

Fostering Teachers' Autonomous Professional Growth: Reform of South Korea's Teacher Evaluation System and Its Implications

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Abstract: A scientific and well-grounded paradigm of teacher evaluation, one that can support the changing role of teachers in a new era and the development of education, has become a central concern for education systems worldwide. South Korea's latest round of teacher evaluation reform has emerged under several converging pressures: social development is reshaping the teacher's role, educational change is calling for the renewal of teacher competencies, and the existing evaluation system is in pressing need of improvement. The reform centres on teachers' autonomous growth. It coordinates the philosophy, methods, and effectiveness of teacher evaluation in an all-round way, and reinforces this with multidimensional support across policy, organization, and technology, embodying a practical logic that unites external direction with professional autonomy. Drawing on South Korea's reform, and responding to the changing educational demands of the era, China should renew the philosophy of teacher evaluation, refine its evaluation practice, and make sound use of evaluation results. It should promote teachers' autonomous growth through a developmental orientation, anchor professional reflection in the evaluation process, and support teachers' continuous improvement on the principle of encouragement, so that teacher evaluation can fully play its part in activating the building of the teaching workforce.

Keywords: Teacher Evaluation System; Professional Development; External Direction; Autonomous Growth

1. Introduction

Educational evaluation affects the quality of education, among which teacher evaluation holds significant importance. In recent years,

teacher evaluation has been transformed across education systems around the world with the aim not to evaluate teacher performance but rather to help them improve. This transformation has occurred in China as well; the recent Chinese policy regarding construction of the teacher corps and its long-term development as an internationally influential leader in education both emphasize the need for further educational reforms that can provide genuine developmental appraisal mechanisms [1]. Therefore, teacher evaluation reform has been identified as an essential part of educational modernization in China [2].

South Korea makes an interesting point of comparison. China and South Korea have the same East Asian background, and both share a number of similarities including their educational systems, teaching methods, and social culture. South Korea has run a Teacher Competency Development Evaluation since 2010. The system was meant to strengthen teachers' instructional capacity, and to some extent it did; but in practice it also revealed weaknesses in protecting teachers' pedagogical autonomy, ensuring the validity of evaluation, and easing teachers' workload [3]. In October 2024, the Korean Ministry of Education announced the Plan to Abolish the Teacher Competency Development Evaluation and Introduce the Teacher Competency Development Support System, a sign that teacher evaluation in South Korea had entered a new stage of reform. This paper examines the background to that reform, the paths it takes in practice, and the logic underlying it, and considers what it offers for the improvement of teacher evaluation in China.

2. The Background to South Korea's Teacher Evaluation Reform: A Convergence of Factors

A teacher evaluation system is, at bottom, a

statement about how a society views its teachers and what it expects of them. South Korea's reform did not arise from any single cause. It grew out of several forces working together: social development that is reshaping the teacher's role, educational change that calls for new teacher competencies, and an existing evaluation system badly in need of repair.

2.1 Social Development is Driving a Transformation in the Teacher's Role

Recent cross-national research on the teaching profession in OECD countries finds that an overwhelming majority of teachers feel undervalued by their societies, and that this perception is closely associated with lower job satisfaction and weaker collective effort toward school improvement[4]. As society changes, so does the teacher's role. Teachers hold and transmit knowledge, and from that position they are expected to help guide and advance society; society, in turn, has to create the conditions in which the many kinds of value teachers offer can be realized. None of this happens on its own. It depends on putting teacher evaluation to work as a driving force. When the value orientation of an evaluation system is reshaped, through a change in how evaluation is understood, in how it is carried out, and in how effective it is, teacher evaluation can become a steady, systematic support for professional growth. It then helps lay the groundwork for a high-quality education system and, over time, feeds back into the development of society itself.

2.2 Educational Change is Calling for the Renewal of Teacher Competencies

Education worldwide currently faces multiple demands. There is an internal pressure to expand provision while raising quality, and to maintain stability while improving efficiency; there is also the challenge that comes with the age of artificial intelligence. If teachers are to fulfil their important role in the progress of education and the development of society, their professional roles—and the competencies that accompany them—must change. Teachers are moving from transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of learning, from single-subject instructors to partners in collaborative education, and from managers of the traditional classroom to practitioners of instructional innovation. As one analysis observes, “in the age of artificial intelligence, teacher competence has expanded

to include information literacy, an awareness of educational ethics and privacy protection, strong adaptability and learning capacity, and international and cross-cultural competence” [5]. Teachers must combine intelligent literacy with the ability to educate through technology if they are to steer a steady course through the currents of the era. This objective need for renewed competence requires us to examine how scientific and adaptive the existing evaluation system really is, so that the system can fulfil its regulating, guiding, and motivating functions and help teachers sustain an effective capacity for learning and a continuing commitment to development at a time when knowledge and technology are being renewed ever faster.

