

## **Ladder or bridge? Non-formal education in an era of societal transformation**

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### **Is education a ladder?**

People often believe education serves as a ladder in life. They assume the more education you get, the better life you end up with and the better education you have, the better chance of landing a decent job and climbing the social ladder. Another belief we all have is that education as a ladder should operate in a fair mechanism regardless of economic conditions and social status. It is a fairly well-grounded belief rooted in personal experience. I also have good reasons to conclude so. If I had not earned my Ph.D., nor graduated from a widely admired university, nor attended high school, I would not be here today writing this as who I am. The privilege of being invited to address international events is something that would not even have been dreamed of by my parents, who barely finished elementary school, or my grandparents, who spent their childhood with no knowledge of the existence of state-run schools. It has definitely been thanks to education, or more precisely quality education at length, that I have those benefits. It is, therefore, difficult to deny that education can be a ladder up in our lives. Education can be an appropriate tool to resolve numerous inequalities in a society and to help the vulnerable and marginalized to overcome challenges in their lives. Education is good, and as advocated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to education.

In short, education enables personal development, social progress, and national prosperity. Modern states have been devoted to the ideal that opportunities for education should be afforded to more and more people. UNESCO put forward the idea of “education for all” for the same reason.

The notion of education as a ladder is also deeply ingrained in the minds of modern

South Koreans, who achieved democratization in the face of a decades-long military dictatorship and remarkable economic growth often touted as the Miracle on the Han River. The idea of an education that enables “rags to riches” can resonate with any South Korean. Presidential elections in South Korea often come with a pledge to restore the traditional role of education as a social ladder. A failure of education to act as a social ladder provokes public resentment, and anyone responsible for corruption in the education ladder must be held legally and socially accountable.

Over the past 70 years, most South Koreans received more education than their parents’ generation and landed a better life. Opportunities for education have expanded over time from primary education to lower secondary, and from lower secondary to upper secondary. South Korea’s economy performed exceptionally and high-quality jobs have been created over the same period. During this time, South Koreans, perhaps, internalized the belief that education would provide them with a path to climb the socioeconomic ladder and live a better life in the end.

Is education really a ladder though? Since the late 1960s, the academic world began raising questions and investigating doubts that perhaps we have confused the effects of increased wealth and opportunities as a whole for the effects of the educational ladder. Perhaps our parents’ jobs, their level of education, and their economic status are more important than our own education in deciding our success in life. Perhaps, education is just a tool for reproducing socioeconomic class. And perhaps, although ideally what we wanted was to accomplish “education for all,” everyone has been raised to surrender to the old socioeconomic order. Kim Shin-il summarized the results of this research as follows:

“The flow of research results reveals that education does not play a substantial role in making society equal or unequal. Moreover, family background is often viewed as the pivotal differentiating factor for children’s education. It means that although the social class achieved by the child is the result of education, the education itself is not necessarily a proof of their competence and therefore, not a piece of evidence that it contributes to equality. Yet the fact that family background is a pivotal differentiating factor for

education is an essential matter that requires attention... Regardless of the correlation between education and equal or unequal society, the equal distribution of educational opportunity is indeed a matter of concern."<sup>1</sup>

The common ground in the conclusions that education does not provide an adequate ladder for those of a relatively low socioeconomic class (that it does not contribute to social equality), and that those in high socioeconomic classes leverage education to solidify their status (that it strengthens social inequality) is that the perception of education is confined to school education. With the recognition of the limitations imposed by formal education, the conceptualization of non-formal education started to gain ground around the 1970s. Coombs and Ahmed, who emphasized the importance of non-formal education in building education systems in developing countries, categorized the context of education into the formal context of education carried out in the classrooms of school, the non-formal context of education organized systematically outside of school, and the informal context of learning by individuals through various media.<sup>2</sup> The recognition of the importance of out-of-school education, namely informal and non-formal learning, also grew as the concept of lifelong learning emerged. Lifelong education began to draw attention in 1972 when the UNESCO Faure report proposed lifelong education as the foundation for educational reform in each country. The term 'lifelong education' embraces both the aspect that education continues across a person's lifespan from cradle to grave, and the aspect that education takes place in all sectors of society, including schools. Lifelong education, particularly from the latter point of view, can be defined as a concept encompassing informal education and non-formal education (or learning) along with formal education. The concept particularly highlights the non-formal education of adults past school-age and the non-formal education of school-age students happening outside of school.

