



## Alternative Schools in Korea

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### Abstract

This study is a historical description and also a system analysis of the alternative schools in Korea as a phenomenon. Describing this special educational issue, the study is divided into two main parts: historical background of alternative schools, presenting the related teacher movements and challenges, also the way of its institutionalization; and the current situation. The most relatable part of the study in today's educational transformation is how a new educational approach can be realized in a traditional educational system, moreover, how can achieve even a more diversified educational system. The present challenges, such as financing and maintaining are also discussed in the paper.

**Keywords:** after school program, Korean education, public education, care activities

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## **I. Prologue**

The intention of education is not in stuffing children with teaching materials from without, but in accepting their individuality and guiding them to lead their own independent lives (Giseop Chung, 2002). As such, educational institutions should practice learner-oriented teachings, but the educational system has far seceded from the very essence of education, only deliberating on shaping the students best fitted to the times. The alternative education movement was instigated to explore separate teaching and learning approaches from that offered by the conventional educational system.

The concept of alternative education is defined by many: 1. new educational practices to let live true life within one's abilities (Heedong Kim at al., 1999); 2. an education that remedies the ills of systematic education and directs to social reform (Seongbo Sim, 1998); and 3. sustainable value orientation, smaller schools rooted in regional societies, restoration of students to their original state, education through changes, and education infused in life (Byeongheon Ko, 1998). The Ministry of Education (2014) defines alternative education an education that argues against the limits of and that searches for approaches to redirect from the current educational system and defines an alternative school as a school that emphasizes learner-oriented non-standardized educational curriculum and diversified teachings that opt for nature-friendly lifestyle and a sense of community. Thus, the concept of alternative education is not a fixed but an open one, and the education strives to accommodate extensive understanding of education and a wide spectrum of attempts (Jonghwa Im, 1999).

In Korea, alternative education movement was initiated as we become aware of the fact that our education system was the cause of various problems such as dehumanization, alienation and grievance as we depended on skill- and competence-based education founded on the values of the industrialization (Yeonggeun Jeong at al., 2002). Such movements emerged worldwide since the 1970's and became known in Korea after mid-1990. Embarked on to overcome the problems and constraints posed by standardized public education system fitted to mass production systems of industrialization and to take on new modernized educational approaches, this movement was an education reformation movement from below started by the people who discerned the need for a change.

With the purpose of finding inner values of men which can be easily overlooked in the score- and entry examination-oriented education system, early stage of alternative education in Korea began as small gatherings of teachers and students trying diversified teaching and learning techniques on weekends and during vacations. These informal associations soon took form of schools outside the national educational system, and some returned back into the system, developing into various types of schools. Alternative schools are recognized as one of school systems in Korea.

In this paper, we first examine the formation and course of expansion of alternative education movement, which later in time, became the cornerstone of the eventual establishments of alternative schools in Korea, ascertain the types and states of alternative schools as of 2015, and sort out any ongoing issues relevant to the topic.

## **II. Formation and Development of Alternative Education Movement**

### **1. The Formation**

In Korea, the alternative education movement became active in the early 1990's. The movement had been around since long before, but it was only then when various kinds of alternative schools emerged and built momentum. There was a chain of education-related events which led to this phenomenon; we'll analyze the background of the formation of alternative education by classifying the events into 4 elements.

#### *1) Educational Practices of Small Groups*

The first factor which became the background of the formation of alternative education system was the voluntary and practical challenges made by the small teacher-student gatherings that wanted to make changes. They are organized in chronological order.

**Prior to 1970** – Long before the movement became lively, Poolmoo School was founded in Hongseong-gun, Chungnam Province in 1958. The school opted for 'living in company with the common people' and offered whole-person education in rural life settings, far away from the metropolis lifestyles filled with competition and thirst for success. Providing ecological education programs and implementing sense of community, Poolmoo School was the very first pioneer of Korean alternative education. It is Poolmoo's 57th anniversary this year, and the school had made available inspirations and practicable ideas (Alternative Education, 2008).

