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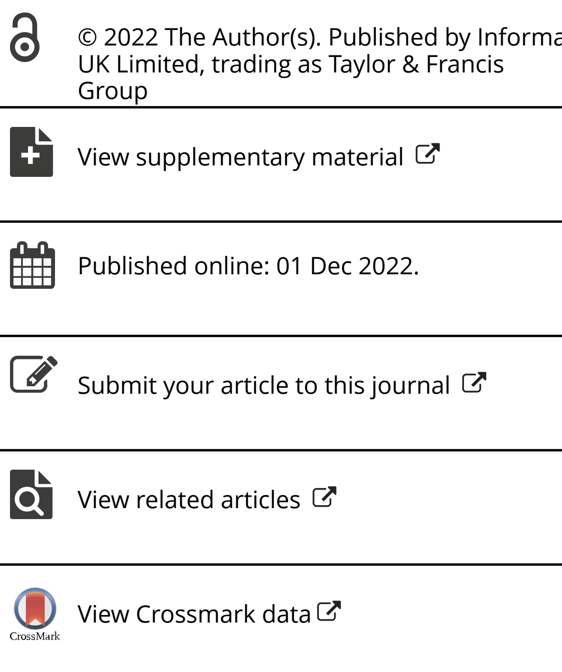

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Happiness, politics and education reform in South Korea: building 'happy human capital' for the future

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ABSTRACT

There has been a growing tendency to use humanistic and utopian goals in the naming and framing of education policies. The case of the Happiness Education Policy (HEP) in South Korea is illustrative and demonstrates the potential of such framing, combined with references to external authorities, to neutralise domestic opposition and generate support from diverse national stakeholders. The HEP focuses on nurturing 'happy human capital' for the future through education initiatives such as the Free Semester/Year Initiative, character education, STEAM-based curriculum, and software education. Through an analysis of a corpus of policy documents and press releases, this article demonstrates how happiness, as a floating signifier, has been redefined in ways that align and support the different sociotechnical imaginaries envisioned by political regimes over the past decade which depart from its humanistic focus.

摘要

教育政策的命名及制定越来越倾向于使用人文主义和乌托邦的目标。韩国的幸福教育政策（HEP）就是一个例子，它显示了这种框架的潜力，结合对外部权威的引用，可以化解国内的反对意见，并获得国内不同利益相关者的支持。韩国幸福教育政策的重点是通过自由学期/学年倡议、品格教育、基于STEAM的课程和软件教育等教育举措，为未来培养"幸福的人力资本"。通过对一系列政策文件和新闻稿的分析，本文展示了幸福作为一个漂浮的能指，是如何被重新定义，以配合和支持过去十年中政权所设想的不同的社会技术愿景，而这些愿景却偏离了人文主义的主旨。

KEYWORDS

Happiness education; floating signifier; happy human capital; bipartisanship; sociotechnical imaginaries; student happiness; creative talents; creativity

关键词

幸福教育; 漂浮的能指; 幸福的人力资本; 两党合作; 社会技术愿景; 学生的幸福; 创新人才

Introduction

With the adoption of the Resolution 66/281 by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2012, the concept of 'happiness' came to prominence not just as an alternative to the prevailing (economic) development paradigm, but also as an important goal of education. Since then, many scholars have explored the relationship between student happiness and different specific variables, which include: self-efficacy, the number of

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hours spent studying, academic performance, school climate (e.g. teacher support, peer support, bullying), quality of life (e.g. eating habits, hours of sleep, family interaction), and future orientation (e.g. career planning) (Bailey and Phillips 2016; Flynn and MacLeod 2015; Jung, Lee, and Shim 2017; Lesani et al. 2016). In parallel, there has been an introduction of 'happiness education' within individual schools, often in the forms of 'positive education programmes' and biweekly well-being lessons (Norrish and Seligman 2015; Morris 2013), and its promotion as an explicit aim of education reform (Tshomo 2016).

