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**Competency-based curriculum and curriculum autonomy
in the Republic of Korea**

by

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Proposing a competency-based curriculum

Changes in today's modern society are both rapid and intricate, bringing both significant challenges and new responsibilities to the field of education. Whereas in the past people strived to acquire as much knowledge as possible, the new task of modern society, exposed to an exponential amount of knowledge and information, is to select the highest quality information and make effective use of it. Such changes, stemming from this transformation into a knowledge-based society, require reshaping the past school-based system and ensuring coherent efforts that actively correspond to the accelerating social developments.

One particular response to the demand for such a change is the recent emphasis on key competencies. Rather than a simple accumulation of knowledge, developments regarding future school education environments are stressing the importance of the utilization of knowledge. Accordingly, the focal point of a curriculum must seek to overcome the narrow-minded past of traditional syllabi or written study plans and to focus on providing learners with the ability to develop knowledge selection and utilization skills. In this context, key competencies are becoming of profound interest both domestically and internationally as a critical aspect of education reform and curriculum innovation.

In order to meet these concerns, the Republic of Korea has begun to consider the possibilities of a competency-based curriculum and has made various efforts in this direction. However, the majority of ideas and arguments regarding a competency-based curriculum still remain as a mere discourse and have yet to demonstrate how key competencies can be developed by learners through a school curriculum. Research conducted in Korea on competency-based curriculum mainly covers its theoretical aspects, governmental measures aimed at integrating key competencies in national curriculum documents, and analyses of experiences in other countries. Although these studies may help in highlighting the new role of a school curriculum, they also have significant limitations as it is still difficult to demonstrate (i) how a competency-based curriculum can be successfully and effectively implemented in schools beyond proclamations and rhetorical discourses, (ii) what a competency-based curriculum is or looks like, and (iii) how it differs from the traditional curriculum and classroom teaching.

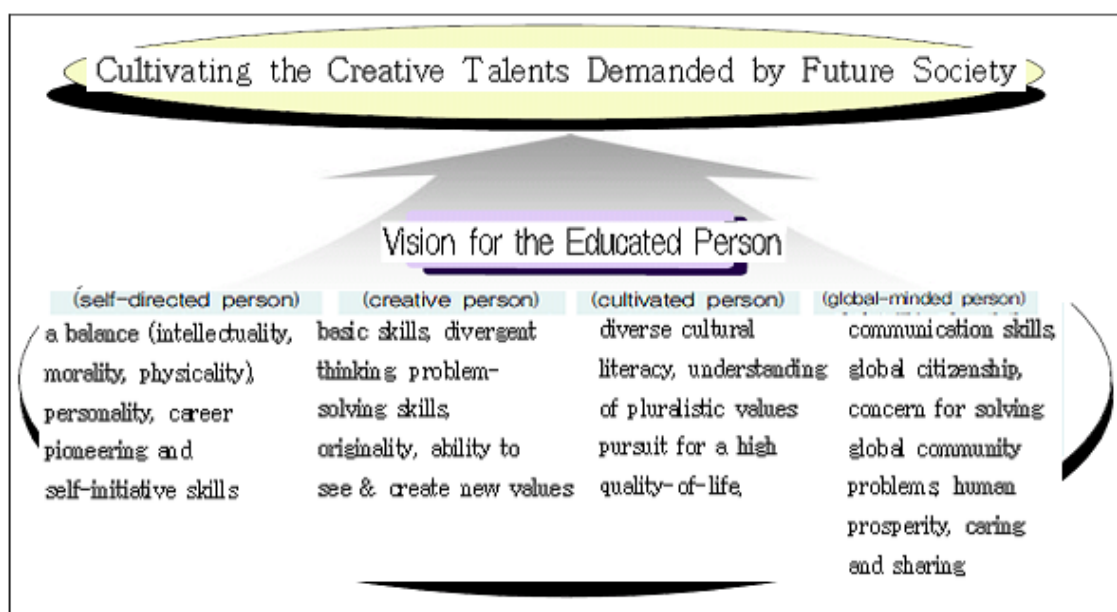
Within this context, the Korean Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE) plays a leading role in spearheading research, promoting discussions, and accumulating research findings regarding key competencies. For example, studies carried out in 2007 stimulated full-fledged discussions on key competencies by drawing out definitions, criteria, and primary domains. In 2008, the key competencies needed were identified based on the outlook of Korea's future job market and lifelong education environment. At that time, it was anticipated that a Korean citizen would need to develop the following ten key competencies for the society of the future: creativity; problem-solving skills; communication skills; citizenship; interpersonal skills; basic learning skills; understanding of the international community and cultures; information processing skills; self-management skills; and career development skills. Hence, in 2009 the focus on key

competencies as a foundation for curriculum development at the primary and secondary level marked a meaningful step in education reform.

