
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Desks to Soaring Skies: Reconfiguring “Studious Korea” through Technological Participation

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| ABSTRACT

South Korea is widely associated with intensive academic study, educational competition, and strong aspirations for educational achievement. However, the educational subject associated with this ethos has not remained static. This study examines how a historically constructed educational ethos has been rearticulated through competency-based, digital, and technology-oriented reforms. It further considers how national education policy has reshaped the educational subject and how meso-level institutions have mediated emerging opportunities for technological participation. It employs qualitative historical and policy discourse analysis of major Korean education policy documents from 1895 to 2023, supplemented by official records on contemporary drone education, competitions, and public programs. The findings suggest that the transformation of Korea’s educational subject is better understood as reconfiguration rather than replacement. Earlier ideals of self-cultivation, effort, ability, and national development remain visible, but are increasingly expressed through creativity, information processing, experimentation, problem solving, and technological practice. The drone cases illustrate how meso-level institutions organize participation infrastructures that extend educational activity beyond conventional classroom spaces. The study therefore conceptualizes technological education as an institutional reconfiguration of an existing educational ethos and highlights participation infrastructure as a meso-level mechanism connecting policy priorities with technological practice.

| KEYWORDS

Studious Korea; educational subject; educational policy; technological participation; policy enactment; Korean education

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1. Introduction

Discussions of South Korea often depict a society deeply defined by education, academic achievement, and intensive study. While Korean students continue to perform above the OECD average in mathematics, reading, and science (OECD, 2023), these contemporary assessment outcomes fail to explain how such a strong educational orientation developed historically. The question, then, is how this educational orientation was formed and how the image of the desirable learner changed across different periods.

This study conceptualizes “Studious Korea” as a historically constructed educational ethos rather than an inherent national characteristic or a synonym for “education fever.” “Studious Korea” refers to an educational formation through which learning, self-cultivation, effort, achievement, and collective contribution have been connected and repeatedly rearticulated across changing institutional and policy contexts.

In this study, “Studious Korea” therefore refers to the historically changing configuration of values through which the desirable educational subject has been defined, rather than to the intensity of educational competition itself. The historical discussion begins with the state institutionalization of modern educational discourse in the late nineteenth century and follows its subsequent reformulations. The 1895 Education Edict, the 1949 Education Act, and the 1968 National Charter of Education serve as historical anchors. These documents show how the state continuously reshaped the ties connecting individual knowledge and development

to broader national progress (Gojong, 1895; Republic of Korea, 1949; Presidential Secretariat, 1968). Modern Korean education emerged through a combination of historical legacies and later processes of state-building, developmentalism, globalization, and rapid technological transformation (Seth, 2002; Dittrich & Neuhaus, 2023).

From the late twentieth century onward, policies increasingly rearticulated this educational formation around creativity, adaptability, and technological agility. The 1995 May Thirty-First Education Reform marked a major shift toward globalization and informatization, while the 2015 Revised National Curriculum institutionalized competency-based conceptions of the learner. The 2023 Digital-Based Education Innovation Plan further emphasized digitally mediated, individualized, and active learning (Presidential Advisory Council on Education Reform, 1995; Ministry of Education, 2015a, 2023). The reforms did not discard earlier expectations. Instead, they attached new meanings to competence, activity, and participation.

Research Gap. Although Korean education has been extensively studied, the historical construction of the educational subject remains comparatively underexamined. Much of the existing literature on education fever and credentialism emphasizes competition and social mobility, leaving the historical construction of the desirable educational subject relatively unexplored (Park, 2018; Seth, 2002). Similarly, research on digital education has largely prioritized technology adoption over viewing technological transformation as a rearticulation of established values. Meso-level institutional processes that mediate these technological participation opportunities have also received considerably less attention than national-level policies.

RQ1. How has the educational subject been constructed and rearticulated in South Korean national education policy from the late nineteenth century to the digital era?

RQ2. How have competency-, digital-, and technology-oriented reforms reconfigured the relationship between knowledge acquisition and educational participation?

RQ3. How have meso-level institutions mediated the organization of technological participation opportunities, as illustrated by recent drone-related educational and public programs?

Three points follow from this analysis. It introduces “Studious Korea” as a historically constructed educational ethos and distinguishes it from generic concepts of education fever and credentialism. The research also broadens the framework for examining educational transformation by proposing the concepts of technological participation and participation infrastructure. The study also identifies meso-level institutional mediation as the critical link between national policy and actual opportunities for technological engagement.