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Shin-il (2015), *Sociology of Education* (5<sup>th</sup> edition), Kyoyook Book, p.299

<sup>2</sup> Coombs, P. H., & Ahmed, M. (1974). *Attacking rural poverty: How non-formal education can help*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

## **The COVID-19 pandemic and non-formal education**

As of October 2021, the cumulative number of death cases from COVID-19 worldwide exceeded 5 million, higher than the death toll of many wars. COVID-19 has taken a toll on almost every sector of our society, but education has been hit particularly hard. The effects on school education are especially problematic because the damage caused affects learners' lives in the long term. In mid-April 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, the United Nations announced that 1.58 billion children and youth from 190 countries were out-of-school. The number was as high as 94% of all students globally.<sup>3</sup> In South Korea, all schools, from primary to university level, were shutdown in March 2020 for the first time in the country's history. With the shutdown, school meals were discontinued too, resulting in an increased number of children skipping meals because no one was at home to take care of them.<sup>4</sup> The recorded number of child abuse cases in South Korea reached an all-time high in 2020<sup>5</sup>, and the country witnessed a series of deaths of elementary school students caused by domestic abuse. The shutdown of schools once again reminded us of the harsh reality that family circumstances are a deciding factor in children's education. As schools partially reopened, with online and remote classes replacing traditional classroom teaching, the educational function of schools recovered to some extent, but the effects of the transition were very different for different groups. UNESCO's 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report also uncovered the reality during the pandemic that socioeconomic gaps translated directly into education gaps.

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations (2020). Education during COVID-19 and beyond. Policy Brief. New York.

<sup>4</sup> Good Neighbors (2020). 2020 COVID-19 and Children's lives: survey on the impact of pandemic on children's lives. National Center for the Rights of the Child (2020), Press release: the impact of COVID-19 on children's lives.

<sup>5</sup> Sohn Hyun-soo (2021), The paradox of online classes: less school violence but more child abuse, Hankyoreh, June 14<sup>th</sup>

“While 55% of low-income countries opted for online distance learning in primary and secondary education, only 12% of households in least developed countries have internet access at home. Even low-technology approaches cannot ensure learning continuity. Among the poorest 20% of households, just 7% owned a radio in Ethiopia and none owned a television. Overall, about 40% of low- and lower-middle-income countries have not supported learners at risk of exclusion. In France, up to 8% of students had lost contact with teachers after three weeks of lockdown.”<sup>6</sup>

Students unable to get help at home have demonstrated poor quality participation in online distance learning. The pandemic and remote, online classes are operating as factors that widen education gaps between countries and social classes. The COVID-19 pandemic, just like other crises, has been worse for socioeconomically disadvantaged countries and classes.

There was a social consensus from the very beginning of the pandemic that the shutdown of schools should not cause students to discontinue learning. While households, communities, societies and governments all strived in their own way to promote learning continuity for students, the following cases are especially noteworthy as they represent efforts to support socioeconomically vulnerable children and youth through non-formal learning facilities at a time when the role of schools has been restricted.

### **Village Learning Circles Project in India<sup>7</sup>**

Since India’s national lockdown was lifted in the spring of 2020, a project called Village Learning Circles has been running in the region of Telangana aiming to support the learning of children in Scheduled Castes, the lowest socioeconomic status in the

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<sup>6</sup> UNESCO (2020), Global education monitoring report summary: Inclusion and education: all means all, p.16

<sup>7</sup> Zacharia, S. (2020), India (Telangana): Remote learning and village learning circles for disadvantaged students, Education continuity stories series, OECD Publishing.