There have also been similar trends in recent decades with other policy goals – Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Global Citizenship Education (GCE) to name a few – being embedded into school culture and practices, or even developed into specific subjects. GCE, for example, is now identified as one of the key goals of school education in many countries. Its specific meanings, or the ways in which they manifest, however, are often ambiguous and vary across contexts (Oxley and Morris 2013), especially as neoliberal and imperial ideologies manifest themselves into the school curriculum (Kim 2019). There has also been an array of studies that have explored how these humanistic, and seemingly utopian, concepts emerged and became embedded in both global and national policy agendas (Daun 2009; Hammond and Keating 2018; Pais and Costa 2020). While some highlight their functioning as policy signifiers with transformative power (Hedrén and Linnér 2009), many argue that the essence of these concepts is often translated and redefined through ongoing processes of policy borrowing (Huang, Harvey, and Asghar 2021; Oxley and Morris 2013), which result in their original (intended) meanings being lost (Bamberger and Kim 2022). Similar claims have been argued in many existing studies conducted in Korea, where scholars have explored how humanistic discourses, such as Lifelong Learning and GCE, are incorporated into national education policies and practices in accordance with the country's needs (Cho and Mosselson 2018; Choi and Kim 2018).

Unlike other humanistic policy signifiers in education, there is a particular dearth of literature that sheds light on: (i) the term 'happiness' as a policy keyword; and (ii) what meanings have been attached to it. This article focuses on those themes and argues that the term has been borrowed and employed by national politicians and policymakers as a semantic antidote to the frustration of the public towards rising inequality in wealth, cutthroat competition in education, and high-stress society. It specifically focuses on the case of South Korea (hereinafter, Korea) where, despite being one of the few countries in the world where 'the right to pursue happiness' is defined as the Constitutional Right, the country is portrayed by the OECD (2013) as having the highest percentage of *un*happy students at school. The article analyses the 'Happiness Education Policy' (hereinafter, HEP) reform introduced in 2013 as a new public K-12 education framework with the vision to encourage students to 'develop their dreams and talents' (MOE 2013a).

The promotion of HEP in Korea signalled that the country had taken a progressive and humanitarian turn, putting less emphasis on the cognitive outcomes of education and showing genuine concern for students' physical, social, and emotional well-being. This, in turn, suggested that the country is actively challenging the stereotypes of its hypercompetitive education system marked by rote learning, pupil stress, credentialism and commodification. This article, however, argues that two consecutive governments in Korea – right-wing New Frontier Party (NFP) government (2013–2017) followed by the left-wing Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) (2017–2022) – ascribed the polysemous

concept of happiness with meanings which embodied the respective government's underlying political and economic ideologies and their sociotechnical imaginaries of the future. Accordingly, the term 'happiness' is viewed as a 'floating signifier' (Laclau 1996): a signifier which continually slides between distinctive – sometimes contradicting – projects according to the nature of the task for which it is employed. The article, therefore, particularly focuses on the intent of these governments, particularly on the role the term 'happiness' plays as a floating signifier in constructing the sociotechnical imaginaries of the two governments and legitimating the need for creative and happy human capital.

A more in-depth exploration of the extant literature on floating signifier and the functions of sociotechnical imaginaries in policy rhetoric is provided in the following section to demonstrate the ways in which new policies are legitimated without strong opposition. This is followed by an overview of the different socio-political backgrounds prior to the 2012 Presidential Election of Korea and how these disparate but interconnected strands gave rise to the term 'happiness' as an overarching policy agenda. The analysis then focuses on 'happiness', which emerged as a policy signifier and generic antidote to the social problems of socioeconomic marginalisation, increasing teenager stress and suicide rates, and public dissatisfaction towards the government.

The analysis draws on official state-level documents published during the time of the two governments, including those produced by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and government-funded research institutions such as the Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI) (for the full list of documentary data sources, see Supplemental data). These documents represent the two governments' overall narrative of their visions of the future of education, which allowed the examination of their underlying political and economic ideologies in relation to education. Using a general qualitative approach (see Thomas 2006), the documents are analysed through a rigorous process of repeated reading, identifying, and coding of emergent themes. The primary focus lies on identifying and unpacking the meanings attributed by the right-wing NFP government (2013-2017) to 'happiness' and, subsequently, by the left-wing DPK government. The findings are then complemented by interviews with policy intermediaries which examined subnational policy actors' interpretation of the role happiness plays as a policy signifier.