The drone cases provide a concrete setting in which this distinction can be observed. They move the discussion beyond policy language to physical, experiential, and public forms of participation outside conventional classrooms. The analytical focus therefore remains on policy discourse and institutional mediation rather than individual behavioral changes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Interpretations of Korean Education Fever

Explanations for Korea’s strong educational orientation have conventionally relied on Confucianism and the historical prestige of scholarship. Joseon Korea fostered deep traditions of scholarship and moral cultivation through institutions like the Neo-Confucian Seowon academies (UNESCO, 2019). However, the intense educational competition seen in modern South Korea also reflects processes that developed beyond this historical legacy.

Historical scholarship has increasingly emphasized the modern formation of Korean education fever. The post-1945 expansion of schooling was driven by a complex mix of state policy, social aspirations, and evolving economic structures (Seth, 2002). Current scholarship similarly urges researchers to historicize education fever rather than view it as a static national trait (Dittrich & Neuhaus, 2023).

Research on credentialism and social reproduction further develops this perspective. Studies show that educational qualifications function as mechanisms of status attainment and societal competition, rather than simply as indicators of learning (Park, 2018; Seth, 2002). This literature helps explain why educational competition became so intense and how it became institutionalized. It says less, however, about how the desirable learner itself was defined.

The focus here is therefore different: instead of measuring educational intensity, the analysis asks how particular qualities of the learner were constructed and later rearticulated. "Studios Korea" examines how learning, effort, self-cultivation, and collective contribution were constructed and rearticulated as educational values across changing historical contexts.

2.2 From Digital Literacy to Technological Participation

Research on educational technology has examined digital literacy, teacher competence, technology adoption, artificial intelligence, and policy implementation. Within the Korean context, researchers have examined how schools adopt these technologies and mobilize institutional support (Kang et al., 2023; Kim & Hyun, 2023). However, less attention has been paid to how institutional conditions enable technological participation (Lee & Kim, 2023). Policy Enactment Theory provides a critical lens for understanding how these policies actually translate into specific institutional contexts (Ball et al., 2012). Policy Enactment Theory is used here to examine the meso-level arrangements through which these broad priorities acquire concrete institutional forms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employs qualitative historical and policy discourse analysis to examine how South Korea's educational ethos has been constructed, institutionalized, and rearticulated through changing education policies and institutional practices.

The analysis focuses on how official educational texts define desirable forms of learning, ability, conduct, citizenship, competence, and participation across historical periods. It does not measure students' attitudes or estimate the causal effects of particular policies. Policy documents are examined as active sites in which educational priorities and learner categories are constructed; they are treated as part of the policy process rather than simply as descriptions of administrative action (Bowen, 2009; Saarinen, 2008).

Historical discourse analysis is useful for examining how educational ideals and categories of learners are constructed through policy language (Jóhannesson, 2010). The analysis considers both the explicit content of policy documents and the relationships among recurring concepts.

3.2 Why 1895 as the Analytical Starting Point?

The analysis begins with the 1895 Education Edict, which marks a major milestone in the state's institutionalization of modern educational discourse. Korean educational traditions certainly predate the modern state (UNESCO, 2019; Seth, 2002). The Edict provides a useful starting point because it explicitly linked education to new learning, science, practical knowledge, and national revitalization (Gojong, 1895).

The periodization is selective and focuses on major policy moments in which the relationships among education, national development, knowledge, competence, and participation were explicitly reformulated.

3.3 Empirical Corpus and Document Selection

National education policy documents and official institutional records from the late nineteenth century to the contemporary period constitute the primary empirical corpus. The document selection process relied on three specific criteria. Texts were selected based on their formal status in national policy, their articulation of the traits of a desirable learner, and their significance as major shifts in how the state approached knowledge, technology, or participation. The primary historical texts include early foundations like the 1895 Education Edict, the 1949 Education Act, and the 1968 National Charter of Education. The corpus also includes modern policy milestones such as the 1995 Education Reform, the 2015 Revised National Curriculum, and the 2023 Digital-Based Education Innovation Plan.

The contemporary corpus is supplemented by official records of drone education, competitions, and public technology events, including the 2023 FAI World Drone Racing Championship in Namwon, 2025 Seoul Drone Racing World Cup, 2026 WDSF International Drone Sports Competition in Cheongju, and 2026 Daejeon Science Festival drone experience zone. These cases illustrate recent institutional forms of technological participation across educational, municipal, competitive, and public-science settings. These cases are not intended to represent Korean youth participation.