Attention to key competencies is also given at the policy level. In August 2007, the Presidential Committee on Education Innovation proposed discarding the knowledge-based curriculum and adopting a competency-based curriculum in the document titled *Future Innovation and Education Strategies*. In 2008, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology referred to the importance of a competency-based curriculum that would cater to the needs of the future society, as one of the major national issues. Thereafter, in the 2009 Revised Curriculum key competencies were taken into account from the early stages of its development.

The *Vision for the Educated Person* partially reflected in the 2009 Revised Curriculum establishes the vision of a ‘global creative person’ who should possess key competencies such as self-respect and self-understanding, communication, creativity, logic, problem-solving, citizenship, cultural sensitivity, and leadership. Under the ideal of *Hongik-Ingan* (e.g. actions that benefit the universal welfare of humankind – the founding spirit of the first kingdom in Korean history), the *Vision for the Educated Person* under the 2009 Revised Curriculum refers to the self-directed, creative, cultivated, and global-minded person as shown in the figure below.

Figure 1: The *Vision for the Educated Person* in the 2009 Revised Curriculum



For example, the self-directed person has a balanced personality (intellectually, morally and physically), career pioneering skills, and self-initiative skills. Being a creative person implies having basic skills, divergent thinking, problem-solving skills, originality, and the ability to see and create new values. The cultivated person has qualities such as diverse cultural literacy, an understanding of pluralistic values, and pursuit for a high quality of life. Being a global-minded person implies having communication skills, global citizenship, a concern for solving global community problems, human prosperity, and caring and sharing. However, the above are only ‘implications’ and no explicit relationship between the *Vision for the*

Educated Person and key competencies is illustrated within the guidelines of the general curriculum.

A look at the goals that are proposed within the 2009 Revised Curriculum reveals a number of elements that either directly or indirectly include key competencies. Regarding the expected outcomes of elementary (primary) education, problem-solving skills are included in section 2, where it is stated "identifying problems in both learning and life, and cultivating basic learning skills to solve such problems [...]"; a reference to competencies such as communication and collaboration can be found in section 4, where it is stated "learning to express a variety of thoughts and experiences and developing feelings of empathy and caring." Other expected outcomes and contents only indirectly relate to competencies. Ultimately, in terms of key competencies the expected outcomes of primary education level include problem-solving skills, communication skills, and cooperation or collaboration skills.

Concerning the expected outcomes at the secondary education level (middle and high school), the key competencies that emerge throughout the 2009 Revised Curriculum are shown in the Table below.

Table 1: The proposed key competencies within the 2009 Revised Curriculum

Elementary level	Middle school level	High school level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦problem-solving skills ◦communication skills ◦cooperation skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦career inquiry skills ◦basic learning skills ◦problem-solving skills ◦creative skills ◦communication skills ◦citizenship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦career development skills ◦self-directed learning ability ◦critical thinking skills ◦creative skills ◦social responsibility

The above indicates that the educational goals at each school level and the *Vision for the Educated Person* in the 2009 Revised Curriculum are based on competencies to a significant degree. In other words, according to the general guidelines the Revised Curriculum is expected to equip learners (or members of society) with the "required knowledge, skills, and attitudes to efficiently or rationally solve various phenomena or problems", which are key competencies needed in the future society. However, a competency-based curriculum reform that goes beyond the mere vision or educational goals to be translated into the actual subjects and syllabi has not been fully implemented, and the focus on key competencies has not yet reached the dimension of a full-scale reform.

