to ensure that all young Korean children have a sound headstart in their moral, health and holistic development. Once the children are in primary school, the same philosophy is further enhanced by teachers. Korean society takes pride in ensuring their young children develop into individuals who become part of the fast developing Republic of Korea. Teachers are trained diligently and offered high wage to ensure the quality of education. The findings of the study will be used to formulate a framework for a successful educational model in multicultural Malaysia.

Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I would like to thank ASEAN University Network for accepting my research proposal and allowing me to participate in the Exchange Fellowship Programme under the ASEAN-ROK Academic Exchange Programme 2016/2017. As I was pursuing my postdoctoral studies in New Zealand then, I had all the time to prepare my research materials and activities to be executed in the Republic of Korea in early 2017. However, once back in Malaysia, I had multiple tasks to accomplish and with the support of my home university, the University of Malaya, I managed to complete my activities, research and final report.

I wish to thank my Korean colleagues, staff at the Seoul National University, parents and non-governmental leaders who supported me during my stay at the Republic of Korea. University of Malaya where I am attached to now granted me research leave and I am really grateful for that. Last but not least, I would like to render my appreciation to Ms. Naparat Phirawattanakul, senior programme officer at the ASEAN University Network (AUN) Secretariat who has been ever so supportive from the time I submitted my proposal application to the moment I completed my final report. I owe her my gratitude and appreciation.

Vishalache Balakrishnan, PhD.

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Introduction

South Korea has emerged as one of the fastest developed countries in the 21st century. South Korea has achieved successful results through the promotion of education in its revolutionary era until today, where education helped improve the economy and sustain development. The significance of education is increasing in South Korea, as the country is already become a high level knowledge-based society and facing intensified international competition. Since kindergarten is optional, most parents educate their young children and at the age of six, their children are sent to six years compulsory chodeung-hakgyo elementary education.

Malaysia in comparison has implemented a blueprint for education (2013-2025) and main objectives as well as strategic plans have been stipulated in the blueprint. However, the aspect of morality and healthy body which is the basis for any sound, sustaining education system is not highlighted. The South Korean primary education research which I am proposing here could help salvage the Malaysian education blueprint to a certain extent where humanities and individual growth and development is concerned. The need to further develop the democratic and multicultural Malaysia which was built through untiring efforts of our forefathers from different nations toward improving the welfare of humanity by starting with the self (morality and healthy body) is the crucial research aspect here.

Historical similarities and differences

Malaysia and the Republic of Korea had similar development in the early 1940s to 1960s. Both countries were torn down by wars such as World War II. Both countries competed in similar sports and other economic and social activities.

However, the main difference between the two was Malaysia has been a multicultural nation for centuries and Republic of Korea has been a homogenous nation for centuries too until recent times when there was an uproar over immigrants flocking into Republic of Korea. Malaysia on the other hand is having the second uproar of

immigrants from different nations such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar and Nepal.

In line with this, I was critical about what happened in the past decades when Republic of Korea moved beyond and became a developed nation. Malaysia on the other had is still within the developing nation category. One essential matter in current development is early education. Early school education which is compulsory in the Republic of Korea has been enforced since after World War II compared to Malaysia where only in recent times it has been enforced. Yet preschool education in Malaysia is not a law as in the Republic of Korea and not fully enforced. Only in current times, preschool education is being enforced. Yet there is much to learn from the Republic of Korea education system especially in the early aspects of character and health awareness among young children.

