

Actual Conditions of Rural Education Stemming from the Shrinking Student Population and their Countermeasures

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■ Purpose of this study:

This study aims to investigate the students' decrease of rural schools and rural education in South Korea and critically analyze previous policies regarding rural education to find appropriate, viable policy options.

■ Research contents and methodology:

This study focused on seven points about rural education in rural areas to achieve the purpose of this research. First, the pattern and actual condition

of whole population change in South Korea were examined. Second, the pattern of whole population change was specifically compared with student population change. Third, we identified the impact of student population change in rural areas on rural education. Fourth, some cases of rural areas were studied to see the change of local population, which include overall and student population, and the transition of local communities and school education while understanding possibilities and limitations of previous educational policies responding to those changes within the rural areas. Fifth, policies related to rural education were critically analyzed. Sixth, we examined how foreign countries, including England, Canada, and Japan responded to the problem of their rural schools. Finally, educational options were suggested to change rural education in relation to the decrease of student population.

To address the issues mentioned above, this project adopted various methods, including document analysis, statistical analysis, individual interview, discourse analysis, Delphi method, conference, and workshop.

■ **The definition and selection of a rural area:**

In this project, 99 local government areas of Guns (군) or Donongbokhabsis (도농복합시) in South Korea were selected as rural areas from 229 local government areas based on the population size and status of those areas. In particular, Guns or Donongbokhabsis with a population of less than 150,000 were included. Guns with a population of 150,000 and more were excluded. In addition, general cities with a population of less than 150,000 were removed while Donongbokhabsis with a population of less than 150,000 were included in this study. This selection and definition of a rural area are grounded on the assumption that a rural area is different from a city, but there are some cities of Donongbokhabsis, which have similar characteristics with rural areas in terms of their population sizes.

■ The change of whole population and decrease of student population in rural areas:

The whole population of South Korea has increased with the rise of average life expectancy even though there has been serious decrease of birth rate since 2000. However, we can see the distinct gap of populations depending on areas. Metropolitan cities, such as Seoul and Busan have experienced population outflow into their satellite cities. Gyeonggido and Gyeongsangnamdo have had population inflow from nearby big cities. On the other hand, Jeollabukdo, Jeollanamdo, and Gyeongsangbukdo, which have many rural areas continuously have had the decrease of their population due to outflow to nearby cities.

Furthermore, there has been a big gap of student population between big cities and rural areas in South Korea while the continuous decline of birth rate has influenced the decrease of population of school age in every level of school education. Student population has increased at schools in new towns near big cities while decreased by more than 50% in some areas of local governments. The problem of decreasing population in rural areas are more serious than the problem of student population. The rate of students with different ethnic backgrounds in rural areas is three times higher than non-rural areas.

Based on the change of student population and other factors, 99 rural areas selected in this project can be classified into four types, including serious decrease, normal decrease, unserious decrease, and no decrease areas. These different types show the gap of student population among rural areas as well as between urban and rural areas.

■ The change of school education led by the decrease of student population in rural areas:

The data source of statistical analysis for this project is grounded on the study about actual conditions and quality of school education conducted by

KEDI to repetitively measure diverse school education for several years.

The first analysis was comparing the actual situation of school education between rural and urban areas, based on the most recently measured data. The second analysis was measuring the area group with gradual decrease of student population against the area group of rapid decrease.

As the result of the first analysis, the gap of actual condition between rural and urban education was found in a number of indicators. The result of the second analysis reveals that there are differences in school education depending on specific regional characteristics among schools in rural areas. Of the 32 indicators, 10 indicators were higher in Eup (읍) regions than in Myeon (면) areas, but 21 indicators were higher in Myeons areas than Eup (읍) regions.

There were few statistically significant differences in the findings of the analysis about the actual situation of rural education with regard to different degrees of the decreasing student population in the regions. About 'students' cultural activities' and 'parents' satisfaction with school operation' in elementary schools, relatively positive results were obtained in the schools where the student population was severely decreased. In middle schools, the indicator of 'teachers' task-related collaboration' showed a more negative direction in schools with the slow decrease of student population than the schools with severe decline.

Focusing on the direction of change (the direction of slope) regardless of statistical significance, elementary schools, in terms of 'home environment', 'the climate and staff of schools' showed a relatively negative changes. On the other hand, in the domains of 'process of teaching and learning' and 'educational outcome,' there were relatively positive changes. Middle schools demonstrated many positive changes in relation to 'home environment' and 'after-school activities' while the strong tendency of negative change was shown in terms of the 'climate and staff of schools.'