In order to actively respond to social changes and prepare for curriculum reform of the future, KICE continues research on key competencies. Particular attention is paid to the fact that despite previous studies providing an important theoretical basis and a range of practical implications, a curriculum with tangible improvements was not made available. Thus, KICE research focuses on providing a more specific and substantiated curriculum improvement plan.

For example, the main purpose of the study on the *Design of the Competency-based Curriculum for the Future Society* carried out in 2012 is to ensure that key competencies are included in the national primary and secondary school curricula in order to actively respond to the current transition toward a knowledge-based society. This study provides an outlook on the anticipated social changes, useful not only for a discussion on educational demands but also to highlight the need of developing a curriculum that cultivates key competencies. The study also discusses how to manage future prospects of social change or future educational needs caused by the impact of mega-trends through key or core competencies. Through various research procedures, it has been possible to organize key competencies into three general categories, namely (i) character competence, (ii) intellectual competence, and (iii) social competence, along with their definitions, necessity, feasibility, and characteristics. Finally, suggestions were made on the most suitable ways to foster key competencies in the curriculum and improve the national curriculum documents.

The 2012 study found that a competency-based curriculum is not necessarily in conflict with the existing national curriculum and that subjects continue to provide a critical path in promoting the acquisition of key competencies. What seems to consistently appear throughout almost all the leading international experiences of a curriculum based on key competencies is that these initiatives are not necessarily centered on an overall reform of the existing discipline-based curriculum. Rather, they seem to respect the unique system of each subject and promote various measures aimed at connecting and practicing key competencies across those different systems. However, this does not imply that there is no need to change the existing curriculum, and thus the 2012 study recommended modifying the actual educational goals of the different subjects. In other words, there is a shift away from the viewpoint that a subject must be taught simply because it holds value in itself to the perception that the subject should be taught because it supports the development of key competencies. Such shifting perspective inevitably suggests that improvements are needed particularly with regard to developing methods that foster key competencies.

Another essential aspect related to a competency-based curriculum that must be taken into account is the need to change the teaching and learning process and assessment systems. Thus, although efforts to change the structure of the intended curriculum are important, the process of innovation for school implementation is also emphasized. In other words, key competencies can only be achieved when innovative modifications to teaching, learning, and evaluation methods supporting the changes introduced in the curriculum documents are implemented and attained. Ultimately, for a curriculum that is intended to successfully develop key competencies efforts must not only be limited to the curriculum documents as it is critical to ensure that the actual teaching and learning process and evaluation methods are aligned with this focus. Thus, in designing a competency-based curriculum, providing a coherent and comprehensive plan for practical implementation with regard to teaching, learning, and evaluation is extremely important. Research carried out in 2013 investigated ways to develop such an alignment between a competency-based curriculum, teaching and learning, and evaluation methods.

Curriculum autonomy policies

Traditionally, the Republic of Korea has had a centralized system of education. Entering into the 1990s this approach began to change by moving away from the conventional goal of unity in the pursuit of diversity.

In September 1992, following an approach of decentralization of curriculum decisions, the 6th curriculum introduced the idea of a school-based curriculum for the first time in the country. Accordingly, the distribution of functions and roles among the state, offices of education and individual schools concerning curriculum implementation was revised, with metropolitan and provincial offices of education in charge of developing implementation guidelines, and local offices of education providing supervisory guidelines. The emphasis was put on 'curriculum localization' within the general framework of the national curriculum in order to take into account the characteristics of local communities and schools in sections related to educational contents and methods.

The 7th curriculum enacted in December 1997 states that the curriculum should not only reflect common features at the national level but also the differences across districts and schools, providing a foundation that further expands the idea of curriculum development at the school level. As a result, schools were asked to move away from their previous passive role of simply implementing the national curriculum defined at the central level and to come up with and implement a curriculum with distinct features at the school level. Two main measures were implemented, namely the introduction and expansion of 'optional activities' and the integration of elective programmes.