Background of the study

In the Republic of Korea education system, creating the holistic individuals starts from early childhood. For aspects of early development in health and character, there is importance of moral education which has been designed in three sections: moral education as a subject, moral education as a creative and character education programme and other curriculum aspects such as social studies. The objectives of the national education curriculum is for children to be inculcated with values and youth to be able to become autonomous characters by applying moral values and virtues in their day to day lives.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Republic of Korea has clearly spelt out that the curriculum announced as the National level Curriculum aims at accomplishing educational objectives and goals of elementary and secondary schools according to Paragraph 2 Article 23 in the Elementary and Secondary School Law. They are:

1. It simultaneously aims for national unity and individual diversity.

2. It is student-centred and facilitates students' autonomy and creativity.
3. Students, parents, teachers, schools, and offices of education cooperate to develop the schools, and offices of education cooperate to develop the optimal curriculum for students.
4. It intends to make a curriculum-centred school education system.
5. It aims to maintain and control the quality of processes and products of public education in Korea.

Ref:http://gangwonepik.weebly.com/uploads/1/3/8/5/13851570/national_school_curriculum-english2008.pdf

With such a wide and interesting scope, I found the whole Korean education system, holistic yet individualised, broad yet focused and most important the focus on student centredness yet providing space for autonomous lifestyle is indeed calling for further research.

Conceptual framework

Using a constructivism framework, I applied Vygotsky's social, cultural and historical perspective which was evident in his conviction that all learning was first accomplished through the language that flows between individuals. Language and action, for Vygotsky, were tools of mediation for learning. Speaking reorganises students' thinking, and their language comes to them as a cultural heritage through their interactions with others which is localised based on culture and traditions.

Because the Korean education system actively uses language, it changes their thinking: and actions change language. This belief is the "cornerstone of the difference" Vygotsky made in conceptualising how students think, learn, and develop. It is my hope that after this research, the knowledge, skills and values obtained from the South Korean primary school education can be put into practice in the Malaysian class as what Vygotsky conceptualised.

Research objective and research questions

The research objective is to explore the primary education system in South Korea with focus on morality and healthy body programs for primary school children. The research questions include:

1. How is morality inculcated among primary South Korean students?
2. What are the main values instilled among South Korean students in primary school?
3. What are the approaches used to teach about healthy body in South Korea primary schools?
4. What is the role of the Ministry of Education in implementing activities related to morality and healthy body in South Korean primary schools?

Research method

The research was conducted using a qualitative methodology; case study. Case study is a means of gathering data and providing coherence and limit to what is being sought (Hamilton, 2011). Data were gathered through several means such as observations, interviews, document collection, journal entry and several other creative ways made possible by advances in technology.

An effort to manage researcher subjectivity as well as allowing the data to speak for itself (Stake, 2005) is what I explored in this research. Willig (2008) emphasises that case studies do not focus on methods used to collect and analyse data but more on analysing the case itself. It is my hope that through this limited but innovative research, the outcomes which would be analysed through thematic terms would help Malaysia and later South Korea in preparing students for a global multicultural world, starting with their own morality and health concerns. When the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin, 1984), case studies

seems to be a practical way to lessen this gap and bring new knowledge to the scholarly and research world.

Hypothesis

As this is a qualitative research, there is no assumptions@hypothesis made.

Ethics in research

There is slight differences between ethics in practice and procedural ethics. Procedural ethics are linked to compliance processes in conducting research whereas ethics in practice refers to everyday issues that occur while research is conducted. In the case of this research, both ethical aspects were strictly followed. A letter of permission was submitted to the principal of the school (Refer to Appendix B) and the gatekeeper of the class who was the class teacher was asked for permission before students were observed and interviewed. The ethics of care was focussed upon when students were interviewed and observed. There was a need to ensure trust and feeling of security at all times.

Findings

Based on my complete, comprehensive field work and document analysis before and after the field work, I am able to use the earlier theoretical framework mentioned to the optimum where this research is concerned.

All four of Vygotsky's theories were in full swing in the school where I did my field work.