2.3 The Existing Evaluation System is in Pressing Need of Improvement

In 2015, South Korea revised the evaluation system it had introduced in 2010, adopting a dual-track arrangement of teacher performance evaluation—which comprises evaluation by administrators and multi-source evaluation—and teacher competency development evaluation, which comprises peer evaluation together with student and parent satisfaction surveys. As implementation has progressed, this arrangement has run into a number of difficulties. First, overlapping items have added to the evaluation burden. The multi-source peer evaluation that appears in both the competency development evaluation and the performance evaluation contains similar indicators, which produces duplication. The two evaluations also operate on relatively short cycles, increasing schools' workload, and the discrepancies that can arise between their results—a teacher may, for instance, score highly on the competency development evaluation yet poorly on the performance evaluation—have eroded confidence in the process. Second, some students and parents show little willingness to take part, and participation rates have fallen steadily in recent years: student participation dropped from 87.4% in 2015 to 47.4% in 2022, and parent participation from 50% to 34.8% over the same period. Third, the results of evaluation have lacked systematic feedback, and some evaluations have not fully achieved their intended aims. The results of the competency development evaluation are commonly used to select teachers for a sabbatical research year or to assign them to competency-improvement

training, yet only 0.2% of teachers actually benefit in this way—so most teachers pay the evaluation little attention. Moreover, applying a uniform set of indicators to all teachers cannot adequately distinguish the professional competencies required by teachers in different types of school, in different subjects, or at different career stages.

3. The Practice of South Korea’s Teacher Evaluation Reform: Supporting Autonomous Growth

South Korea’s reform centres on teachers’ autonomous growth. As Figure 1 shows, it coordinates the philosophy, methods, and effectiveness of teacher evaluation in a comprehensive way, supported by multidimensional measures across policy, organization, and technology, and so embodies a practical logic that unites external direction with professional autonomy.

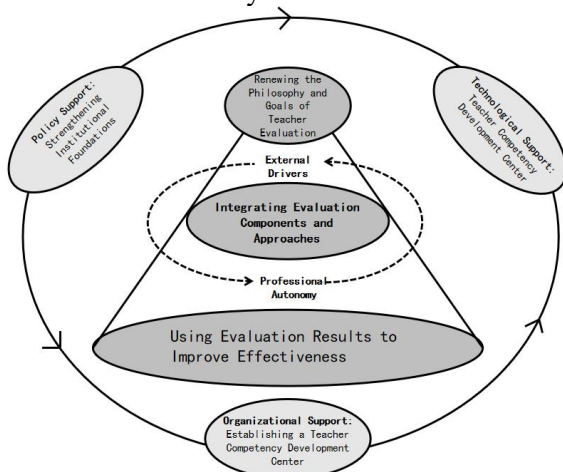


Figure 1. The Practice of South Korea’s Teacher Evaluation Reform

3.1 Content of the Reform: Coordinating the Philosophy, Methods, and Effectiveness of Teacher Evaluation

In response to the problems of the existing system, South Korea has coordinated its reform across the philosophy, methods, and effectiveness of teacher evaluation, working on several fronts at once to make the system more scientific and more effective.

First, the reform shifts the philosophy of teacher evaluation and renews the goals of competency evaluation. South Korea has set out to raise teachers’ social standing so that, under the protection of the constitution and other laws, teachers become respected education professionals; on this basis it is restructuring the

evaluation system, building both an evaluation framework and a competency development framework that raise teachers’ professional level and make them the innovators who lead educational change and classroom renewal in a new era.

Second, the reform integrates evaluation items and changes the methods of competency evaluation. South Korea’s former competency development evaluation comprised three components: peer evaluation, a student satisfaction survey, and a parent satisfaction survey. The government has, on the one hand, linked the competency development evaluation with the performance evaluation and removed duplicated items so as to ease the evaluation burden. On the other hand, it has placed the emphasis on a qualitative evaluation of how teachers guide students’ learning and lives and of teachers’ own professional development, paying particular attention to teachers’ professional performance and to the support system for professional development. The parent satisfaction survey has been replaced by a school evaluation, and the student satisfaction survey by a student perception survey, in which students reflect on the learning and growth that have resulted from their teachers’ educational activity—feedback that is then used to improve teaching in the following year. A new teacher self-diagnosis component has also been added, which gives teachers the results of a self-assessment of their competence together with the trend of change over the past five years, helping them to grow and develop on their own initiative. Third, the reform emphasizes the use of evaluation results in order to raise the effectiveness of competency evaluation. Drawing on artificial intelligence, the government tailors teacher training to individual needs, expands the scope, range, and intake of the sabbatical research year, and makes flexible use of the multi-source evaluation and the student perception survey, so as to provide strong support for the development of teacher competence.