3.4 Why Drones?

Drones provide a bounded case through which particular forms of technology education can be examined; the cases are not intended to represent the field as a whole. Drones bring together technological competence, embodied activity, and public participation, including coding, engineering, collaboration, and problem solving within organized settings.

This makes drone-related programs useful for examining how technological learning moves beyond conventional classrooms. The cases focus on institutional opportunities for technological participation, not on the educational superiority of drones.

3.5 Analytical Procedure

The documents were compared across policy periods, with attention to changes in educational aims, desired learner characteristics, conceptions of knowledge, and opportunities for technological participation.

To trace changes in the educational subject across periods, the analysis examined the following conceptual contrasts:

- knowledge acquisition → information processing
- individual cultivation → competency development
- teacher-directed learning → expanded student activity
- classroom learning → expanded experiential learning
- technology as content → technology as practice
- learning about technology → participation through technology

Contemporary drone materials serve as meso-level cases that illustrate how technology actually functions within organized settings.

3.6 Analytical Scope and Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. The reliance on policy and institutional texts primarily captures official discourse rather than the lived experiences of teachers and students. Furthermore, the purposive historical corpus highlights major policy shifts instead of offering an exhaustive educational history. Finally, the drone cases serve as illustrative examples rather than representative data. They do not establish a direct causal relationship between national policy and technological participation.

4. Results / Findings

4.1 Historical Construction of the Educational Subject

4.1.1 The 1895 Edict: Education for National Preservation

The 1895 Education Edict positioned education as a matter of national preservation and state development, extending its significance beyond private or scholarly activity. The Edict described education as the “foundation of national preservation” and emphasized new learning, science, and practical knowledge. In doing so, it connected individual cultivation with the broader objective of national revitalization (Gojong, 1895). The document thus linked individual cultivation to a broader collective purpose.

4.1.2 The 1949 Education Act: Institutionalizing the Democratic Citizen

Following liberation, the 1949 Education Act formally embedded education into the state apparatus by establishing legal frameworks for schools and compulsory learning (Republic of Korea, 1949). The legislation sought to develop individual personality, independence, and civic awareness. At the same time, it heavily promoted scientific thinking and cooperative responsibility as essential contributions to national progress (Republic of Korea, 1949).

One important feature of the legislation was its invocation of Hongik Ingan. Traditionally understood as the ideal of broadly benefiting humanity, Hongik Ingan served as a normative foundation of national education (Republic of Korea, 1949).

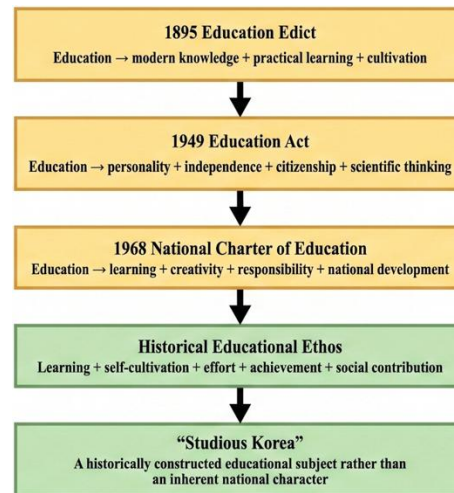
4.1.3 The 1968 National Charter: Learning for National Reconstruction

The 1968 National Charter of Education tightened the link between personal cultivation and national development. The document explicitly called for acquiring “scholarship and technology” alongside cultivating a “creative power and pioneering spirit.” It positioned these individual talents as essential tools for participating in and serving the nation's broader developmental goals (Presidential Secretariat, 1968). Historical scholarship has shown that the Charter was closely connected to the modernization project of the Park Chung Hee government and to efforts to cultivate human resources considered necessary for national development (Shin, 2005).

Repeated use of these ideas in schools and public institutions gave them institutional durability (Shin, 2005). Across the 1895, 1949, and 1968 documents, official narratives consistently intertwined the concepts of individual learning, civic responsibility, and national development.

These recurring themes support the interpretation of ‘Studios Korea’ as an actively constructed educational ethos rather than as a timeless national characteristic. Yet, the specific qualities and responsibilities demanded of the educational subject continued to evolve across different historical eras.