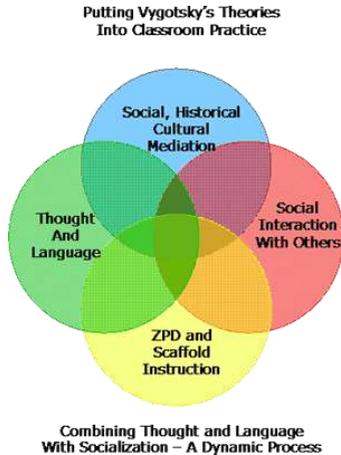


Figure 1: Korean classrooms and all four aspects of Vygotsky's theory.

Description of school in the case study

The school I chose as my field work place is about two hours away from the city of Seoul and my Korean friend and I travelled by train and later by taxi to reach the school. It was named Seon Haeng Elementary School in the popular suburb of Suwon. It is a relatively new school compared to many other elementary schools in Suwon which is popular for its Samsung plants. The school had a strategic location, with brand new buildings and only started in 2011, which means it is less than 10 years old. The school has about 800 students who were all Korean children; 30 teachers, one principal and 40 school staff to help with the school system. Thus I found the school very homogenous in practice and standards.

All primary schools in the Republic of Korea teach nine subjects, The primary curriculum consists of nine principal subjects: moral education, Korean language, social studies, mathematics, science, physical education, music, fine arts, and practical arts.



Picture 1: School in case study

Morality inculcated among primary students

The school chosen for the field work had a special system that they were trying to implement. It is important to note that many aspects of creativity and innovation are seen in action in the current Republic of Korea education system. Morality was inculcated through relationships, classroom activities and school philosophy.

Seon Haeng Elementary School was implementing and trialling Restorative Discipline as one of their innovative plans for character development and holistic education.

Restorative Discipline is a philosophy and system-wide intervention that places relationships at the heart of the educational experiences. The main aim of Restorative Discipline is to change the school climate rather than merely react to student behaviour whether positive or negative.

Thus in the classroom that I observed, teacher allowed a certain level of flexibility where students movement and activities were concerned.



Picture 2: Students being themselves during lesson time.

The class students had the privilege to move around freely in the classroom and teacher was being very friendly with full observation of what was going on, as one of the characteristics of Restorative Discipline is providing time and taking time. Teacher was patient with students' characters and it was all dialogue driven. There was lots of communication going on between teacher-students and students-students atmosphere. The whole process rests on the steady establishing and deepening relationships.



Picture 3: Much time was spent establishing relationships.

Other than relationships, the manner teacher and students were engaged with the teaching and learning activities also enhanced moral values. For example the materials such as textbooks, work books, technology equipment such as computers and video players all added to the holistic education that the students were undergoing.

Students enjoyed the colourful and engaging books they were communicating with during lessons. As it was the beginning of the year, the particular lesson which I observed was about Santa Claus sending presents to the different children homes and how he underwent different challenges and emotions. The main lesson for the day was about the students and their emotions and how they learn to cope and control their emotions when in relationship with the others. It was the textbook that triggered so much excitement and engagement among the students and teacher.



Picture 4: Learning emotions



Picture 5: Learning about relationship

It was indeed one of the Restorative Discipline ways of using an internal leadership response team to spearhead the implementation and help support necessary dialogue. Teacher used the textbook as shown above to provoke the initial discussion among students but she later went on to connect students and their daily lives to the moral aspects taught. They shared their own emotions and how they learnt to control their emotions in their day to day lives.

Teachers in a Restorative Discipline philosophy play a very important role. They usually are very alert and sensitive to their students' needs. They place fundamental attention on harm and the subsequent needs of the victim. The teacher I observed was very patient with all her students, whether those who paid full attention to her teachings or those who were hyperactive. Students who were at times disturbing their friends were not scolded or punished but teacher caringly told them to teach other friends who had not finished their work or gave them some important chores to complete.



Picture 6: Lesson is student-centred



Picture 7: Teacher engages students in lessons

Thus for the first research question, the elaborate explanation here is comprehensive to show that students acquire morality through experiential learning. Values are acquired in an authentic but meaningful manner.