3.2 Safeguards for the Reform: Multidimensional Support in Policy, Organization, and Technology

To ensure that the reform is implemented, South Korea has provided support across the policy, organizational, and technological dimensions, building a sound support system for teacher

competency development and advancing the reform in a systematic way.

First, supporting policy measures provide a policy guarantee. South Korea has amended the Directive on Teacher Competency Development Evaluation, the Regulations on Teacher Training, the Enforcement Decree of the Act on Local Education Subsidies, and other related laws and regulations in support of the reform. The Enforcement Decree of the Act on Local Education Subsidies, in particular, provides for increased funding for teacher training, offering systematic support for teachers' development as agents of educational innovation and as education professionals; it adds "the operation and support of teacher training" as a standard item of financial need within the regular subsidy, so that local education systems have stable and continuous funding for teacher training.

Second, a centre for developing teacher competence provides an organizational guarantee. South Korea has established a Teacher Competency Development Centre, which strengthens the capacity for teacher guidance and workforce building through a system of cooperation among schools, education authorities, and teacher-training institutions, and which keeps abreast of the varied demands for teacher competence across different areas of education. For teachers and schools that need it, the centre offers the necessary professional support, including advice from outstanding mentor teachers and the planning of subject-knowledge learning for each teaching cycle.

Third, an AI-based training system provides a technological guarantee. South Korea has strengthened its support for teacher-led classroom change, introducing AI digital textbooks and a digital curriculum revision, among other measures, to renew school education, supporting AI-enabled personalized learning, and enabling teachers to respond actively to the changes that digital and AI technologies bring to the educational environment. The AI training system can recommend tailored training programmes linked to the results of a teacher's competency diagnosis, strengthening incentives for teachers and supporting their autonomous growth.

3.3 Features of the Reform: A Practical Logic Uniting External Direction with Professional Autonomy

Looked at as a whole, the measures in this round

of reform share a common logic: external direction and professional autonomy are made to work together. The reform takes the rigour and soundness of external evaluation seriously. At the same time, it treats teachers' professional development as something autonomous and individual. The aim throughout is a balance between the two, so that professional development becomes both efficient and sustained.

On one side stands external direction. South Korea uses a reasonably sound evaluation system to drive the development of teacher competence. The new arrangement strengthens the multi-source evaluation of teachers, which now draws on peer evaluation, the student perception survey, school evaluation, and teacher self-diagnosis. Bringing in these different parties allows a teacher's overall performance to be judged more soundly, and it gives teachers a clear sense of where their competence stands and how far they have come. The regulation and incentives that external evaluation provides are meant to keep teachers improving their methods and raising their professional level.

On the other side stands professional autonomy. Here South Korea relies on a fairly complete set of support measures. The use of the AI system enables the recommendation of customized training programs for individual teachers depending on the findings of the competency assessment process. This is complemented by the Teacher Competency Development Centre, which operates with an additional dimension through collaboration among schools, educational administrators, experts, and training organizations. There has been expansion in terms of scope and variety of training offered, as well as a greater budget, making teacher training more practical than theoretical. Taken together, these measures point to the central idea of the reform. The value orientation of teacher evaluation has shifted: evaluation is now meant to drive the growth of professional competence, and to give teachers' own initiative in their development as much room as possible.

4. Implications of South Korea's Teacher Evaluation Reform: A Reform Driven by a Shift in Values

Reform of educational evaluation, as one study puts it, is "a systematic undertaking that involves a transition between old and new ideas, systems,

and paradigms” [6]. The Korean experience is instructive here. As the demands placed on education keep shifting, China should move faster on the shift in values that underlies teacher evaluation, improve the evaluation system itself, and let teacher evaluation do the work it is capable of in strengthening the teaching workforce.

4.1 Renewing the Philosophy of Teacher Evaluation: A Developmental Orientation for Self-Directed Professional Growth

Improving the teacher evaluation system has to start with the thinking behind it. Three things deserve fuller recognition in China: teaching is a public profession, the teacher’s role carries the marks of its time, and teachers’ work has a character all its own. When teachers are viewed as professionals with the ability to develop themselves throughout their careers, there is a shift in the meaning of evaluation as well. The importance of evaluation does not lie in criticizing teachers for their performance but rather in awakening their desire for professional development from within and increasing their ownership in that development process.