country. Scheduled Castes, formerly known officially as Untouchables and Depressed Castes, comprise the poorest class in India. The Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society (TSWREIS), based in Telangana, which is home to many Scheduled Caste people, designed a system under which students could gather to continue learning in homes, churches, temples, community centers, religious facilities, and panchayat offices, and even in fields, until schools reopened. Students gathered for learning in groups of five to ten. They engaged in studying voluntarily, using learning materials that, at first, were delivered by teachers via messenger application on mobile phones and later were widely broadcasted on TV. In areas so underdeveloped that learning materials could not be distributed in such ways, senior students guided the juniors in their studying. TSWREIS established plans to operate 50,000 Village Learning Circles before schools fully reopened. Members of the community and religious leaders played an especially decisive role in creating spaces for students to gather. Village Learning Circles also helped individual students to take remote classes in a cooperative setting, not in an isolated environment.

### **Children's Welfare Center in Nowon-gu, Seoul**

In South Korea, there are welfare centers in low-income neighborhoods that provide care services to elementary students after school. When schools went online for the new semester in April 2020 as a result of the pandemic, the welfare centers undertook the role of learning support on top of care services. At the time the pandemic began, Nowon-gu in Seoul had been operating 21 after-school childcare facilities for elementary students, called I-HU centers.. Originally, these centers were places for students to stay after school and before they went to evening cram school classes, as well as after cram school until their parents came home. As the centers were generally in residential areas near schools, they were convenient places for students to spend an hour or two after school. During these hours, the centers ran a few non-formal education programs for students. With the pandemic, however, I-HU centers turned into spaces in which children would remain the whole day and study. Some even came to the center in the morning, instead of going to

school, and took online classes. Workers in the centers were not professional teachers but managed to help students study online.

### **Community Hub Initiative in San Francisco<sup>8</sup>**

In September 2020, the city of San Francisco, U.S., implemented an emergency response policy that made active use of local non-formal education facilities to minimize the impact of the pandemic on learning for children in low-income families. The Community Hub Initiative involved Boys & Girls Clubs, churches, YMCAs, community centers, recreation centers, libraries, cultural centers, and several community-based organization sites to assist low-income students in getting online. As of September 2020, 45 hubs were serving 800 students. The priority population for the hubs included children with poor living environments, those from families experiencing homelessness or living in RV parks, and children in the foster care system, since obtaining internet access is often difficult in such living environments even if students are provided with digital devices. The initiative serves as a good example of harnessing public facilities in the community to provide educational support for distance learning for children and youth with the greatest need.

These examples from India, South Korea, and the United States during the pandemic are a great reminder of the value that non-formal education facilities have. However, even before the pandemic, about 258 million children and youth worldwide were out-of-school. While developing countries have higher numbers of children and youth out-of-school, other countries are not immune to the problem. South Korea is generally seen as a country that is approaching complete enrollment of primary and secondary school-age

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<sup>8</sup> CBS SF (2020). San Francisco launches new Community Hubs to provide in-person learning support for kids. September 14. <https://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2020/09/14/san-francisco-launches-new-community-hubs-to-provide-in-person-learning-support-for-kids/> Accessed 23 October 2021.

students, yet approximately 1% of the total school-age population drops out-of-school every year, and children and youth who drop out-of-school are a source of concern as being at risk of falling into crime. In addition, many countries are still failing, to a greater or lesser degree, to provide access to education for highest needs groups such as people with disabilities.

Getting out-of-school children and youth back into school is a long-standing policy task not only for individual countries but also for international organizations such as UNESCO. Schools have, of course, played a crucial role in realizing “education of all” but it has also often been pointed out that education has its limits in promoting social equality and tends to emphasize standardization among all students, something that perhaps stems from the nature of school education. School education rests on a standardized curriculum represented by textbooks and lecture-style teaching based on the authority of teachers who are recognized as qualified. Most school systems, although again the degree varies by country, display hierarchical structures among schools of higher grade and apparatus for selection and ranking is strongly embedded in the system. Students and parents voluntarily and willingly conform to the school’s political and cultural order for the sake of gaining the upper hand in the competition for selection. To put it another way, schools are conducive to standardized education, rather than diversity.