Main values instilled among South Korean students in primary school

Values are part of Korean culture. Many values are instilled from the time the children are young. By the time they are in primary school, they already know what is expected of them either from their parents, their teachers, their friends and also from themselves. The most important value instilled in each and every Korean child is being diligent. Diligence in their life is so important because from young they are exposed to being able to take care of themselves. Then they need to be diligent in their studies, their social life, their health and their relationship with others.



Picture 8: Every student is diligent in class.

Other than diligence and hard work, two values that I observed in the school that I did my field work and the different Koreans that I came into contact with was humbleness and respect. They are respectful to everyone, without much concern whether the other person is older or younger. The students I spoke to spoke of filial piety as a value instilled in them. They have great respect for their parents and acknowledge that parents make them into better human beings.

During my field trip in school, students showed great respect to their teachers, principal, the helpers who helped prepare food and cleaned their school and also us the visitors.

The Principal was a great person as he acknowledged the students and they in return were at ease in his presence. The principal sat and had his lunch break among the students and that was a great atmosphere as students treated him as a 'friend' and spoke to him as they went to get their food. The Restorative Discipline uses a whole school approach. All administrators, teachers, all staff, and students seem to have been exposed to or trained in restorative processes.



Picture 9: Mutual respect among teacher and students.



Picture 10: Pupil and principal have lunch together.

In an interview with several nine year old students of both gender, they emphasised that parents expected them to behave well at home, in school and in public places. They were expected to be honest and have their own space at home and in school. I observed that the

students ate what they enjoyed during lunch break and the food which I also ate was healthy fresh food prepared by the chefs in the school. The lower classes had to take their food and take turns to serve their friends. The upper classes have their food in the cafeteria but had to eat fast and leave and they needed the space in the cafeteria which was limited for other students. Breaktime was allocated in such a way that the cafeteria was not too cramped up. Students took their own food, ate and cleaned the place for the next one to use.



Picture 11: Complete, healthy lunch.



Picture 12: Returning eating utensils after lunch.

The sharing of space and caring about others seems to be values that was in action in the school researched. The students cared about the

others who had not had lunch and seem to follow the Restorative Discipline philosophy naturally.

They were also very active and in between their lessons, they were given break time to do some leisure activities. Some students did skipping. Others were dancing. Thus self-discipline was another value instilled in the primary school students.



Picture 13: Time for skipping.

Restorative Discipline calls for collaboration with community-based restorative justice programmes, local businesses, and agencies that serve young people, including community and faith-based programmes, law enforcement, and public health and mental health entities, local Community Resource Coordinating Groups, justice system representatives and other stakeholders. This was obvious in my case study school as the community played an integral role in developing the school. Many buildings and digital equipment have been donated by business organisations and individuals. Other than that parents and other stakeholders cooperate with the school staff to ensure the school develops and grows in all aspects.



Picture 14: A place to skip sponsored.

One best practice carried out in the school is “short break time” after two lessons. During this break time, students have choices of either they want to dance or do skipping. It seems to be a good way for students to release “tension” or do some fitness exercise which helps keep them alert and active for the next few lessons.



Picture 15: Smart television free for all classes.

The school principal and the teacher who I interviewed were very committed individuals. The principal for a start is a very innovative personality. He has travelled far and to many countries. He ensures that knowledge and experiences gained is shared with others in the school and the local community. Though we had some language barrier my Korean friend translated much of his creative and innovative ideas for the betterment of the school. The principal

works closely with the school board and local community which is Restorative Discipline in action because Restorative Discipline requires a top down commitment from school board members and administrators. There needs to be mutual respect and cooperation from each individual involved.



Picture 16: (From left) Korean scholar, principal, teacher, myself.

Everyone in the school had a sense of shared responsibility. The day I observed the Year 3 class, the teacher was on duty and after lunch break, she swept and cleaned the classroom.



Picture 17: Shared responsibility to keep the class clean.