Renewing this kind of approach implies the need to change focus in the evaluation process. There are four such shifts. First, from a unidimensional approach to a multidimensional one. In education, teacher evaluations have traditionally focused on the impact of teaching and scholarly activities, using quite restrictive criteria. This issue is addressed in the study on reforming teacher evaluation in universities, which proposes moving away from the restrictions imposed by unidimensional assessment to a more complex framework, which would include, among others, qualitative judgments and peer reviews, thereby considering the actual complexity of teachers’ work [7]. A modern system, along similar lines, should rely on various standards and assess teacher performance in different domains to provide a better reflection of their overall professional effectiveness.

The second is from outcome-based to process-oriented approach. It means that rather than focusing on the end result of learning and researching, evaluation would pay more attention to teachers’ work on the process and give feedback while it is not too late. Thirdly, the shift will be from outside assessment to self-evaluation. Traditionally, evaluations have been

done mostly by schools or administrative departments and the conclusions drawn from them used for title promotion and performance assessment. In any contemporary teacher evaluation system, priority must be given to self-assessment and peer assessment, because teachers learn about the areas where they need to develop through reflection on their performance and constructive criticism from fellow teachers. The latest reforms in China in this field emphasize self-assessment, academic peer assessment, value-based assessment, comprehensive assessment, and development-oriented assessment with an emphasis on process, as the goal of these reforms is to move beyond the narrow confines of quantitative assessment and restore the purpose of evaluation to improving quality [8]. The fourth change concerns the transformation from static evaluation to dynamic evaluation. Instead of being performed at set intervals, evaluations should be conducted based on the real progress of teachers and adjusted according to the stage of their career.

4.2 Refining the Practice of Teacher Evaluation: Anchoring Professional Reflection in the Process

The practice of teacher evaluation is the crux of reform and determines its effect. Practice now needs to be refined so that the evaluation process becomes the anchor for teachers’ professional reflection. To attend to the evaluation process is to treat evaluation as a supportive force that arises from within teachers’ growth and is embedded in their development.

On one side, teacher evaluation should move more quickly towards being proactive and process-oriented: strengthening process evaluation and multi-source evaluation, and giving weight to teachers’ self-evaluation and reflection. Teacher development portfolios can be established to record process data on teaching, research, and professional ethics, providing a comprehensive and objective basis for evaluation. Dynamic tracking can be carried out, using big-data platforms to follow the teaching process in an immediate, dynamic, and continuous way, so that problems are identified and addressed promptly. Students, peers, parents, and others can be involved so that a teacher’s work is evaluated from many angles; and teachers can be encouraged to evaluate themselves, examining their work against the

indicator framework, identifying for themselves the gaps in their growth, and taking on board advice and suggestions in good time. On the other side, teacher evaluation should foster a sound evaluative climate, ensuring transparency and fairness so that teachers take an active part in the process and trust its results. China should “create a system for conducting professional competence tests of primary and secondary education teachers on a regular basis, establish a good indicator system, enhance the participation of teachers, and build an evaluation platform that connects homes, schools, and communities” [9], promoting the cooperation and exchange of ideas among teachers, which would enable them to achieve professionalism collectively through mutual learning. In addition, for creating a healthy climate, attention should be paid to what follows after the evaluation. Apart from giving marks, schools and the relevant agencies should provide constructive feedback to teachers, guiding them professionally.

4.3 Making Sound Use of Evaluation Results: Supporting Continuous Improvement on the Principle of Encouragement

It is through the application of the results that an evaluation system will be able to demonstrate its value. According to one study carried out on teacher performance evaluations, there are four categories of teacher performance evaluations: “bureaucratic, professional, market, and managerial accountability”. Of all the categories mentioned, the one of managerial accountability has become more and more predominant, thus putting certain constraints on the ability to evaluate performance effectively [10]. The approach to teacher evaluations must be changed accordingly. Results must be applied efficiently, and improvement encouraged.

First, it is required to have a proper orientation that is motivating. Teachers need long-range objectives that will make them continuously improve themselves. If the process of evaluation is connected with self-improvement and career advancement of a teacher and gives constructive suggestions, it generally evokes enthusiasm and stimulates creativity. It is also important to take into consideration individual characteristics: incentive techniques will be most effective if they are individually oriented toward the needs of a teacher at each particular stage of professional growth, and improvement programs are drawn up in such a way that a teacher finds

them feasible.

It is also essential to ensure variation and appropriate incentives that match the real needs of teachers in their professional growth. Good teachers may be rewarded with bonuses, scholarships, and allowances, which will do a good job for their self-respect and professionalism. The outcomes of evaluations may serve as means for providing teachers with additional training opportunities, studying in higher educational establishments, taking an active part in educational research and instructional innovations, as well as with necessary support for achieving this goal. Lastly, professional development programs should be monitored all the way along, meaning that relevant authorities should keep track of teachers' achievements and problems on the road to success and provide necessary support whenever it is needed. Incentives, in their turn, should be changed according to teachers' professional development.

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