Floating signifiers and the promotion of ideological agendas

As the name denotes, a floating signifier is one where what is *signified* or the meaning is unstable and unfixed. Since it has no single agreed-upon definition, the signifier can be articulated differently, or even be viewed differently, across different discourses (Torfing 1999, 301). A floating signifier emerges when there is an attempt to incorporate new demands (i.e. new meanings and visions promoted by new political actors and agendas) into existing chains of demands (i.e. the meanings that constituted the original signifier) advanced by earlier social agents (Laclau 1996). These new demands lead to a reconfiguration of the existing chain of demands and resignification of the signifier over time, where the previous meanings – despite their earlier contingencies – eventually get abstracted and dislocated from their historical and political contextual complexities (Beech 2009). In other words, floating signifiers involve a semiotic process whereby the complexity of the real social world gets reduced and selectively defined into particular (economic) imaginaries (Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008).

Such a flexibility opens up a discursive space for political actors to utilise seemingly humanistic – or, although not always, utopian – floating policy signifiers (e.g. happiness, well-being, global citizenship, sustainability) to offer the public the promissory vision, or illusion, of a better future. What is notable in this harnessing of humanistic floating policy signifiers among political actors is the assemblage – or what Robertson and Dale (2015) describe as the 'education ensemble' – of culture (in the case of this research, the ways in which 'happiness' is understood in a particular context), politics (e.g. of whose and what knowledge counts or prioritised), and economics (e.g. economic system and logics shaping the education system). This understanding of the education ensemble provides a new perspective to see a phenomenon, such as globalisation, as a 'project' rather than an exogenous or accidental course of events. This turns attention towards the power relations and the (in)visible mechanisms and agency (e.g. exercised by the OECD through its PISA tests) within the production of education policy involved in both disrupting and determining the nexus of the three determinations (culture, politics, and economy) in education.

This article interprets the promotion of 'happiness' and 'HEP' as central to each government's development, promotion, and legitimation of sociotechnical imaginaries (STIs), which are future-oriented and collectively imagined visions of social life reflected in the nationwide scientific and technological projects (Jasanoff and Kim 2009; Jasanoff 2015). These imaginaries constructed, challenged and compromised by a multitude of actors play important roles in shaping normative expectations of what constitutes a good society and how it can be realised. As Jasanoff (2015, 4) argues:

> Imaginaries … encode not only visions of what is attainable through science and technology but also of how life ought, or ought not, to be lived; in this respect they express a society's shared understandings of good and evil.

As an analytical framework, the concept of STIs provides a basis for understanding how future uncertainties are framed and how they can be tackled through technological improvements. The imaginaries then serve as proxies for promoting the ideological agendas of the political stakeholders, echoing what Beckert (2016, 9) described as 'fictional expectations'; that is, imaginations and expectations of the future serve as *interpretative frames* that enable political actors to orient decision-making in line with the imaginaries they pursue.

The literature on STIs has focused on the discursive strategies promoted by international organisations, national government, policymakers and, more recently, by the press (Schiølin 2020; Vicente and Dias-Trindade 2021). One of the prominent strategies employed by these actors is the dialectics of pessimism and optimism. Schiølin (2020, 549) argues that the STIs of the 'fourth industrial revolution (4IR)' have often been tied to a binary logic of pessimism and optimism, which offers only two possible futures 'one in which 4IR creates happiness and prosperity, and one in which 4IR creates a dystopian, inhumane and mechanical future'. In other words, the STIs, as proxies, became yet another discursive tool through which the policy actors advance their ideologies and policy agendas. They embed what Stone (2012, 158) identifies as two broad but intertwined storylines that define and legitimate policy issues. The storyline of 'decline and rising' bases itself upon the assumption that something that has worked well in the past is no longer functioning or sustainable, and thus is causing the 'decline'. This

storyline commonly involves facts and figures that could both ‘problematise’ the situation and construct the need to reform, persuading the receivers that the reform would put the society back on the ‘rising’ track. The second story line of helplessness and control revolves around the idea of power and inevitability; the narrative, according to Stone (2012, 165–166), generally goes:

> The situation is bad. We have always believed that the situation was out of our control, something we had to accept but could not influence. Now, however, let me show you that in fact we can control things.