These results of analysis showed a variety of educational gaps between rural

and urban areas while rural schools with the rapid decline of student population had seriously negative educational conditions.

■ **The actual condition of rural education by reduced student population:**

Three rural areas, including Buan-Gun, Gunwi-Gun, and Cheongyang-Gun were selected in order to specifically understand the actual situation of rural education stemming from the decrease of student population. These areas have low student populations and recently experienced the rapid decline of student populations.

The research team conducted the document analysis of whole and student populations in rural areas and individual interviews with officials of local governments, school staff, and students' parents to grasp the decrease of student populations, the change of school education according to the decrease, and previous policies responding to these changes.

As the result of analysis, there were the decline of student population in three areas mainly due to students' transfer to neighboring urban areas. The reason for this transfer can be summarized as 'desire for good education' in general while 'good education' has various meanings. In some areas, most students transferred to nearby urban areas seeking diverse educational opportunities to enroll in 'innovation school' or 'autonomous school', but in other areas, students pursued realistic demands for entering to effective schools to get high standardized test scores to finally enter highly ranked universities.

Furthermore, we found considerable cases of students' moving from a small town (Myeon) to a big town (Eup) within the same rural area (Gun). This phenomenon is related to the fact the underlying tendency of local governments policies about scholarship funding and educational programs, which was concentrated in Eup regions.

Students in case areas have common experiences of less or fixed social relationships with their friends. Moreover, there were generally increasing rate of students with different ethnic backgrounds or a single-parent students in the areas. On the other hand, students in those areas experienced collaborative and communication-oriented learning experiences, such as individualized or project-based classes within less competitive and closer relationships within their schools.

Meanwhile, teachers tried to find their own values of their working and pursuing educational experiences which are possible only in their small schools. However, the burden of teaching and administrative works that individual teachers had to bear was considerable. The avoidance of rural schools were witnessed from some teachers.

Some local communities and parents were also actively involved in the operation of curriculum and overall school based on partnership with their teachers. There were some districts of education and local governments which instituted separate policies for rural education. Some policies were designed to revive small rural schools, but other policies were to encourage the consolidation of small schools, the establishment of boarding schools, and successful advancement of students from rural schools into urban schools.

■ **The problems and responses of rural education in foreign countries:**

We found some characteristics from the cases of England, Canada, and Japan. First, in these countries, educational gap between urban and rural areas, especially in terms of the quality of education and academic achievement, was remarkable. In other words, the educational resources of local communities have not been virtuous circles because the school-age population in the rural areas has been declining within the rural areas and, at the same time, leaking

into urban areas. In addition, teachers' burden in rural areas has increased while educational facilities and infrastructure have become increasingly vulnerable.

Second, at the government level, a variety of measures have been taken to deal with these rural issues, including raising funds to guarantee educational opportunities for students and providing support for teachers.

Third, in these countries, school education has been assumed to be an essential condition for the community to function smoothly, that is, a prerequisite for survival of the community. To achieve this goal, partnership between education authorities and local communities have been made to increase the educational capacity of the region.

■ The critical review of existing policies on rural education:

This study conducted the critical review of policy documents about rural education distributed by the Ministry of Education in the form of press materials. The government's policies on rural education have been promoted to solve the educational gap between urban and rural areas, eliminate relative alienation experienced by rural students, and remove the inefficiency of educational administration due to decreased number of students in rural areas.

As the result of the critical discourse analysis about the policies related to rural education in previous national governments, especially Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak regimes, the policies have been promoted under the basis of the abolition of small schools. The policy discourse about rural education in Lee Myung-bak and the Park Geun-hye governments can be summarized as establishing discourse hierarchy centered on the discourse of "optimal size school." On the one hand, the discourse of "optimal size school" is intended to actively break through the issue of abolition of small schools packaging it in "educational" meaning, rather than passively avoiding or defending the

issue.

The abandonment of small schools has been the long-standing issue of school education in rural areas for over 30 years, and there have been some conflicts between rural regions and national government. While the national government has tried to abolish or merge small schools in rural areas into bigger schools in urban areas with the logic of administrative and financial efficiency and equality, many internal participants and civic groups of rural education have resisted the devastation of rural education. By the way, Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye governments have focused on fostering the "optimal scale of school" as the leading model of public education, rather than withdrawing or avoiding this issue. Therefore, the policy was disguised not as a cause of 'devastation' of education, but as a way of 'reviving' school education in rural areas.