Figure 1. Historical Formation of the “Studios Korea” Educational Ethos



4.2 Rearticulation Through Informatization and Competency-Based Reform

Educational policy changed noticeably in the 1990s. The 1995 May Thirty-First Education Reform framed educational transformation around globalization and informatization and emphasized diversity, autonomy, individual potential, creativity, and adaptability (Presidential Advisory Council on Education Reform, 1995; Ministry of Education, n.d.). The policy language consequently placed less emphasis on the acquisition of established knowledge alone and more on how learners responded to social and technological change.

The 2015 Revised National Curriculum institutionalized this orientation even more explicitly. It sought to cultivate a “creative and convergent person” grounded in core competencies. These essential skills included knowledge-information processing, creative thinking, aesthetic sensitivity, alongside robust community and communication skills (Ministry of Education, 2015a). Consequently, the national curriculum shifted its weight toward the actual processing and real-world application of knowledge. Concurrent initiatives like the Free Semester Program and expanded software education opened new doors for experiential, technology-driven learning (Ministry of Education, 2015a, 2015b). Digital tools were increasingly incorporated into learning environments where students were expected to explore and interact.

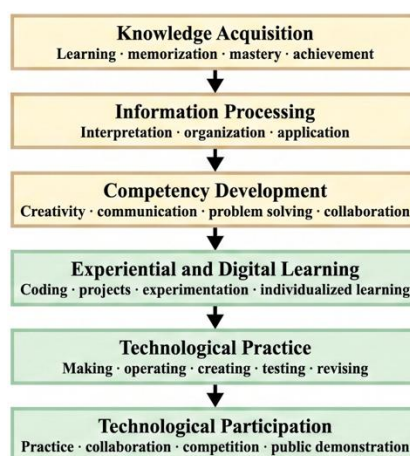
More recently, the 2023 Digital-Based Education Innovation Plan carried this competency-oriented framework into digitally mediated environments. The policy also assigned teachers a broader role in designing learning experiences, particularly through individualized and digitally mediated learning (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Throughout these reforms, policy narratives increasingly defined the desirable learner through traits such as creativity, adaptability, and digital competence. These new requirements emerged alongside established expectations concerning knowledge and achievement. The earlier educational values remained visible, while their institutional expressions expanded to incorporate new competencies, experiential activities, and technological practices.

Table 1

Historical Reconfiguration of the Korean Educational Subject

Period	Dominant policy discourse	Educational subject	Primary educational logic	Spatial tendency
1895	Modern education and national strengthening	Cultivated modern subject	Knowledge, virtue, physical and intellectual development	Emerging modern school
1949	National education and citizenship	Democratic/national citizen	Personality, scientific thinking, creativity, responsibility	National school system
1968	National modernization	Disciplined developmental subject	Learning, self-cultivation, creativity, national contribution	School and public institutions
1995	Globalization and informatization	Adaptive information-oriented learner	Information, individual potential, creativity, adaptability	Diversified learning environments
2015	Competency and convergence	Creative and convergent learner	Knowledge processing, creativity, communication, community	Classroom + experiential spaces
2023	Digital-based education	Active and individualized learner	Digital learning, personalization, inquiry, participation	Classroom + digital environments
Contemporary	Technological participation	Technological participant	Practice, creation, experimentation, competition, collaboration	School + public/competitive spaces

Figure 2. From Knowledge Acquisition to Competency and Technological Practice

4.3 Meso-Level Expansion of Opportunities for Technological Participation

The drone cases show several ways in which technological participation is organized at the institutional level within the broader policy environment. For instance, the 2023 FAI World Drone Racing Championship in Namwon (Federation Aeronautique Internationale, 2023) and the 2025 Seoul Drone Racing World Cup both blend international competition with interactive public experiences, such as coding classes and drone soccer (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2025). A similar pattern appears in the 2026 WDSF International Drone Sports Competition in Cheongju, which bridges competitive sports with school-based settings (Chungcheongbuk-do Provincial Government, 2026). Even public science venues, such as the 2026 Daejeon Science Festival, now incorporate hands-on drone activities to broaden technological engagement (Daejeon Metropolitan City, 2026).