Another criticism raised against schools is the definition of inclusion. With increases in migration to South Korea for labor and marriage, schools here underline the importance of diversity and inclusion, but inclusion from whose point of view? This question is a major issue in South Korea’s multicultural education. When South Korea, a country that continues to place great emphasis on the ideology of its identity as an ethnically homogeneous nation, talks of inclusion, there is a substantial risk that migrants’ cultural diversity will be treated as an issue of secondary importance.

Although schools – representing formal education – do have a role to play in expanding opportunities for education, it is not easy nor desirable to resort to the single path of formal education to resolve certain deep-rooted social problems or educational challenges. Amid the social crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, I firmly stand by the effort of our society to actively explore the value and the essence of non-formal education

because the context in which non-formal education was raised in the 1970s remains valid in 2020.

### **Flexibility: the feature of non-formal education**

Non-formal education is often understood as ‘an education that is not formal’ due to its literal meaning. Borrowing the concept of sets in mathematics, non-formal education exists in a set that does not overlap with formal education. This definition sits in the same context as the categorizations of lifelong education stated earlier: formal, informal, and non-formal. The world and things in it, however, do not always function in accordance with mathematical theories or literal interpretation. In real-life, non-formal education, unlike its surface meaning, appears in the domains of formal education, drives the non-formalization of formal education, and acts a battlefield for the struggle for recognition of education outside the realm of formal education.

Formal and non-formal education can be considered as institutional and practical interventions to manage people’s lifelong education. In the concept of lifelong learning, the term “lifelong” focuses on three aspects of human learning.<sup>9</sup> First, learning takes place in a wide range of areas where human lives unfold (learning is life-wide). Second, learning is a historical phenomenon that occurs across the entire course of human development from cradle to grave (learning is life-long) Third, life itself is an important source and object for learning. We all continue to engage in learning that is committed to finding meanings in life (learning is life-deep) A state’s intervention in lifelong education that has the three features stated above is called formal education, while practical interventions by various social organizations are called non-formal education.

Formal education is conducted through a uniquely organized system called school,

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<sup>9</sup> Kang, D. J. (2015). *Life and learning of Korean artists and craftsmen: Rhizoactivity*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

responsibility for which lies in the state. School education is conducted over a long period of time of some 20 years at the beginning of a person's lifespan. It operates with a standardized curriculum which can be allocated to grades and is connected to a state-qualified diploma system. Elementary education can be accessed by anyone, but higher education is, more often than not, open to only those with adequate qualifications for enrollment. The process of enrollment occasionally involves highly selective procedures, leading to fierce competition among candidates, largely because formal education has an immense impact on the distribution of jobs and status in later life stages. Learners participating in formal education are mostly full-time students.

While formal education has developed based on the state-run school system, non-formal education has been conducted by various social organizations with autonomy. Non-formal education is mostly short term, and takes place in diverse areas of our lives, with no regard to formal school diplomas. The learners of non-formal education are rarely full-time students, but instead intentionally make time to participate in classes. As learners voluntarily opt for classes of their choice, it is crucial to support them with teaching methods that proactively acknowledge their interest.

A very distinct feature of non-formal education compared to formal education is flexibility. Non-formal education responds swiftly to learners' needs. Non-formal education does not focus on delivering the nation's standardized curriculum to learners but strives to devise new curriculums that cater to learners and their interest. Therefore, teachers and education designers require creativity. Non-formal education is particularly known for its history of extending educational opportunities to those who were unable to take part in traditional school education. Korea has a history of private and civil sector education dating from the Night Schools that operated during the Japanese colonial period (1910 to 1945). Learners at Night Schools literally gathered at night for literacy and basic education. Night Schools were later succeeded by non-formal education for those in their teens and twenties who moved from rural areas to cities to find jobs in the 1970s and 1980s when the South Korean economy was growing rapidly. Almost none of these facilities for non-formal education were authorized as formal schools although the teachers and students in night school called their learning site a 'school.' Even now,

education institutions for adult literacy, successors to the Night Schools, operate actively in South Korea. Worldwide, UNESCO estimates that there are still 773 million illiterate adults,<sup>10</sup> and most of the education for them is conducted in the form of non-formal education or alternative education.