**1970's** – Korea joined the ranks of industrialization in 1960's, and since then, realized a miraculous economic growth known as the 'Miracle of Hangang(River)'. The education system at this time period was mostly government-controlled, and as such, the objective and direction of education was led toward quantitative growth compliant with the rapid economic growth. Therefore, toward the end of 1970's, it was only natural that people began to contemplate the genuine nature of education, followed by reflectivist approaches to transform the modern school system. The most illustrative example is the 'People's Education Movement', which was a part of awareness education that began among the common people for laborers and farmers. This humble movement developed into night school, citizens' education, study room for children with low-income working parents movements(Alternative Education, 2008), and later expanded to 'Adolescent Shelters', 'Urban Alternative Schools', and 'Alternative Schools for Elementary School Students After Classes' that provided educational opportunities for the deschooled students.

**1980's** – Many developments had challenged to free children from the uniform rote learning approach influenced by industrialization. These developments denoted various encampments for firsthand ecological experiences. They offered liberated and diversified educational programs, and toward mid-1980's, took forms of weekend schools and seasonal schools intending for creating wholesome adolescent culture. Specific examples of the movement are 'Another Culture' movement in 1984 and the establishment of 'Free School Moolggo' in 1985. These camp-type programs that oriented on children's self-governing capacity quickly spread across the nation (Alternative Education, 2008), and became the source of inspiration for other abundant alternative education approaches in the 90's.

### *2) The Appearance of Korean Teachers and Educational Workers' Union*

The second element was the appearance of Korean Teachers and Educational Workers' Union (KTEWU). It was institutionalized in 1987 by the teachers and educational workers who contrived to stimulate changes in the school system by presenting the problems with their firsthand understandings. The union aimed for education for humanization, or whole-person education, which led them to widely publicize the seriousness of educational problems. They claimed our system was too examination tests-oriented and remote from the sparkles of the children, and that there were injustice in education system stemming from economic differences. The teachers and educational workers came together to establish independence and professionalism in and bring democratization of education system, and led the students to have independent lives as democratic citizens (Okgyeong Hwang, 1998). Since its legalization in 1999, KTEWU continued to expand the practices of whole-person education in addition to various activities to better educational environment. Some of the teachers in KTEWU played important roles in shaping the alternative schools as they exist now.

### *3) Communal Childcare Campaign*

The third element is Communal Childcare Campaign which took place and expanded rapidly in the early 90's. Communal Childcare Cooperative is founded and run by a specified number of household members with invested capital. Such cooperatives greatly resolved childcare struggles for working parents (Cheolgyu Choi, 2012), most of all concerned about balance with the nature, sense of community, equality, citizen autonomy and other merits of that era. The first communal childcare cooperative was instituted in 1994 when 20 sets of parents concerned with childcare during the day came together to build a childcare center. After 7 years, in 2001, 'San School' was founded from the very groundwork set by the cooperative in Bucheon, Gyeonggi-do. This is the first alternative elementary school in Korea. More alternative elementary schools as well as middle and high schools followed soon after. This campaign was meaningful in the context that parents came forward to put into practice alternative education incorporating naturalism, communitarianism, and equalitarianism

(Alternative Education, 2008). Communal Childcare Campaign was one of important backgrounds of alternative elementary schools.

#### *4) Educationalists' Volition for New Educational Practice*

The fourth and final element is the educationalists' volition for new educational practice. Together with the social alternative education movement that opted for changes in the public education system, the educationalists displayed reflectivist movements. In the early 90's, these educationalists showed new found volition for new educational practices by publishing alternative education magazine. Some of them, in 1996, began alternative education movement based in 'Seoul Peace Education Center'. They first introduced foreign alternative education instances through research studies and literature, published 'Cheoeumcheoreom', an alternative education periodical, organized our merits of alternative education such as 'peace', 'life', 'gender equality', 'body and divinity' among others in teachable context, and led many practical movements including 'Restoration of Small Schools Act', 'Alternative Education Hanmadang', and 'Love of Education Study Room'. Some of these are still managed and run by the educationalist including 'Love of Education Study Room', "School Education Improvement Study Group" and 'Small Schools Solidarity Meeting' (Alternative Education, 2008). Their efforts played large role in settling and legislating alternative education in Korea.