Optional activities cater to the various interests, aptitudes and needs of students and complement educational activities offered through subject-based and extracurricular activities. They are classified as subject-related optional activities and creative optional activities. Subject-related optional activities focus on subjects in the elective curriculum included in the national common core curriculum. Creative optional activities are for the purpose of education beyond the course of study and self-directed learning reflecting the interests and needs of individual students. General guidelines were defined at the national level, while decisions concerning goals, contents, teaching and learning methods, and evaluation regarding the curriculum of optional activities were left to the schools in light of the local conditions and students' and parents' wishes along with the characteristics of the region. Electives are to be offered to meet the diverse individual interests and needs of students. This system is organized and operated during the second and third years of high school education. Within this two-year period, a total of 136 units out of the 144 required units are managed as electives except for the eight units assigned to extracurricular activities.

Additional measures to substantially expand operational curriculum autonomy of individual schools were put in place within the framework of the 2007 Revised Curriculum (Notice of 28 February 2007). In particular, level-differentiated instruction has been encouraged in order to better respond to individual differences in student

abilities, aptitudes, needs, and interests. There are two forms: a step-by-step curriculum and an advanced complementary curriculum. In the case of the step-by-step curriculum, the learning content is divided into different stages of difficulty, allowing learners to progress at their own pace. In contrast, the advanced complementary curriculum is organized by grade level and differs in the depth and volume of learning, depending on the student's learning ability. The basic content of this curriculum is set on the minimum standards of the requirement. This curriculum further expands the content for students who have achieved those standards, while providing supplementary learning with the core concepts and knowledge of the basic contents for those who fall short of the minimum requirements. In addition, an intensive course programme has been introduced that allows students, upon agreement of the principal, to complete the required hours allocated to a subject by taking an intensive course. This system allows the school to allocate the number of hours to a subject by a specific term or year according to the local circumstances or the nature of the subjects.

Another important change was introduced through the curriculum autonomy measures of the School-Based Management Plan for Promoting School Autonomy released on 11 June 2009. This measure was part of the curriculum reform and expanding operational autonomy efforts that the new government had designated as a new project. Measures to expand curriculum reform and operational autonomy were set in order to allow schools to implement a curriculum featuring distinct characteristics according to the specific conditions of their districts, reduce the burden of student learning, and maximize the effectiveness of education. One of these measures allows school to adjust instructional hours within 20% of the respective subject (cluster) – up to 35% in the case of autonomous schools and designated high schools. Thus, schools can strengthen a well-rounded education by increasing hours for music, art, and physical education or decide to increase the number of hours allocated to certain subjects in the case of low achieving students. Another measure will allow for subjects like music, art and ethics that are assigned one hour per week to be taken more intensively (e.g. two weekly hours). In the case of practical subjects, it is expected that this approach will enhance learning and reduce the number of tests. The integration of optional and extracurricular activities is another measure. School autonomy has been limited by the redundancy and segmentation between these two sub-areas since the introduction of school discretionary hours within the 6th curriculum, while the need for integration has constantly been brought up. Students and parents can choose desired subjects, and use time for further supplementary learning or community service activities, depending on individual needs. Concerning high schools, these are allowed to provide various elective courses according to the demands of students, parents, and the local conditions. High schools are also allowed to organize subject offerings in a timeline that considers the effectiveness of requirement completion, learner aptitudes, career interests, and college admissions. Furthermore, the elimination of division between general and supplementary electives will allow for more options to be taken according to student interests and needs; following the same concept of subject clusters, students will have the option of taking either a general or a supplementary elective within the clusters.

Most of the curriculum autonomy measures of June 2009 are reflected in the 2009 Revised Curriculum – the latest revision of the national curriculum. In addition,

it also integrates the concept of grade clusters and subject clusters and the creation of autonomous school courses. Grade clusters allow the changeover from assigning subject hours according to grades, to proposing subject hours according to grade clusters. As the hours of subject clusters are proposed by school districts, various methods of class/group organization, i.e. the operation of non-graded or multi-graded systems, become easier. The ten subjects of the common curriculum (Korean, ethics, mathematics, social studies, science, music, art, physical education, technology and home economics, and English) are regrouped into 7-8 subject areas according to the relevance of their educational goals, teaching methods, etc. Finally, high schools are given the autonomy to organize and operate autonomous school courses within 64 units taking into account student aptitudes and career choices.