Table 2

Institutional Mediation and Forms of Technological Participation

Institutional setting	Example	Principal actors	Spatial environment	Form of participation
International event	2023 FAI World Drone Racing Championship	FAI, organizers, competitors	Competition venue	Racing, observation, international participation
Municipal program	2025 Seoul Drone Racing World Cup	Seoul Metropolitan Government, event organizers	Public drone park	Coding, racing, soccer, exhibitions, interactive experiences
School-linked competition	2026 Cheongju drone sports competition	Public authorities, school, specialized association	Elementary school	Competitive technological practice
Public science event	2026 Daejeon Science Festival	Public/event organizations, technology associations	Science festival	Hands-on experimentation and recreational participation
Educational programs	Coding/drone experiential activities	Schools, teachers, local institutions	Classroom + experiential spaces	Making, coding, experimentation
International/competitive ecosystem	Drone sports and racing	Associations, municipalities, participants	Local and international venues	Practice, competition, public demonstration

5. Discussion

5.1 Reconfiguring Rather Than Replacing “Studious Korea”

The historical comparison does not point to a break between older and newer educational ideals. Instead, many earlier expectations remain visible in contemporary policy, although they are expressed through a wider set of competencies. Education remains associated with learning, self-development, ability, responsibility, and collective purposes across the historical corpus, even as the competencies through which these expectations are expressed become increasingly differentiated. This interpretation shifts attention from the intensity of educational competition to the historical formation of the learner (Seth, 2002; Park, 2018).

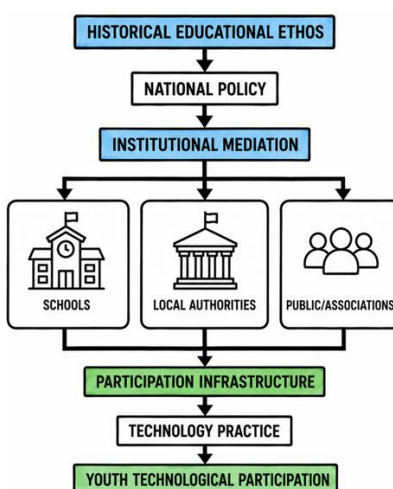
Drawing on Hobsbawm’s concept of invented tradition helps clarify this dynamic of continuity and change (Hobsbawm, 1983). The documents suggest that some educational values gained durability through repeated institutional use. This process does not imply the deliberate fabrication of a single educational heritage.

The learner described in recent policy documents is therefore not entirely new. Earlier expectations concerning achievement and self-development remain, but they are now accompanied by creativity, information processing, communication, digital competence, and technological practice (Ministry of Education, 2015a).

5.2 Extending the Digital Education Literature: From Competence to Participation

The idea of technological participation also changes how Korean digital education can be discussed. Existing literature largely prioritizes policy implementation and infrastructure (Kang et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2023; Lee & Kim, 2023). The cases examined here draw attention instead to the institutional pathways through which technological competence can become action.

Simply possessing technological knowledge or competence does not automatically guarantee opportunities to experiment, collaborate, or actively participate in technological communities (Blikstein, 2013). In this article, technological participation refers to opportunities to experiment, collaborate, make, and act with technology. It is therefore analytically distinct from simply possessing digital literacy or competence. Framing it this way aligns with constructionist and maker-oriented philosophies that champion hands-on experimentation and design (Papert, 1980; Blikstein, 2013).

Figure 3. From Policy to Technological Participation

Policy Enactment Theory also helps explain what happens between a national policy statement and an actual opportunity to use technology. The drone cases make this intermediate level visible: schools, municipalities, organizers, spaces, equipment, and programs all shape what participation becomes in practice.

5.3 Participation Infrastructure

“Participation infrastructure” refers to the material, spatial, and organizational conditions that make technological participation possible. In practice, this means schools, municipalities, and program organizers must work together to translate abstract policy priorities into concrete physical spaces, equipment access, and structured activities.

At the meso level, these arrangements connect policy priorities with what students can actually do. The analytical pathway is therefore:

policy discourse → institutional mediation → participation opportunity

5.4 Technological Participation and the Spatial Expansion of Education

The drone cases also change where educational activity takes place. Learning can take place outside the conventional classroom when technological activities are organized in public and extracurricular settings. In such settings, knowledge is used through movement, equipment, experimentation, and interaction with others.

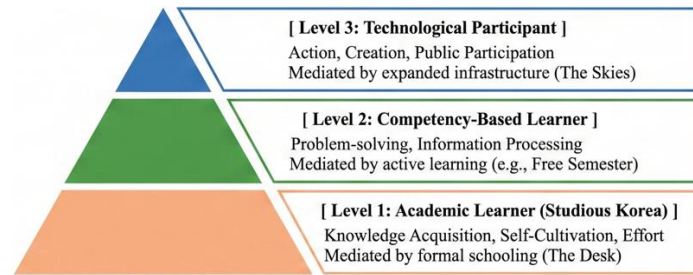
“From Desks to Soaring Skies” describes this movement from classroom-based learning toward a wider range of physical and public settings. The metaphor is not intended to suggest an abandonment of formal academics. The phrase simply highlights the growing variety of institutional settings where students can actively practice and socially organize educational knowledge.