What characterises this narrative is the oscillation between the state of powerlessness and (disguised) empowerment, where the latter is only achievable if one accepts the prescribed solution. Such a binary logic, in turn, obscures the possibility of any alternative futures (for bounded imaginaries, see Smith and Tidwell 2016), and, by offering reassuring and promising imaginations, lowers the psychological barriers that the public may have against the future uncertainties. Auld and Morris (2021) develop a second storyline through a heuristic schema, presented in three Acts. Act 1 sets the ‘scene’ by identifying an undesirable ‘crisis’ and, in so doing, heightening the public anxiety. Act 2 introduces a (hopeful) path to salvation. Act 3 finally presents a ‘better future’ that can only be achieved when the proposed solutions are accepted. The schema serves as a useful interpretive lens through which to examine how political actors craft strategic narratives to secure and forge their legitimacy.

Scholars such as Jasanoff and Kim (2009) and Guston (2014) also stress how opportunities and challenges experienced in the present have an impact upon individuals’ foresights and predictions of the future, leading to a constructive and anticipatory approach to governance. Recently, studies have analysed how education institutions and policy actors deal with the uncertainties brought by rapid industrial changes (Matthews, McLinden, and Greenway 2021). Unsurprisingly, a range of current STIs describe the future in terms of ‘sustainable development’, ‘the fourth industrial revolution’, ‘digitalisation’, or ‘artificial intelligence’ which have been at the centre of futuristic education agendas of many nation-states; for example, *the Digivision 2030 project* launched by the Finnish government and the Korean government’s introduction of compulsory Computer Science subject at lower-secondary school level. Rahm (2021) and Tafdrup (2020) argue that different political and social problems are increasingly reduced – or converted – to ‘educational problems’, wherein the imaginaries of, and aspirations for the future influence expectations as to what knowledge and skills are needed and how education will serve to transform individuals to succeed in the near future. This may, in turn, serve to pinpoint the role of individuals in the ‘coproduction of technological and societal developments’ (Felt 2015, 104).

The implications for education policies driven by these imaginaries are profound; not only can they direct policy actors to focus on specific sets of cognitive competencies (e.g. problem-solving skills) and ‘which technological artefacts people should develop and learn to use’ (Tafdrup 2020, 36), but they also permeate into every aspect of personal life. The latter is particular evident in the policy emphasis on what this article describes as ‘skillification’ of individuals’ non-cognitive domains – for example, as OECD (2019, 3) has recently stated: ‘by paring the artificial intelligence of computers with the cognitive, social and emotional capabilities of humans … we educate first-class humans, not second-class robots’.

Background: prior to the 2012 Presidential Election

Since the late 2000s, there has been a sudden resurgence of references to happiness and well-being in policy discourses, particularly in the Global North (Binkley 2014; Delhey and Kroll 2013). This can largely be attributed to the spread of the 'post-GDP (Gross Domestic Product)' (or 'beyond GDP') agenda. Particularly influential has been the 2009 report published by then French President Nicolas Sarkozy's Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, also known as the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission. The Sarkozy Commission recognised the limitations of traditional indicators of development, such as GDP and Gross National Product (GNP), and called for a more holistic approach to development (see Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi 2009). This prompted both supranational agencies (e.g. the OECD) and nation-states to develop new indicators and measures that can comprehensively capture the non-economic aspects of development, most notably, social and personal well-being of individuals and the society. In 2010, the then UK Prime Minister David Cameron launched a happiness (well-being) index, emphasising that the nation's well-being needs to be measured alongside traditional economic metrics (Hutchison 2010). The year 2012 also gave a rise to policies promoting happiness worldwide as the UNGA proclaimed 20 March as the International Day of Happiness based on the Resolution 66/281 'Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development' introduced by Bhutan, a country which promoted the concept of Gross National Happiness as early as the 1970s, denouncing the continued reliance on GDP as an overall measure of progress.