As seen above, the series of alternative education movements, acts, and groups began to form solidarity, and these convergences functioned as the roots of establishment of alternative schools in Korea.

## **2. Development**

### *1) Foundation of Alternative Schools*

As seen above, the alternative education system in Korea had begun to find substitutes for our public education system and seek the possibility of whole-person education. Therefore the movement is not systematization from above, but a voluntary movement from below.

However, early on, these time-limited after school, weekend or seasonal gatherings could not take form of a school. For these movements to accomplish practical and substantial reaching there was a need to make full-time schools. As such, in February of 1995, 47 individuals from 17 alternative education organizations assembled to start a group that aimed for founding a new school; they were called 'Gathering of People Making a New School'. These activists who shared the merit of education that cherished ecologism,, communitarianism, freedom and autonomy, not only, later, gave births to numerous alternative schools, but also founded 'Mindeullae', a medium for the field of alternative education and 'Alternative Education Solidarity', a nationwide assembly (Alternative Education, 2008).

Two years after, in March 1997, Korea's very first full-time alternative school Gandhi Youth School in Sancheon, Gyeongnam Province. Even through many errors, the school maintained its fundamental whole-person education system and provided curriculum centered on 'education of love and affection', 'free education' through community lifestyle, 'rural education', and 'diversified and specialized programs'. On December 1997, Gandhi Youth School was authorized by the Specialized School Program of the government.

As the apprehensions and limitations regarding the current public education system and students in that system failing to adapt and deschooling were raised as social issues, the parents began to take interest in alternative schools. These schools, ultimately, offered a turning point in changing the perception of the school system, and many alternative schools were founded by religious organizations (Eunsook Park, 2005).

## *2) Legislation*

As mentioned in the Formation section, the need for a change in education system set off various alternative school movements and the education society challenged to put into practice these ideology and merits, within the system. In response to the efforts, after thorough and comprehensive reviews, the government began to legislate on alternative education.

Ministry of Education was seeking for preventive measures to deschoolings of students in 1996, and prepared plan for foundation and administration of alternative schools for maladjusted students in 1997. At the end of the same year, the government introduced the concept of Specialized High School, a new type of secondary educational institution, and included alternative schools in its description. The legislation process for alternative school was commencing (Byeongheon Ko, 1997). The small groups of teachers and students, wanting to change the school system, begun to take forms of schools that soon became authorized, and with the legislation, alternative education that used to be outside the education system legally became part of the system, earning opportunity to present a more methodical countermeasures to the problematic public education system.

Around the time Gandhi Youth School acquired government license in 1997, Youngsan High School located in Younggwang, Jeonnam Province also acquired license as a specialized high school. Founded in 1975 as a miscellaneous school, Youngsan High fused the principle of 'Mind Practice' of Won-Buddhism with academic curriculum to nest those students who suffered extreme psychological agony due to bullying and school violence (Nochan Park, 2008). Started by Gandhi and Youngsan, Yangeop, Hwarang, Wongyeong, and Hanbit High Schools were authorized as specialized high schools in 1997. Many more joined the circle since across the nation.

The legislation process of alternative education or alternative schools can be divided into 3 stages. The table below depicts the legislation process described by Junseong Hwang and Hyeyoung Lee in their 2010 paper.

Table 1: Legislation Process of Alternative Education

Stage	Enforcement Decree	Description
1	Enactment of Articles 76 and 91 (Feb. '98) of Enforcement Decree of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act	Emphasis on countermeasure for maladjusted students and diversification of school education. First official acknowledgement of alternative education. Rudimentary level legislation
2	Enactment of Article 60-3 (Mar. '05) and Enforcement Decree (Jun. '07) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act	Alternative school established as an official legal term. Established the rules on the foundation and operation of alternative schools.
	Revision of Articles 60-3 (Nov. '09) of Enforcement Decree of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act	Revisions of 2nd stage enforcement decree concerning support for alternative educational institutions
3	Regulations on the Establishment and Operations of Alternative Schools (Jan. '15) (Presidential Decree No.25840)	Regulations on the establishment and operations of alternative schools in accordance with Article 60-3 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