5.5 Layered Educational Subjects and Potential New Forms of Inequality

Technological participation appears to function as an additional layer over traditional academic expectations. Academic achievement remains important, while policy documents increasingly ask students to demonstrate creativity, problem-solving, and digital competence as well (Ministry of Education, 2015a).

What emerges from this pattern is a layered set of expectations for students. Recent policies add technological and competency-based expectations to an already established model of educational achievement. The resulting learner is shaped by a wider set of expectations than before. This expansion also raises a question of inequality. As the state values a wider range of technological competencies, students may face a broader, more complex set of domains in which they must prove their educational distinction (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. The Layered Educational Subject

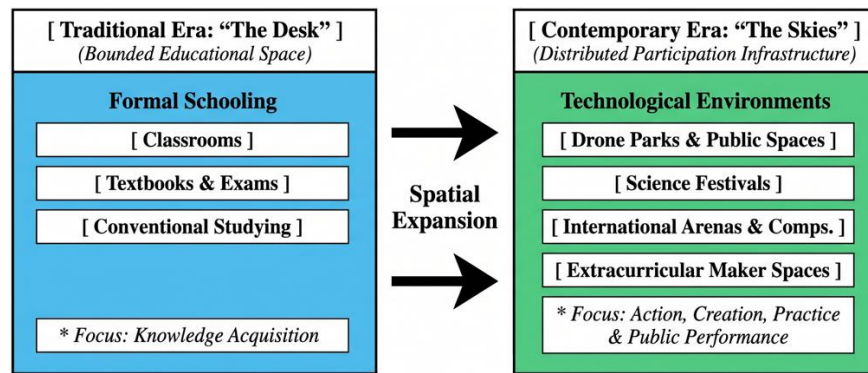


At this stage, however, the layered educational subject remains a theoretical proposition rather than an empirically demonstrated outcome. The present evidence does not show that technological participation is already stratified through shadow education. It does, however, raise the possibility that unequal access to participation infrastructure could create new forms of educational competition. Previous research on educational competition (Seth, 2002; Park, 2018) provides a basis for future research on whether technology-oriented activities become additional objects of educational competition.

5.6 Theoretical and Policy Implications

For scholarship on Korean education, it becomes necessary to separate educational intensity from subject formation. While “education fever” captures competition and aspiration, “Studios Korea” tracks the evolving definition of the desirable learner. In the realm of educational technology, researchers need to shift their focus from mere access and adoption toward the actual institutional conditions that enable participation. For policy, this means that participation infrastructure should be considered an equity issue. Access to meaningful technological participation depends not only on devices, but also on spaces, instructors, organizational support, and opportunities for practice.

Figure 5. From Desks to Soaring Skies: Spatial Expansion of Educational Participation



6. Conclusion

The historical comparison presented in this article points to continuity as well as change in the Korean educational subject from the late nineteenth century to the current digital era. This research reveals a persistent core of values. Education has consistently remained tied to self-development, responsibility, and collective progress, even as the institutional forms and required competencies have shifted dramatically over time. Later reforms increasingly emphasized information processing, creativity, communication, digital competence, experimentation, and active learning (Ministry of Education, 2015a, 2023; Presidential Advisory Council on Education Reform, 1995). Therefore, the contemporary educational subject represents a dynamic reconfiguration of established expectations, not a complete departure from them.

The argument has two main conceptual consequences. First, “Studios Korea” provides a framework for examining the historical construction and rearticulation of the desirable educational subject, complementing approaches centered on education fever, credentialism, and educational competition (Park, 2018; Seth, 2002). Another key contribution is the conceptual distinction among technological literacy, competence, and participation. Keeping these concepts separate makes it possible to identify participation infrastructure as the meso-level mechanism through which policy can become technological activity.

Because this research relies primarily on historical policy documents and official institutional records, it cannot claim to capture individual student experiences. It also does not attempt to establish a direct causal relationship between national policy and technological participation. The historical corpus and drone cases are illustrative rather than exhaustive or fully representative of Korean education.

Seen in this longer historical context, “Studious Korea” is less a fixed national characteristic than a changing set of expectations about what a good learner should know, do, and contribute. Those expectations have survived successive reforms, but their concrete form has changed—from scholarship and national development to competency, digital practice, and participation.

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