



# The developmental history of labor education in South Korea from a sociopolitical and economic perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Although there is a considerable body of research regarding the relationships between the sociopolitical and economic transition and its implications for the education system in South Korea, there is little known about how sociopolitical and economic factors affect labor education practice in South Korea. The premise of the study is that the development of labor education is driven not only by workers' needs but also by the state's policy to increase productivity while keeping the labor movement and political expression under control. Since many educators often overlook the importance of labor education by excluding it from adult education, very few studies have been conducted to identify the relationship between sociopolitical and economic factors and labor education in South Korea. The purpose of the study is thus to examine the effect of particular combinations of social, political, and economic forces on the development and expansion of labor education in South Korea during the period between the 1960s and the 1990s. The results of the study can be compared with studies of other countries that underwent a similar pattern of political and economic transformation.

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## 1. Introduction

To understand more fully the reasons behind a certain type of educational expansion and its role in society, we need to examine not only the educational context but also the sociopolitical and economic context because education always operates in some group's interests (Sandlin, 2000, p. 290). Furthermore, the failure to recognize that knowledge is inseparable from power leads to the mistaken belief that it is possible to offer neutral or objective knowledge (Clark, 1983). Therefore, it is important to understand how social context under a specific political regime is related to a certain type of educational implementation and expansion.

The current socioeconomic and political climate in major industrialized countries is having a dramatic effect on union membership, union bargaining power, and the public perception of, and attitudes toward, organized labor (Nesbit, 2003). In Asia, trade unions are one of the only means to organize labor forces so they can reach their optimum production potential (ILO, 2004a). Korea has a long history of conflict-oriented industrial relations, with labor and management often clashing (Lee, 2003). Throughout this history, labor–management relations in Korean industries

have been characterized by offensive and hostile actions in pursuing rights and interests. According to the Korean Labour and Society Institute (KLSI), less than half of the companies surveyed had a collective bargaining process; the absence of collective bargaining contributes to the tense relations between workers and management (2001).

Labor–management cooperation is a key to workplaces acquiring new technology in an increasingly competitive global market. However, labor unions have been left out of the drafting and implementation of labor education policy, which could severely curtail its long-term effectiveness in South Korea (ILO, 2004a). Likewise, since the environment surrounding Korean industries is unique, labor education has greater implications for workplaces in that country than for workplaces in other countries. Labor education can be an important factor not only in establishing stable industrial relations but also in providing lifelong educational opportunities for workers in South Korea.

## 2. Definitions of labor education

In the context of adult education, there has been an increasing emphasis placed on worker and workplace learning in the field (Dawson, 2005). In the rapidly changing workplace, workers suffer from a deficit of necessary skills and knowledge, which must be rectified by a greater amount of education and training (Kim, 2004a,b). Today, the industrial economy is changing into a knowledge economy based on science and technology. Such changes lead us to the context of lifelong education, in which more

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and more education is needed in most workplaces. Even though there are many definitions of labor education, the education workers receive in relation to their jobs is most often called labor education. Labor education has contributed not only to the development of labor–management relationships but also to the expansion of worker education into a wide variety of education fields. This education has induced changes in workers' values and attitudes toward labor and played a role in enhancing the performance of vocational education.

According to Robinson (1969), labor education is used to describe all types of education for adult workers. Similarly, Hong (2000) defined labor education as systematically organized behavior to meet educational needs for humanization, which is an objective of labor unions, as well as the self-actualization needs of workers. Labor education can be defined as education for workers led by various educational providers, such as trade unions, private enterprises, universities, and governments (Kim, 1994). Contrary to many of the previous studies that defined labor education as including all kinds of education for workers (Hong, 2000; Kim, 1997; Oh, 2007; Robinson, 1969), Spencer (2002) stated that labor education is the most important contemporary and central form of non-vocational adult education available to workers, frequently attracting more participants than other non-vocational adult education formats. Spencer (2002) also stated that the purpose of labor education is to prepare and train union members to play an active role in the union and to educate activists and members about union policies and changes in the union environment. According to Nesbit (2003), labor education can be defined as a tool of transformation and innovation for union staff training and leadership development to respond effectively to the rapidly changing world. Similarly, Nissen (2000) argued that labor education plays a role in helping unions organize.