The flexibility of non-formal education can be also found in the so-called alternative school movement, which strongly rejects school education. The tradition of ‘no teaching happens until students wish to learn’ from Summerhill in England and the Free School in the U.S, became the spiritual foundation for alternative schools that have emerged in a number of countries, pointing out the limitations of school education. Alternative schools that have no official authorization and make practical interventions in student’s learning in a flexible manner can be seen as the epitome of non-formal education. In South Korea, alternative schools were born in the 1990s from antipathy towards the rigidity and bureaucracy of schools, and exam-oriented education. The characteristics of these alternative schools included curriculums built on an ecological philosophy, classes that center on projects, not on core subjects, and active participation from parents. In the 2010s, elementary and secondary schools in South Korea initiated innovative school projects by adopting these features of alternative schools. In other words, non-formal education offered a model for reforming formal education.

The flexibility of non-formal education is even more in the spotlight since the information revolution, with the advent of various new media and the universal spread of online/internet culture. Different online portals and platforms are competing against each other with content for non-formal education, and YouTube is flooded with learning content. Applications that can be used on the go on smartphones and tablet PCs are springing up everywhere. Individuals with expertise and professional experience are also stepping up as online teachers in non-formal education by making video lectures. Getting recognized by learners for quality lectures is more important than becoming a certified teacher. Online non-formal education providers also operate systems that support course

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<sup>10</sup> <http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/literacy> UNESCO’s estimate of illiterate adults does not include illiterate adults in Korea estimated at about 2 million.

development and teaching methods for experts in specific fields. Meanwhile, lectures of teachers and professors in the formal education sector are also actively circulated on platforms for non-formal education. MOOCs (massive open online courses), which emerged with the spread of the internet to provide college-level lectures online, are a classic example. MOOCs are open to anyone, regardless of their grades. They provide lectures that were previously available exclusively for those who enrolled in college. In South Korea, the National Institute for Lifelong Education is currently producing K-MOOC content in collaboration with broadcasting companies. For example, the program Great Minds, which is the result of a collaboration between the National Institute for Lifelong Education and the Korea Educational Broadcasting System, presents opportunities to hear lectures given by foreign academics.

### **Policies aimed to expand the role of non-formal education**

The flexibility of non-formal education is linked to the alternative education of a school-free society envisioned by Ivan Illich, a famous critic of mass education.

“A good educational system should have three purposes: it should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and, finally, furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenge known.”<sup>11</sup>

These three purposes are also the objectives of lifelong education policy that exists to support and promote lifelong learning. The expansion of lifelong education policy has been centered on non-formal education. In South Korea, following the enactment of the Lifelong Education Act in 2000, the share of adults aged 25 or older participating in

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<sup>11</sup> Illich, I. (1971), *Deschooling society*, Harper and Row. p.91, Translated by Park Hong-kyu (2009), *School-free society*, Thinking Tree, p.152

lifelong education increased, from 28% in 2009 to 36.8% in 2014 and 40% in 2020. Of those participating in lifelong learning, the percentage participating in formal education has shown a steady decrease from 4.3% in 2009 to 1.4% in 2020. The increase in participation in lifelong learning is due to non-formal education. The expansion of non-formal education has been largely driven by an increase in lifelong learning centers operated by municipal governments, universities, media agencies, civil organizations, and businesses such as department stores since 2000. For example, the number of lifelong learning centers run by municipal governments grew from 15 in 1997 to 475 in 2020. As of 2020, there are 4,541 non-formal lifelong education institutions in South Korea. As lifelong learning has garnered more and more interest, various social institutions, which previously had been regarded as having no particular relation to education, have entered the world of non-formal education. Institutions such as libraries, welfare centers, art galleries, science centers, museums, and cultural facilities have begun to offer non-formal education to users.