The conclusion for this section is values instilled are personal and communal. The personal values are diligence, respect, honesty and humility, creativity and innovation. The communal values are mutual respect, cooperation, equality and caring for others.

Approaches used to teach about healthy body in South Korea primary schools

Approaches used to teach about health body were mostly student-centred and teachers ensured that lessons taught were interesting and meaningful. In this particular school, Restorative Discipline uses a whole school approach. All persons concerned such as administrators, teachers, school staff, and students were exposed to and/or trained in restorative processes with periodic boosted.

When I was walking around Seoul and Suwon, there were many health shops around. Then in class when I asked the students about what they thought about health and how they were taught to be healthy, they were thoughtful and responded: "My mother always make sure I eat my food when it is hot", or "Our teachers make sure we wash our hands clean before serving food during lunch break".

I paid a quick visit to the restrooms and found them to be clean and nice. Other than the school helpers doing the daily routines, the students themselves had a duty schedule to complete their chores. It was also a sense of community responsibility being shared by all students.

Health and healthy body are seen as essential in maintaining a high level of education in the Republic of Korea. Much emphasis is included in early childhood education where aspects of holistic growth is included in every day education.

In primary school, the students are already aware of healthy daily habits such as proper diet, enough sleep and consistent exercise. Students did not take their health for granted and enjoyed being in an environment where every student cared about the other. As the Restorative Discipline places an emphasis on meaningful accountability in matters involving harm and conflict, the students

were proving the philosophy to be real and meaningful. The teachers helped create an environment where “health was wealth” and safety of every child was looked after at all times in every place within the school.



Picture 17: Clean restrooms

Clean restrooms were evidences of how students not only took care of their personal cleanliness but also the cleanliness of their environment. Students were very proactive and diligently ensured that their restrooms were clean and cheerful.

Role of the Ministry of Education in implementing activities related to morality and healthy body in South Korean primary schools

The Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea takes great pride in ensuring that the education system was always in par with the advancement of science and technology locally and globally. Overall in the school that I did my field studies, the school principal and his teachers implemented the Restorative Discipline philosophy which calls for collaboration with community-based restorative justice programs, local businesses, and agencies that serve young people, including community and faith-based programmes, law enforcement, and public health and mental health entities, local community

resource coordinating groups, justice system representatives and other stakeholders.

There is indeed great flexibility in conducting the curriculum within the primary schools in Korea.

Conclusion

The Republic of Korea primary children are provided with many artistic subjects that shape them into progressive yet complete and comprehensive human beings. Through early childhood education to the completion of compulsory education, the fundamental strengths of individuals need to be fostered through combined efforts of schools, family, local communities, media and the nation.

The fundamental strengths, respectively to be fostered at a target stage of education, include the ability to observe basic lifestyles, sociability, and so forth, that enable children to grow, develop and to live in society independently. It is also necessary to foster qualities essential to the citizens who make up the country and society as well as the global world. So far, research on wellbeing of children based on qualitative approach and case studies are scarce or hardly conducted either in Malaysia or Republic of Korea.

Mostly research studies on children wellbeing are very quantitative based and focus is usually on academic excellence or technology progress, excellence in sports and not on fundamental strengths of the young nation. This research would indeed be a niche for other futuristic research to highlight the developing strategies in the South Korean education system which at early stages of schooling, focusses on values inculcation among the young children, compared to most Asian countries which focus on academic and knowledge excellence. There is great hope that this research can create a new horizon on how children can be taught in schools to be excellent in career lives but simultaneously be cultured, civilised and value-laden citizens of the nations and the global world.

Appendix A: AUN Offer Letter

Ref. No. 346/ 2016

11 August 2016

Professor Dato' Dr. Mohd Amin Jalaludin

Vice-Chancellor

Universiti Malaya

Dear Professor Dato' Dr. Mohd Amin Jalaludin,

Subject: The Announcement of Awardees for the Exchange Fellowship Programme under ASEAN-ROK Academic Exchange Programme 2016/2017

With regard to the aforementioned programme, it is my great pleasure to inform you that the following applicants from Universiti Malaya have been selected to participate in this programme.