### 3) Diversification

As the alternative education movement, which began to make changes in the education system, took forms of full-time schools. They were able to provide students more diversified educative experiences, and more importantly, gave opportunities for education to drop-out students again. Also, the legislation process allowed for many authorized forms of alternative schools that focused on alternative education from different aspects. Their functionality not only included providing the general alternative education, but also as trusted-type schools specifically for dropped-out or near-dropout students, and specialized schools that guarantee specialized academic programs. Along with the government’s involvement, religious groups and private groups continued to run unauthorized alternative schools as well. The types and current status of these alternative schools can be seen in the next chapter.

## III. Current Status and Types of Alternative Schools

### 1. Current Status of Alternative Schools

Alternative schools in Korea can be divided into two types: 1. authorized and run by Ministry of Education, and 2. Unauthorized and run by private entities. Authorized alternative schools can be further divided into three types, and they are as follows.

Table 2: Current Status of Alternative Schools in Korea

CAT	Miscellaneous	Authorized		Trusted	Unauthorized
		Specialized			
		Middle School	High School		Civilian-Run
No. of Schools	Total : 24 (Public : 6 / Private : 18)	Total : 12 (Public : 3 / Private : 9)	Total : 24 (Public : 3 / Private : 21)	Total : 199 (Mid-to-Long Term)	Total : 237

Source : Restructure data from Ministry of Education (2014).

The different types of alternative schools as shown above are run slightly differently by their academic programs and administrative intent. The characteristics of schools by their academic programs and administrative intent are described below.

## **2. Characteristics by Type**

### *1) Authorized*

Authorized alternative schools are those that accommodated the condition of providing their students state-level education programs, and they are divided into miscellaneous, specialized, and trusted alternative schools. Schools authorized by Ministry of Education receive financial support, making their tuitions similar to general-type schools, and they are accredited, meaning their education is accepted by the state. By regulation, their academic programs must consist of 30% of state-level curriculum, and the rest 70% may include alternative curriculum of their choices.

#### *(1) Miscellaneous Schools*

Miscellaneous schools are “various educational institutions providing special academic programs, activities and conditions for students who pursue non-conventional approaches offered by standardized schools”(Seoul Educational Regulations No. 628). In other words, miscellaneous schools incorporate all educational institutions that provide regular academic programs outside the basic 6-3-3-4 school system. First introduced in 1997 and officially categorized as Miscellaneous School of Alternative Education, these schools offer experience-based character education as well as education more specifically fitting to individual aptitude and liking for those students who deschooled or searching for a more personalized education.

Within the branch of miscellaneous school, there are a variety of schools run with different objectives. There are job-specific alternative schools that proficiently prepare students for specific fields, Saeteomin schools that help North Korean refugee students to adapt and prepare for lives here, and multi-cultural schools that focus on adaptation to Korean society for students from multi-cultural families. They can be run as separate elementary, middle, or high schools or together, or middle and high schools only.

#### *(2) Specialized Schools*

For specialized schools, there are middle schools and high schools, and they're not just simple alternative schools but those that encourage transformation in fundamental thoughts and formation of merits in this time, and in the social order and the very foundation of school system (Daejung Kang, 2002). After recognizing the significance of diversity in schools, specialized schools were first introduced in 1997 to offer academic programs fitting to aptitudes of students who wish to develop their own special abilities. Most specialized school are boarding schools because of their geographical conditions and accessibility depending on their educational objectives.



The most visible characteristics of these schools is the liberated nature of school administration and organization of courses, with small discussion-based classes (Juyeong Yoon, 2010). Specialized middle schools and high schools each have authority to control respectively 30% and 70% of their academic programs. The common subjects for specialized middle schools are as follows.