With a rapidly aging population, South Korea is expected to see higher participation in non-formal education moving forward. Aside from COVID-19 pandemic, there is another reason that the year 2020 will be recorded as a historic year for the country: it was the first year in South Korean history that the population declined. South Korea's total fertility rate in 2020 hit 0.84, which is also a historic low. The total fertility rate in 2000 was 1.48. Having already become an aged society in 2018, with over 14% of its population aged 65 years or older, in 2025 South Korea is expected to become a 'super-aged society' with one in five people aged 65 years or older. The expansion of the elderly population is leading to an increased number of people in the so-called third stage of life. The first stage of life is from birth to school education; the second is one's working life; the third is a period of healthy life after retirement; and the fourth is a period of deterioration in health and death. An aging population means that the third stage of life expands for most people. For a decent living in the third stage of life, a new set of knowledge and skills are required as well as an understanding of a changed social role. This is why more and more elderly are asking for non-formal education.

There are at least two aspects of policy that need to be considered to fulfill the changing

needs of non-formal education from the perspective of lifelong learning. One is to provide support to subsidize learning expenses required to receive non-formal education, and the other is to officially recognize the value of non-formal learning in such a manner that it can be socially utilized. These two aspects apply not only to the context of South Korean society in the 2020s but also need to be considered by other countries that hope to solidify the role of non-formal education.

### **Policy aimed to subsidize learning expenses: Lifelong Learning Voucher**

Koreans' participation in lifelong learning has increased overall but differs considerably across the population depending on income and education level. As of 2020, the participation rate among those with income of more than 5 million won per month was 45.4%, while that of those with income of less than 1.5 million won per month was 29.7%, 15 percentage points lower than the higher income earners. The participation rate of those with a college diploma or a higher level of education stood at 51.5%, while that of those who only graduated middle school or less was 28.4%. Participation gaps across different income and education groups have not narrowed much over the past decade. All in all, economic and academic background has a substantial effect on engagement in non-formal education, similar to the impact that parents' economic and academic background has on children's education. South Korea's elderly poverty rate was 43.4% as of 2020, the highest among OECD member countries. The elderly population in South Korea also has a relatively low level of education. The rate of higher education completion for those aged 55 to 64 stood at 24.4% in 2020, almost one-third of those aged 25 to 34, whose completion rate was 69.8%. This demonstrates the urgent need for policies that aim to promote lifelong learning among low-income and low-education groups.

The South Korean government implemented a policy called Lifelong Education Vouchers in 2018. The policy provides people in low-income groups with up to 350,000 won per person to subsidize their lifelong learning. The recipients are allowed to take any program of their choice in 1,700 non-formal education institutions nationwide. A significant number of people have experienced lifelong education for the first time in their lives thanks to the voucher policy. 36.3% of those who had never received lifelong

education before the policy cited the economic burden as the reason for not participating in lifelong education. It turns out that the recipients, after spending all their voucher money, even spent extra money out of their own pockets to extend their learning. Compared to those who were not selected to receive the voucher, the selected recipients spent an additional 26,000 won per month on lifelong education. The vouchers certainly appear to have served as priming water for their engagement in lifelong learning.<sup>12</sup>

The experience of Kim Mi-ra, who won the 2020 Grand Prize in the story-sharing contest for voucher recipients, is a great example of the power that non-formal education has. Ms. Kim, who had been suffering from depression in her later years after her two children got married, learned how to make rice cake with the help of the voucher, earning a national certificate. Having learned additionally how to make desserts, Ms. Kim started a business in her own atelier and embarked on a new life. The atelier is not only a studio for her to work but also a study center for underachieving children in the neighborhood and a space for vocational training for people with disabilities. A small voucher created a big turning point in Ms. Kim's life.

### **Policies to promote recognition of the results of non-formal learning: The Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) and Lifelong Learning Account System**

Ivan Illich emphasized that a good education should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives, meaning that teachers, learners, and those who design and plan education must be able to distribute and access educational information anytime, anywhere. The realization of an education network, envisioned by Illich as a form of a school-free society, rests on the smooth distribution of information. 50 years ago, when the concept was first proposed, everyone thought that it was

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<sup>12</sup> Byun Jong-im, Hong Joon-hee, Park Yoon-soo, Cho Soon-ok, Kim Yong-sung, and Park So-hyun (2019). A study on the performance of lifelong education vouchers. National Institute for Lifelong Education

impossible to achieve outside of a utopia. Today, however, digital information technology is enabling worldwide distribution of educational information online, and the internet is also expanding educational opportunities to infinity and beyond.