1. Dr. Vishalache Balakrishnan, Lecturer, Faculty of Education
2. Dr. Freddy Tan Kheng Suan, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, UM Power Energy Dedicated Advanced Centre

They will receive the first 50% of the total amount of the Exchange Fellowship grant upon signing of the contract. The last 50% will be furnished after the full report is acknowledged by the AUN Secretariat.

Each research fellow is requested to fulfill the following activities;

1. Sign the Exchange Fellowship Contract and return it to the AUN Secretariat by **31 August 2016**;
2. Submit the bank account information and detailed work-plan in the same period as No. 1;
3. Sign the financial receipt after receiving each disbursement and return it to the AUN Secretariat by fax or e-mail.
4. Finish the final report within nine months, starting from the date of signing the Exchange Fellowship Contract
5. Submit the formal letter from the Korean host institutes indicating their period of research work-plan in Korea and their activities.
6. Submit the original airfare receipt and original plane ticket after returning to home country.

7. Adhere to the research format in accordance with the TOR for the final report.

Should you require for more information, please feel free to contact the AUN Office at aun.naparat@gmail.com.

We highly appreciate your kind cooperation and continuous support to the programme.

Respectfully yours,

Assoc. Prof. Nantana Gajaseni, Ph.D.

AUN Executive Director

Enclosed: 1. Term of Reference

2. The Exchange Fellowship Contract

3. Bank Account Information

Appendix B: Letter to Suwon Elementeray School

Ref. No. 028 / 2017

30 January 2017

Subject: A visit to Sean Haeng Elementary School

Dear Principal of Sean Haeng Elementary School,

This is to inform you that **Dr. Vishalache Balakrishnan**, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Foundation and Humanities, University of Malaya, has been invited from ASEAN University Network (AUN) and Korean Association of Southeast Asian Studies (KASEAS) to conduct a research under the Exchange Fellowship Programme 2016/2017 in Republic of Korea during 22 January – 7 February 2017.

As part of her research, **Dr. Vishalache Balakrishnan would like to pay a visit to your school on 1-3 February 2017 followed by a workshop with NGO and parents on 4 February 2017.**

It would be very grateful if you would consider welcoming her on the above mentioned schedule.

Thank you very much for your kind cooperation.

Sincerely yours,

Associate Professor Nantana Gajaseni, Ph.D.

AUN Executive Director

Appendix C(i): Articles to media based on research

Focus on formative years

By VISHALACHE BALAKRISHNAN - February 16, 2017 @ 10:08am

REPUBLIC of Korea (ROK) or South Korea is world No. 1 in the field of education. I was curious about what made that nation progress so fast in education and economy.

After spending three weeks conducting research in schools and the Seoul National University, and meeting think tanks, I found that ROK has a history of education that is centuries old.

My primary research was to explore the primary school education with focus on the teaching of moral and health programmes.

Upon analysing the educational history, I had a clearer picture of why ROK has emerged as the world No. 1 in education — investment in preschool education (0 to 5 years old) and focus on teacher training and their wellbeing. ROK invests heavily in early childhood education. Historically, education started in ROK with character development more than 500 years ago. Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism were the pillars behind the basis for character formation.

By 1949, education laws required every child to attend preschool. Parents who could not afford it were provided with subsidies and monetary aid to ensure that no child was left behind.

The early education focused on basic hygiene, character development and a progressive life. Diligence was inculcated from an early age. By the time these children attended primary school, basic skills have been learnt and they seem to be mature for their age, know the right food to eat and behave appropriately in schools and public spheres.

Character has been formed according to the norms and culture of local society. Teachers in elementary schools can fully focus on the

teaching and learning process. The other important factor is training for teachers and excellent support systems at all levels. For a start, teacher candidates are selected from students who obtain excellent results in high school and have an all-round history in school.

