Educational Issues Facing Children of Multicultural Families in Korea

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This paper examines the educational issues facing children of multicultural families in the Republic of Korea by comparing immigrant education policies and the present situation for children of multicultural families in Korea with the education of foreign resident children in Japan, where the issue was addressed earlier.

Foreign residents make up about 2 percent of Korea’s population, and the figure is rising yearly. Partly as a legacy of Japanese colonial rule, Korea has long been a strongly nationalistic society based on a discourse of monoethnicity. In view of its growing ethnic diversity, however, Korean society is now in transition as it faces the need to create new cultural values backed by a rethinking of Korean nationalism in light of the multi-ethnic and multicultural reality. In 2006, the government reoriented its immigration policy toward integration, as part of a national vision calling for the realization of an “open society” “where nationals from a variety of countries live together in harmony.” In the area of education policy, children of “multicultural families” (mainly children of foreign workers and of international marriages) were guaranteed the right to an education and measures in support of this were formulated in an “educational support program for children of multicultural families.”

A look at education policies and the actual situation of children of multicultural families suggests that the transformation of education in Korea has only just begun. Immigration policy was traditionally centered on workers, and it was only a few years ago that policy-makers addressed the problem of education for children of multicultural families. The new policy has not yet permeated the classroom, as reflected in the problems that foreign workers’ children are experiencing with school enrolment and eligibility to receive diplomas. This study makes a comparison with the education of foreign resident children in Japan, identifying similarities and differences.

The issues involved are twofold. First, education must be established as a right. Increasing the attendance rate among children of multicultural families who are not in school has been defined as a policy issue, but policy measures must be premised on their
having the right to an education. A related issue is the guarantee of the right to an equal education. Second, if the government’s “comprehensive support measures from a multiculturalist perspective” are to function effectively, multicultural education must go beyond teaching multicultural understanding to include antidiscrimination lessons. It must address the discrimination that affects children of multicultural families and promote a change in the culture of Korea’s schools. A case in point is the issue of the names of children of Mongolian ancestry. In this regard, the education of foreign nationals in Japan may serve as a reference.

In a Korea whose integration policy has embraced multiculturalism as an ideal, it is very important to ask how the educational issues facing children of multicultural families will be reflected in policy, while paying attention to the problems experienced in the education of foreign children in Japan.