Table 3: Specialized Subjects for Specialized Middle Schools

CAT	Common Subjects	Electives	
Specialized Subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Mind Diaries</li> <li>· Ecology and Farming</li> <li>· Expressive Activities (Discussion &amp; Debate, Crafts, Music, Arts, Movies)</li> <li>· Field and Experiential Learning (Mountaineering, Teatism, Sex-Ed, etc)</li> </ul>	Expressive Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Music-Utility Music, Instrumental Ensemble, Korean Traditional Classics &amp; Music</li> <li>· Arts-Wood crafting, Pottery, Art Appreciation</li> <li>· PE-Martial arts, Mountaineering, Leisure Sports</li> <li>· Others-Photography, Theater, Video, etc</li> </ul>
		Exploration	Subject Learning, Graduation Works
		Others	Second Language, Computer Assembly, etc
CAT	Common Subjects	Electives	
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		Exploration	Subject Learning, Graduation Works
		Others	Second Language, Computer Assembly, etc

Source : Alternative Education (2008)

As shown in the table above, the subjects are composed of a variety of fields to stimulate the potential temperaments of all students, and unlike common schools, the students can select subjects of their choices. The key significance of specialized schools is the contribution to diversity and the fact that school subjects were created and managed away from standardized classes.

### (3) Trusted Alternative Schools

Trusted alternative schools were first introduced in 2001 specifically for potential middle school and high school drop-out students for the reasons of maladjustment and others. The Regional Superintendent of Education assigns qualifying standard or alternative schools as trusted alternative schools and trusts students when needed. These schools are controlled by Education Offices of the city or province. Once assigned, these schools are granted with administrative and financial support from the relevant Education Office. The overview of trusted alternative school management can be seen in the table below.

Table 4: Overview of Trusted Alternative School Management

<b>Target Students</b>	Students with special interests in various areas other than those offered by standard middle schools and high schools / Potential dropout students
<b>School Records</b>	School of affiliation
<b>Graduation</b>	Diploma from school of affiliation is offered after completion of selected courses * After trusted duration, students may return to their school of affiliation
<b>Attendance &amp; Grades</b>	School of affiliation accepts the records from trusted schools
<b>Cancellation of Trust</b>	Trust status of students with guidance problems may be cancelled → Processed following regulations of school of affiliation
<b>Application Acceptance</b>	2 times a month throughout the year
<b>Curriculum</b>	Composed of 1/3 state-level standardized subjects and 2/3 alternative subjects for students
<b>Duration</b>	1-year standard / Extension allowed (In response to the request from the student, decided by the heads of trusted school and school of affiliation)

Source: Restructured data from *Alternative Education (2008)*.

As seen above, the curriculum of trusted alternative schools are only composed of 1/3 common standardized subjects and the rest is at the discretion of the students, minimizing the standardized subjects and maximizing subjects selected by the students. Majority of students who were at the brink of deschooling for various reasons are able to overcome their predicaments and have successfully graduated from their respective schools.

## 2) Unauthorized Schools

While various authorized alternative schools appeared after legislation of alternative schools, many unauthorized ones continuously made appearances as well. Unauthorized alternative schools can be divided into 3 types, Suburban, Urban, and Elementary. There are currently about 237 unauthorized schools (Ministry of Education, 2014) run by civilians, often forming self-regulating solidarities for information exchange and other reasons.

**Suburban Alternative Schools**– These schools further free their academic curriculum from specialized schools. Their system is non-graded, and they aim for harmonizing learning and life. Experiences outside of school are important to their viewpoint, and as such, they employ diversified experiential learning opportunities, occupational training for food, clothing and housing as well as vocational training and related internship projects. Small-sized community-learning approach is their most common characteristics.

**Urban Alternative Schools**– Usually these schools have combined formation of middle school and high school. They were built for deschooled students who, for any reasons, cannot attend suburban-type schools or actively want to remain in urban surroundings. Forming tight relationships with various institutions and organizations in the local community, they offer academic programs fully utilizing those resources. In community

settings, the students are able to establish their identity and build confidence as well as foster communication skills. Urban alternative schools are founded with the purpose of fostering their students to become independent and healthy citizens of the society with basic capacities for career paths. Academic programs vary depending on the school's focus. They are mostly located in Seoul.