They are provided with comprehensive training, merging hundreds of years of local wisdom with latest Western and Eastern educational philosophy and psychology that have been proven effective.

The Education, Science and Technology Ministry ensures that teachers receive high wages and have small number of students in their classes. This, in return, allows teachers to research the latest methods of teaching and learning so that they can maximise time spent with students in the classroom.

Every day, teachers are in school from early morning until 4.30pm. School starts around 9am and ends at 2.30pm. But teachers continue with administrative work and prepare for next day's lessons. By having fewer students (between 16 and 18 students) in class, teachers can experiment with innovative teaching methods and technology.

We, in the Malaysian education system, have much to learn from ROK. I am thankful to the Asia University Network for this opportunity to research and share what I have discovered in the South Korean education system.

It goes back to the basics: 0 to 5 years old is the most important formative age for character formation and a healthy body.

VISHALACHE BALAKRISHNAN,

Senior (research) lecturer, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Ref: <http://www.nst.com.my/news/2017/02/212786/focus-formative-years>

Appendix C(ii): Articles to media based on research

Exploring Korean teaching and learning

SOUTH Korea, or the Republic of Korea (ROK), has emerged as the world number one for educating students. I was curious about what made that nation progress so fast up the ladder of education and economics compared to Malaysia.

As a participant of the Asean-Korea Exchange Fellowship Programme 2016/2017, I spent three weeks conducting research in schools, the Seoul National University, and meeting some Korean think tanks.

My primary research was to explore primary school education in the ROK, focusing on the teaching of morality and healthy body programmes for primary school pupils.

After in-depth document analysis on the educational history of the ROK, I have a clearer picture of why ROK can emerge as the world number one for education.

Firstly, the country sets a solid foundation by investing heavily in early preschool education (up to five years old).

It goes back to basics: this is the formative age for character formation and healthy bodies.

Historically, education started in the ROK with character development more than 500 years ago. Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism were the pillars behind the basis for character formation.

By 1949, preschool education for every Korean child was compulsory, and parents who could not afford it were provided with subsidies to ensure that no child was left behind.

The focus of early education was on basic hygiene, character development and leading a progressive life. By the time these

children came to primary school, basic skills have been learnt, and they seem mature for their age; knowing the right food to eat and behaving appropriately in school and public spheres.

With character having been developed and formed according to norms of society, teachers in elementary school can fully focus on the teaching and learning process.

The second important factor that speeds up world class education in the ROK is training of teachers and the excellent support system for teachers at all levels (elementary school, middle high school and high school).

For a start, teacher candidates are selected from students who obtained excellent results in high school and have a well-rounded record in school.

They are provided with comprehensive, up to date training; merging hundreds of years of local wisdom with the latest Western and Eastern educational philosophy that has been proven effective not just in one but many developed nations.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology ensures that teachers receive high wages, have small number of students in their classes for deep teaching and learning to take place. This provides the opportunity for the ROK teachers to research the latest method of teaching and learning so that they can maximise the opportunities from the time spent with students in the classroom.

Because their classes have small number of students (usually between 16 to 18), teachers have the opportunity to experiment with innovative teaching methods, applying technology along the way.

Teachers are usually in school from early morning until 4.30pm every day. School starts around 9am and ends at 2.30pm, but teachers continue with administrative work and prepare for the next day's lessons.

We in the Malaysian education system have much to learn from the ROK. I am thankful to the Asean University Network for this invaluable opportunity to explore more on the Korean education system.

DR VISHALACHE BALAKRISHNAN
Senior (Research) Lecturer,
Faculty of Education,
Universiti Malaya

Read more at

<http://www.thestar.com.my/news/education/2017/02/19/exploring-korean-teaching-and-learning/#BwYzeLDMFTjT2c6G.99>