Subsequently, for the first time in the PISA 2012 survey, the OECD introduced new questions on student happiness ('I feel happy at school') and satisfaction at school ('I am satisfied with my school'). After Korea ranked last and second-to-last, respectively, among both OECD and OECD partner countries (OECD 2013), the media was alarmed as the news swept through the country which prompted the rise of educational crisis narratives, having implications for the country's extant political, economic and educational projects.

The sudden shift of attention from the country's outstanding performance in PISA's cognitive assessments (i.e. reading, mathematics and science) to its poor performance in non-cognitive dimensions served as a major hindrance in the government's operationalisation of nation-branding. Over the past two decades, the country has consistently ranked as one of the top-performing countries in major international large-scale assessments, namely the PISA and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Renowned for being one of the top-performing education systems, governments like the United Kingdom (UK) and top consultancies such as McKinsey identified Korea as a model for emulation with respect to pedagogy, school autonomy and teacher quality (Barber and Mourshed 2007; Morris 2012). With the introduction of non-cognitive outcomes of education such as happiness and well-being, the country's pride in producing talented and competitive individuals turned into humility. International perceptions of the Korean education system made a dramatic turn, from what Barry McGaw then Director for Education of the OECD has described as: '[b]y the measure of PISA, Korean education is clearly among the very best in the OECD that is something with which Korea can be very well pleased' (McGaw 2005, 13) to what Andreas Schleicher stated in October 2019:

> … although Korean students are performing very well academically in international comparisons, such academic success comes with a great deal of anxiety that these students experience routinely. (Schleicher 2019, no pagination)

This became a problem for the government in their nation-branding project, which had at its core the promotion of a successful education system, or more broadly, in relation to the promotion of sustainable (economic) development in the age of 4IR, which has at its core the creativity-happiness nexus. The country's success in education now appeared to come at the cost of student well-being and psychological distress due to excessive competition, long hours of studying, and even the highest suicide rate among the OECD countries (Sellar, Thompson, and Rutkowski 2017; Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014).

Excessive pressure on students to succeed on their tests or to enter the most prestigious institutions has been described as the 'education fever', which, in turn, contributed to the country's low performance in student well-being measures (Yoon and Järvinen 2016). However, the then President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) and his right-wing GNP government's guiding principles of choice and competition (e.g. the 300 Upper Secondary School Diversification Project), and market-oriented initiatives that increased the accountability of schools and students (e.g. No Student Below Basic Level policy; National Assessment of Educational Achievement) were not mitigating the education fever and academic pressure. Instead, their policies were blamed for driving elitism in the educational system and for increasing the student drop-out rate, higher individual expenses on private tuition and teenager suicide rates. All this public dissatisfaction resulted in a deepening polarisation and, by the end of Lee Myung-bak's presidential term in 2012, its public approval rating fell to 20%.

As a response to the rapid fall in the approval rating, the right-wing GNP formed an Emergency Response Commission in December 2011, appointing Park Geun-hye as the chairperson of the Commission. Soon after her appointment, Park brought the phrase *happiness of the people* to the fore and sought to reclaim the trust of the public:

> Korea has achieved growth in the process of overcoming the financial crisis, but the warmth has not been well spread to people of the nation. I believe that the most important goal of the policy should now be the happiness of the people. What is the meaning of growth when people are not happy? We will change the policy paradigm so that the happiness of the people becomes the competitiveness of the nation. (Park quoted in Kim 2012, para. 3)

Although they belong to the same party, throughout the speech Park drew a clear line between the future policy direction of the GNP and the policies of the government led by Lee Myung-bak. The Commission then promised that the party will undertake a major revision in both its political manifesto and policy priorities (Cho 2012), subsequently renaming the party the New Frontier Party (NFP; *Saenuri-dang*) a year before the end of Lee's presidential term. These changes, thus, illustrate the sense of urgency within the conservative party for drawing a strategic distinction from the Lee government and, in so doing, (re)establishing its party legitimacy (Kim, Choi, and Park 2022).