Recently, the curriculum autonomy approach is creating a number of uncertainties and concerns, mainly due to the strong promotion of school autonomy and the diverse policies endorsed by the previous government. The curriculum autonomy policy began to stand out when it was confirmed in the announcement of Lee Myung-bak administration's strategies and agenda made on 7 October 2008. The curriculum autonomy plan of June 2009 and the 2009 Revised Curriculum can be seen as an extension of these government strategies and have recently had a direct impact on schools across the country.

Obviously, curriculum autonomy is not something that has suddenly appeared during the current administration. As mentioned, curriculum autonomy dates back to the 6th curriculum of 1992. In the wake of the decentralization policy, scholarly and scientific debate came alongside the policies. Discussions around school-centered, school-based, and school-level curriculum development mainly concentrated on the idea of giving to schools and teachers an increased responsibility regarding the curriculum development process – enhancing the role of teachers and curriculum models and emphasizing the need of securing autonomy. Since then, while school autonomy has constantly been promoted through education reform and curriculum revision, research has also been conducted to uncover the demand for and actual reality of curriculum autonomy.

Starting from the 6th curriculum, the curriculum autonomy policy has constantly been promoted, continuing on through the 7th curriculum, the 2007 Revised Curriculum, the curriculum autonomy plan of June 2009, and the 2009 Revised Curriculum. In addition, the school-based curriculum and teacher education, discussed in terms of curriculum autonomy, have been the major subjects of debate during this time period. However, twenty years after curriculum autonomy was advocated for the first time, it still appears to remain far from current school practice.

In fact, autonomy measures contemplated in the curriculum autonomy plan and the 2009 Revised Curriculum have been negatively received by school teachers to a significant degree. To be fair, the implementation of a new curriculum always needs a certain amount of time for adaptation and trial and error. The frustration that comes with any change is natural. However, despite the fact that there has been an emphasis on curriculum autonomy policies for a long period of time, its trial and errors, frustration and negative feedback remain problematic.

Curriculum autonomy policies have a controlling quality in terms of the teachers' curriculum activities, and such cases can be identified in many parts of the policies that have been adopted in the past. For example, within the 6th curriculum, the key term was 'decentralization'. Aiming at improving the previous system where all decisions regarding curriculum were taken at the national level, the decentralization developed a system of distributed decision-making among the state, local regions and schools. In order to support curriculum decision-making processes at the local regional level, the metropolitan and provincial offices of education were ordered to organize and operate their curriculum. In addition, local offices of education within the framework of the 7th curriculum were asked to develop and supply practice-centered supervisory guidelines.

However, despite the original intentions this idea resulted in merely providing another system of controlling the curriculum of individual schools. Also, analysis showed that no difference existed between the state-level guidelines and the practice-centered supervisory guidelines of the local offices and that a majority of teachers felt that the guidelines were not useful. Eventually, the low effectiveness of these guidelines led to their removal when the time came for the 2009 revisions. However, in the 2009 Revised Curriculum, the section 'Support from the Offices of Education' states that the metropolitan and provincial offices of education are expected to continue organizing and operating their curriculum, while they continue designing and disseminating their supervisory guidelines.

The main issue regarding curriculum autonomy policies in the Republic of Korea is that 'autonomy' is perceived as limited and not full-fledged, and teachers tend to find it difficult to accept the autonomy proposed in these policies as *true* autonomy.

'Optional activities', viewed as the illustrative example of school-based curriculum development in the country, were introduced in the primary education curriculum through the 6th curriculum and expanded throughout all grade levels by the 7th curriculum. Optional activities are a typical example of limited autonomy in the curriculum because although this domain is presented as increasing autonomy, its detailed and restricted framework gives little autonomy to teachers. Particularly in the case of the 7th curriculum, in which there is a division between the subject-related optional activities and creative optional activities, the latter are further segmented into self-directed learning and co-curricular activities. In addition, each domain is to organize and operate within the specific amount of hours allocated. As a result, optional activities have been criticized for limiting the autonomy of teachers, and in the 2007 Revised Curriculum, improvements to the detailed framework within optional activities were introduced so that schools were allowed to integrate optional activities and extracurricular activities according to their specific needs. Then in the 2009 revisions, optional activities and extracurricular activities were integrated together as 'creative experiential activities,' allowing for more flexible autonomy by not allocating a specific number of hours to each activity. In this sense, the 2009 revisions can be looked upon as a step forward in autonomy measures in comparison with the 7th curriculum and 2007 revisions.