On the other hand, some scholars have used the term workers' education as a separate category that involves education that develops social awareness and works to achieve social justice through social movement (Son, 1989). Similarly, for Hellyer and Schulman (1989), workers' education develops critical awareness and social action, not the "personal development and job skills" focus of human resource development (HRD). Also, Salt et al. (2000) pointed out that workers' education has often been seen by workers and their organizations as a means by which they can advance their interests in the class struggle with their employers. However, Robinson (1969) argued that workers' education is used to describe educational programs for workers run by non-union organizations in subjects related to general educational advancement and citizenship. As can be seen by this lack of agreement among scholars, the concepts of labor education and workers' education are still developing in a rapidly transforming society.

In South Korea, labor education seems to have a broader meaning than workers' education, which mainly focuses on education related to labor and labor–management relations provided by labor unions. According to Ahn (2003), labor education can be defined narrowly as a systematic attempt to assist union members' roles and activities for the realization of the purpose of the trade union and to meet their educational demands. However, there is blurring of these terms in adult education in South Korea. Workers' education and labor education are not mutually exclusive; the terms are often used interchangeably to refer to either workers' education or a work-related form of education. Labor education is intended to inform workers about their rights and social responsibilities, which ultimately will enable them to achieve social justice for themselves; workers' education is associated with raising the awareness of workers about these issues and labor activities (Son, 1989).

As Hong (2000) pointed out, labor education has the following meaning in modern society: it is a way to develop the workers' ability to express opinions and enjoy a creative life; it is also a

major instrument of HRD and industrial relations. However, labor education has often been perceived as ideological education to evoke union consciousness and political awareness among workers, rather than as part of state-sponsored adult education. This can be illustrated by the fact that in the Lifelong Education Law Amendment (2007) a labor education provision was not included.

With the introduction of neoliberal globalization and economic restructuring, labor education in South Korea has become widely perceived and increasingly promoted as a major cooperative effort to improve overall workplace conditions not only for workers' lives but also for productivity and global competitiveness. Adult education in South Korea has a broad meaning for educators and adult learners, which includes lifelong education, vocational training, and HRD. Under the umbrella of adult education, labor education should be broadly understood as a term that includes a broad range of education related to labor, such as industrial education, corporate education, and vocational training (Oh, 2007).

In this study, we prefer to use the terminology "labor education" to include a broad range of work-related training, except for workers' education as defined previously.

### 3. Theories of the state and educational expansion

Social policy has been defined as the attempt to use education to solve social problems, influence social structures, and improve social conditions. Policy implementation involves degrees of state intervention in people's lives – intervention that may be viewed as "well fare" by some or unjustified "ill fare" by others (Quigley, 1993), especially in the area of education. Kim (2004a,b) argued that we should consider how workers learn in a certain political, economic, and cultural environment where much of the information and knowledge could be mediated by the government or the corporation. Such an analysis can advance the theory of educational expansion by specifying the configuration of political forces that contribute to particular educational outcomes.

Katz and Kahn (1978) listed the social, political, and economic environments as significant subgroups of the educational policy environment. Griffin (1987) identified three approaches to educational policy: market model, progressive liberal/welfare model, and social control model. Jarvis (1993) developed four models of the relationship between education and social policy by splitting Griffin's middle category in two: progressive liberalism and welfare. Jarvis (1993) identified the relationship between the state and adult education and argued that adult education might be viewed as an instrument of state policy. In the market model, education was viewed as a commodity. In the progressive liberal model, education was viewed as enriching individuals. In the welfare model, education was viewed as correcting social injustices. From the perspective of the social control model, policy factors of social control were fundamental to education, most apparently in the provision of lifelong learning programs (Jarvis, 2004).

Lee (1992) argued that industrialization policy, social movements, and the state had a strong impact on labor policies in South Korea. Kim (1998a,b) analyzed the environment of labor education policy in South Korea from a sociological standpoint. He viewed the environment from the perspective of ideological, political, economic, and social factors.

Spencer (2002) noted that there has been a lack of serious attention to labor education's history, contributions to adult education, and its future role as a component of adult education. Indeed, educational researchers have rarely paid attention to labor education compared to other educational fields in South Korea. For these reasons, few studies have attempted to examine the

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