Happiness and 'Creative Talents': The right-wing NFP government

In July 2012, Park Geun-hye announced her presidential bid for the 2012 presidential election as the right-wing NFP (formerly the GNP) candidate. On that occasion, Park introduced a political vision of 'a new era of people's happiness and hope'. The word happiness appeared 23 times in her speech, where Park proposed that, if elected, the government would launch a 'Fifty Million Citizen's Happiness Plan' that encompasses three pillars of (i) economic democratisation; (ii) welfare expansion; and (iii) job creation

(*Kyunghyang Shinmun* 2012). The notion of economic democratisation, in particular, requires special attention as it is the notion usually employed by the left-wing politicians, calling for the regulation of conglomerates in the name of corporate governance reform, fair opportunities for socio-economically disadvantaged populations, as well as the support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to operate under a fair business culture so that the SMEs could compete with the conglomerates. In fact, there was little difference between the election promises made by Park (right-wing) and the other candidates Moon Jae-in (left-wing) and Ahn Cheol-soo (centrist), both of whom adopted economic democratisation as their campaign slogans. The opposition party candidate Moon Jae-in, for example, also came up with an overarching slogan of 'People come first' on the basis of the country's founding principle *Hongik Ingan* that posits the importance of promoting welfare and prosperity of all humankinds. The 2012 presidential election, thus, illustrates an interesting example of how the two camps with seemingly contrasting political ideologies introduced, and subsequently translated, the rising discourse of happiness into their own political agendas.

Park won the 2012 presidential election, successfully succeeding Lee Myung-bak of the same party. The crux of Park's education policy pledges was the proposal for Happiness Education Policy (HEP) reform under the slogan 'Happiness Education for All: Creative Talents Shape the Future'. Following the election, the MOE introduced an overarching framework of HEP, which encompasses three disparate visions that would contribute to the cultivation of creative talents: (i) normalisation of school education (which generates an impression, and even further, a crisis narrative that the current school education is in an 'abnormal' state and needs 'immediate' fixing); (ii) competency-oriented society; and (iii) equitable educational opportunities. What the government meant by 'happiness', however, remained ambiguous. In its 'Operation Plans for Happiness Education and Cultivation of Creative Talents', the MOE (2013a, 2) proposed a wide range of disparate initiatives, including 'the (Exam) Free Semester Initiative', 'strengthening of character education', 'activation of physical education', 'promotion of a violence-free school environment', 'supporting students' career planning', 'cultivating regional universities', 'fostering meritocratic society', and many more. The floating nature of the meaning of happiness became more evident as the government in parallel pursued a neo-liberal education agenda (e.g. expanding the autonomy of private schools, keeping specialist independent schools at the upper-secondary level) based on the claim that respecting students' aptitude and talent is the first step of HEP (MOE 2014b; Yun 2014).

It is also notable that HEP has been legitimated by situating its objectives within the broader economic imaginaries of the government. The economic orientation of the HEP has been spelt out by both then President Park and many policymakers. President Park, during the 2014 symposium 'Achieving HOPE (Happiness of People through Education): Innovation in Korean Education for a Creative Economy', pointed out that:

> the success of her trademark 'creative economy' initiative hangs on establishing a new education model that encourages students to think creatively, in a departure from the conventional ones focused on rote memorization of facts. (Park quoted in Yun 2014, para. 1)