Considerable efforts have been made to reduce the regulatory functions of the national curriculum and expand teachers' autonomy through curriculum

autonomy policies. It is also true that some perceived limitations have been improved to a certain degree through revisions such as the 'creative experiential activities'. However, most of the organizational and implementation plans of the national curriculum still provide limited autonomy; despite the measures introduced, organizing and implementing the curriculum must be in accordance with the regulations issued by the metropolitan and provincial offices of education. For example, regarding the offering of a new middle school elective, regulations state that "schools, if necessary, can offer new elective courses. These courses must be in accordance with the organization and implementation regulations of the metropolitan and provincial offices of education and require taking the necessary steps in advance."

Cases of limited autonomy can be found especially within the high school curriculum. For example, while new courses – including the utilization of the community learning center, advanced placement courses and college courses with an internationally recognized curriculum, general high school vocational courses, high school field trips catering to professional education, and courses not specified in the national curriculum – are nominally viewed as a reflection of school autonomy, they must adhere to the guidelines of the metropolitan and provincial offices of education. In addition, in the 2009 Revised Curriculum intensive course offering and the policy of permitting schools to adjust classroom hours within 20% of respective subjects, both proposed as school autonomy programmes, are presented within frameworks providing limited autonomy. In primary and middle schools, physical education, music, and the arts were excluded from the policy, and physical education was excluded from intensive course taking as well. Thus, although autonomy policies were implemented, exceptions and conditions within their guidelines ultimately resulted in limiting the preconized autonomy.

The implementation of the national curriculum in the Republic of Korea is ensured through curriculum revisions and the instructions issued by the Ministry of Education. The latter are acts of the Minister of Education that must be enforced in individual schools as stipulated in the regulations of Article 23 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which states that the school is in charge of implementing the curriculum and that the Minister of Education takes decisions concerning curriculum standards and contents. The curriculum autonomy policy was also applied to individual schools in accordance with the above. This can be perceived as a top-down approach where schools are obliged to adhere to and implement policies defined at the central level. Therefore, strictly speaking, rather than allowing teachers to take autonomous decisions concerning the curriculum, these measures make teachers responsible for adhering to autonomy policies and implementing them. In the end, curriculum autonomy appears to be imposed and compulsory, and rather than stimulating innovation and creativity in curriculum implementation, this kind of 'forced' autonomy has not produced the expected changes. In many cases teachers and individual schools have tended to simply resort to the previous curriculum. An example of this is the autonomy set for optional activities or intense courses that were expanded and offered within the 7th curriculum.

As curriculum autonomy is a means of empowering individual schools with regards to curriculum implementation, one may presume that teachers are in favour of such a policy. However, from the perspective of teachers that are forced to accept

and implement it, this policy seems paradoxical because it gives autonomy to teachers in a compulsory way. Due to the legally binding nature of the autonomy policies, teachers remain to a large extent confined to their traditional role of passive implementers of decisions taken at the central level, and they tend to show just a formal acceptance of these policies without a high degree of engagement.

While the demand for curriculum autonomy is very high, curriculum autonomy as a policy measure often receives little empathetic acceptance as there seems to be a gap between expectations and the reality within schools. Various problems cited by teachers relate to content reorganization (regarding the policy of permitting schools to adjust classroom hours within 20% of respective subjects), credit transfers, evaluation (regarding the intensive course programmes), as well as subject selection and time allocation. Furthermore, the perception that autonomy policies tend to result in conflicts between teachers, additional workload and increased teaching burden, continues to spread.

The effective implementation of curriculum autonomy policies at the school level requires teacher engagement and support. For this to happen, the first step is to define policies that are based on the demands and needs of the schools. The Republic of Korea has moved in the direction of curriculum decentralization and deregulation focusing on autonomy policy measures taken at the central level. Such curriculum autonomy policies tend to lack the sense of ownership that teachers need when it comes to translating these policies into school practice. Thus, it is essential to ensure that teachers feel that they have control or ownership over curriculum autonomy policies and are fully convinced that these policies meet the actual demands and needs of the schools.

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