In the past, the government has neglected the fact that small schools in rural areas are not "intensively fostered" by actually eliminating the schools from all support. Furthermore, even if rural schools are selected for intensive fostering which is most evident in the discourse of rural schools, the idea of "intensive fostering" is driven by the characteristics of 'rural area' from the viewpoint of the urban areas, rather than based on the actual daily life of rural regions then failing to bolster self-sustaining capacity.

■ **Exploring alternatives:**

This study explored alternative policies to provide possible options for the problem of declining student population and the change of school education in rural areas. This project basically assumed that the process of student population's decreasing in rural areas is a complex phenomenon resulting from not only the natural factor of low birth rate, but also the social factor of population movement from rural into urban areas.

There are specific premises underlying this project. First, the decline of student population is an essential issue for rural education. A student is the most basic source of education then the decline of student population can shake the foundational meaning of education. Second, the decrease of student population in rural areas pertains to population movement, rather than low birth rate. So, this problem is related to various factors because population movement stems from many causes, such as employment, industry, public health care, and culture. Third, policies should be based on long-term perspective to solve the problem because various policy interventions in many fields should be accompanied by changes in people's perception and culture about rural areas. Fourth, the innovation of education is a necessary condition for solving the problem of declining student population in rural areas. This problem cannot be solved only by educational change, but it cannot be solved without the change of education.

Specific methods of this study include 'Problem Trees,' 'Objective Trees,' and 'Logical Framework Approach' generally used in the program development of Official Development Assistance (ODA). In particular, the research team used the methods of Problem Trees and Objective Trees to identify specific objectives and final goals of policies for national government. Then Logical Framework Approach was adopted to create Program Design Matrix.

This study set the problems of rural education through four levels, and they have cause-effect relationship that a problem in a lower level functions as the cause of the problem in upper level. The problem in the top level was identified as 'the decline of student population in rural areas' which is led by 'students' movement from rural to urban areas' and 'low birth rate in rural areas' as the problems in the second level. 'Pressure to go to college,' 'parents' migration into urban areas,' 'the poor conditions of rural school education,' 'the poor conditions of rural communities,' and 'unknown factors' as the

problems of third level led to the problems in the second level. In the bottom level, there are seven problems, including ‘hierarchy system among universities,’ ‘the lack of school curriculum,’ ‘the lack of peer pressure,’ ‘the inconvenience of school commutation,’ ‘the absence of private education service,’ ‘the lack of after-school care service,’ and ‘the absence of leisure and convenience facilities.’

After understanding the structure of the problems of this study, the research team utilized the method of ‘Objective Trees’ to find specific objectives for solving problems. Through this process, ‘the maintenance of student population in rural areas’ was set as the final goal of new policies, and this is the situation which the decline of student population in rural areas as the top level problem is solved. Below the goal, we set four specific objectives, including ‘the decrease of students’ outflow from rural to urban areas in the levels of elementary and middle schools,’ ‘students’ inflow from urban to rural areas,’ ‘households’ or adults’ inflow from urban to rural areas,’ and ‘the alleviation of low birth rate in rural areas.’ While the third and fourth objectives pertain to broader population problems, the research team selected ‘the decrease of students’ outflow from rural to urban areas in the levels of elementary and middle schools’ and ‘students’ inflow from urban to rural areas’ to create Program Design Matrix (PDM) using Logical Framework Approach.

PDM consists of various activities, results, purposes, and assumptions. In this model, each element of activity, result, and purpose is achieved when specific assumptions closely related to each element were met. This study suggested seven specific activities, including the implementation of rural-based school curriculum, the enhancement and expansion of experiential learning opportunities, the dramatic improvement of school commutation, the activation of inter-school programs, financial support for after-school programs, the

research of new value on school education and rural education, and equitable development among universities. In addition, this research included broader social conditions, such as 'the improved conditions of community' and 'mid to long term policy implementation based on legal and institutional supports'

■ **Conclusion:**

The problem of decreasing student population should be recognized as a social problem so that the policy authorities should actively seek better solutions to change the actual situation. It should not be perceived as fixed variables of rural education. This report considered the declining student population in rural areas as a key issue of rural education and explored policy responses to achieve the maintenance of the number of students. This effort will stimulate various policy discussions about the issue in the future. 'Problem Trees,' 'Objective Trees,' and PDM, which have been conducted as the part of this research, need to be more sophisticated in the future with the involvement of a wider range of stakeholders. Moreover, the details of the decreasing student population in rural areas and the analysis of various actual situations in terms of the opportunity, process, and result of rural education need to be deepened.

■ **keyword:** rural education, the decrease of student population in rural areas, small school