**Elementary Alternative Schools**– Founded by the ideas of communal childcare, religion, dancing body, and education movement, elementary alternative schools are for elementary school students. Mostly located in the metropolitan area, these schools display diversified forms as they have absolute control over their academic curriculum, but they most commonly focus on freedom, autonomy, equality, human rights, sense of community, and life. Also, elasticity in academic programs as well as daily operations, extremely high participation of parents in academic programs, non-graded system, and project and experiential learning are also common grounds in their school programs. Most elementary alternative schools are inclined to combine elementary and middle school systems, and as such, sometime run as an unified elementary, middle, and high school.

#### **IV. Arguments and Their Issues**

As seen above, the alternative schools in Korea began and developed with social movement for alternative education and settled after legislation as state-recognized education system. In that process, these schools received positive assessments as they attained perceptible achievements in examining the conventional entry examination-oriented education, displaying prospects of diversified school systems, and offering opportunities of education to deschooled or maladjusted students. However, the following issues are still ongoing.

##### ***1) Perception of Alternative Schools***

In the early stages of formation, alternative schools had to be self-sufficient in all aspect of running a school as they were autonomously established schools outside the state education system. With no assistance, financial or otherwise, from the state, the burden, mostly financial, fell to the parents. As such many students from the common masses were not able to attend these schools even if they wanted to. On the other hand, some alternative schools had to strangely experience entry competitions as there were too many students and parents trying to break away from the public education.

Moreover, as these phenomenons became frequent in few schools, they unwillingly develop contrary effect of aristocratic academy in which only the richest could attend. Even though such occurrence was extremely rare among alternative schools, there emerged negative viewpoints of them, judging them to be the symbol of private education. However, such negative notions are diminishing as they became authorized by the Ministry of Education and grew in numbers. Also, more changes in the awareness of these type of schools took place as the government began with financial support

project for unauthorized alternative schools since 2006. There still are some people suggesting negative aspects of these schools.

### ***2) Unaccredited Grades from Unauthorized Alternative Schools***

As illustrated in the Current Status of Alternative Schools, there are many authorized alternative schools as of 2015. However, unauthorized ones are great in numbers, too. The authorized schools grant their graduates diplomas and academic background the state acknowledges, but as this is not the case for the graduates of unauthorized schools, they must take state qualification tests to go onto next level of education or find employment. This burden is unfair to those students. The government is continuously authorizing unauthorized schools, but some of them refuse to enter into the state education system due to their ideology and other reasons. As such recognition of credits from unauthorized schools is still an ongoing issue.

### ***3) Limitations to Academic Curriculum***

As seen in the Types of Alternative Schools, authorized alternative schools are guaranteed absolute control over 70% of their curriculum. The state continues to guarantee their autonomy, and some unit schools are operating independent programs as they see fit. However, a number of high schools have organized college-prep courses in their programs which may impose limitation on running diversified alternative subjects. For this reason, there are voices suggesting more alternative subjects imposed on their academic programs.

## **V. Epilogue**

So far, we have looked into the formation, development, current status and types of alternative schools in Korea as well as the issues at hand. Alternative Education Movement that developed into various forms of social movements converged to take forms of schools, and the legislation brought them into the state education system that settled in as authorized educational institutions receiving state assistance. Currently, there are two types of alternative schools, state-authorized and –supported schools and unauthorized schools run by civilians.

Presently, after 20 years of the first foundation of an alternative school, the autonomous academic curriculum have contributed to attracting positive responses from the parents, elevating reliance and satisfaction in school education. Also, they minimize the number of dropout students arising from various reasons and help those students to bring back interests in school education.

Students who received education from alternative schools are, in general, satisfied with their schools in terms of relationship with teachers, educational programs, classes, facilities and more (Hyeonsu Ko, 2010). Also it can be seen from results of study (Yeonghwa Kim, 2014). The graduates of alternative schools develop their critical mind

and interest, and when faced with specific problems, they lead their lives independently and energetically. It seems the experiences that students undergo in alternative schools have enormous impact on their students.

Alternative schools in Korea still have the works of gradual authorization of unauthorized alternative schools. However, they seem to continuously propose developmental directions in school education.

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