The expansion of non-formal education naturally leads to demands by learners to have their educational results socially recognized. While formal education can easily be utilized in society as generally recognized educational attainment, non-formal education, with the exception of certificates for specific qualifications, is often only for self-fulfillment. It is imperative to place value on non-formal education in such a manner that the results of non-formal education can be utilized in society. This will motivate learners to further their study and allow education policies to work with other social policies such as welfare and employment.

South Korea has two policies dedicated to recognizing non-formal education. The first is the Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) ([www.cb.or.kr](http://www.cb.or.kr)), which is well known internationally. The ACBS is a system that acknowledges various forms of learning experience inside and outside of school as credits, which can be accumulated and later recognized by the Minister of Education as sufficient for a professional bachelor's or academic bachelor's degree. The Ministry of Education and the National Institute for Lifelong Education pre-evaluates the curriculum of out-of-school non-formal education and certifies them as recognized subjects of the ACBS. Learners can take pre-recognized courses at a non-formal education institution of their choice and obtain a degree by accumulating credits from the courses. Credits taken at regular universities can, of course, be included for a degree. National qualification certificates can also be converted into credits since learning was involved in the process of obtaining the qualification. From 1998, when it was first implemented, to 2020, a total of 1.85 million people were registered as learners in the ACBS. In 2020, learners earned about 10.6 million credits in total, 74.4% of which were credits from non-formal education, 17.7% of which were from regular universities and 5.5% of which were from national qualification certificates. As of today, almost 830,000 people have obtained degrees granted in the name of the Minister of Education under the ACBS.

The other non-formal recognition system is the Lifelong Learning Account System.

([www.all.go.kr](http://www.all.go.kr)) This is an online system run by the state to help individual learners to manage and keep track of their learning experiences. Learners can create their own account to manage all their academic qualifications, career experience, other qualifications, lifelong learning certificates and other self-directed learning in one place. They can even get a state-approved certificate of learning history. By the end of 2020, the number of learners who had opened learning accounts amounted to 420,000. The National Institute for Lifelong Education evaluates non-formal curriculums and registers those that meet the requirements as a course that can be incorporated into the account. Such courses are also associated with the recognition system for elementary and secondary education. Depending on learners' needs, these courses can also be recognized as literacy education credits, waivers for qualification exams, and waivers for certain subjects at distance learning and correspondence middle and high schools. The more non-formal education expands, the higher the value of the Lifelong Learning Account System will become.

### **Non-formal education as a bridge**

As an institution that carries out formal education, school has a relatively-short history of 200 years. If education is to be defined as the system and practice of learning across a person's lifespan, non-formal education existed long before formal education, although its conceptualization came after. In other words, education is non-formal in nature. The original non-formal education would have aimed to promote the intellectual and personal maturity of learners, rather than their socioeconomic status. Education that promotes intellectual maturity guides learners to break out of their own world and engage actively with others, since knowledge offers us with the eyes needed to see and explore various worlds. Education that promotes personal maturity enables learners to relate in a profound way to their inner self. This is because self-growth is truly achieved in comparing oneself with one's past self, not with others. Therefore, the primary role of education is to build a bridge between the past, present and future of the learners' inner world. Only when this bridge is well built will education's role as a ladder be in its place.

Non-formal education, which has emerged amid the expansion of lifelong education

and lifelong learning since 1970, is now growing further in importance and influence in the process of the digital transition that is happening ever faster since the pandemic began in 2020. This is due to the flexibility of non-formal education, which enables learners to respond quickly to social changes. This brings us to the reason why educators and education designers who wish that education could promote changes in people and the world, and help build a just and sustainable life, must never overlook the value of non-formal education. Non-formal education should take the lead in building solid bridges to transform the lives and worlds of those who are socioeconomically marginalized. Non-formal education can respond more sensitively and creatively to the needs of diverse learners, and should not hesitate to pioneer different experiments. That is how non-formal education can drive innovation for formal education and open up a new horizon in education. I offer my full support to all those working in the non-formal sector, who, even today, are persevering in building bridges for those in need.