Park's statement proposes creativity as the antithesis of rote learning, particularly with regard to problem-solving skills. It is then posited that developing students' creativity is a steppingstone towards achieving a 'creative economy', which would, in turn, ensure

happiness – and *hope* as the acronym of the symposium suggests – for all people. The notions of both the creative economy and creativity, however, are not defined across the policy documents. While the use of the latter as a buzzword is nothing new in the field of education (Beghetto 2005), the ways in which the creative economy was defined and promoted by Park's right-wing NFP government was a far cry from other initiatives elsewhere; for example, in the late 1990s UK, Tony Blair's Labour government promoted the convergence of culture and arts with creativity. In 2001, John Howkins, a leading figure on creative business, proposed a more encompassing description of the term as comprising of science, patent, arts, and cultural industries (Howkins 2002). The Korean version of a creative economy, however, deviates from both versions as its focus lies on the convergence of the country's mainstream industries, such as the manufacturing industries, that are facing the limits to growth with new growth engines of science and technology (Ministry of Science, ICT and Future Planning 2013). This reflects the country's deep-rooted national imaginary of 'technological developmentalism', which posits technology as a key vehicle for economic growth, which traces back to the 1960s when developmentalism operated as the nationalist project under the Park Chung-hee regime (1961-1979), or even further to the period of modernisation in the late nineteenth century (Kim 2018). As a key feature of the developmental state (Woo-Cumings 1999), the imaginary of technological developmentalism has for long been firmly entrenched in the country's economic and technological governance, privileging economic growth over other social problems (Kim 2021). According to Kim (2018, 12), the concept of the creative economy has similarly been driven by the motives of technological innovation and economic growth, rather than of human enhancement or sustainable development.

Across the education policy documents published under the right-wing NFP government led by Park, the term creativity has been used alongside two other key terms: (i) *(creative)* character development; and (ii) *(creative)* talents (MOE 2013c). The former involved an initiative to promote the humanities movement, enhancing the synergetic relationship between the arts and sciences by shifting from a STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) to a STEAM-based curriculum (Science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics), and introducing an integrated curriculum of liberal arts and science, as well as enhancing character education (MOE 2014a, 2015a). What these documents described as 'creative talents' also revealed divergences from the government's economic agenda; that is, whereas MOE documents stressed having a good character as a core competency of 'future talents' (e.g. MOE 2013b), the essential competencies illustrated in the government's creative economy operation plans only include cross-disciplinary knowledge, creativity, problem-solving skills, and 'risk-taking spirits' (Ministry of Science, ICT and Future Planning 2013, 13). Further research may be needed to understand the different meanings associated with the notions of character and character education.

Happiness and 'Innovative Talents': The left-wing DPK government

Despite the impeachment of Park and the election of Moon Jae-in the left-wing DPK candidate, in 2017 the initiatives introduced by the right-wing NFP government continued and even expanded under the left-wing DPK government. The most notable example is the Free Semester Initiative (hereinafter, FSI), which was the flagship policy of the right-wing NFP government's HEP reform, which exempts lower-secondary school students

from high-stakes examination pressure over the course of one semester. Students are instead encouraged to engage in a variety of interactive curriculum and extracurricular activities (e.g. club activities, career experiences) that are designed to help them explore their interests and dreams.[1] However, the initiative was not without concerns and criticisms (Park, Cho, and Jang 2022), particularly with regard to the long-term sustainability of the policy, falling scholastic standards of students, and the regional and social inequalities in their access to educational and vocational infrastructures (Shin, Hwang, and Kim 2015). Despite these concerns, the left-wing DPK government expanded the FSI to the Free Year Initiatives (hereafter, FYI). One of the interviewees revealed *why* FYI was legitimated:

> There is hardly any check and balance in Korean educational policymaking. We have come to a bipartisan agreement on 'Happiness Education' agenda, and have had same agents – except the principal agents – over a long time. If you work with same people over and over again, it makes us harder to oppose them. (Policy intermediary Interview #1, 2021)

This was precisely the case with Park's FSI. Back in the 2012 Presidential campaign, then left-wing DPK party candidate Moon Jae-in proposed to benchmark Ireland's Transition Year (TY) programme, signalling the possibility of borrowing the 'best practices' from elsewhere by emphasising that the TY model 'would help unhappy children who lost their dreams to find their dreams again' (Moon quoted in Lee 2012, para. 2-3). He then suggested an initiative called *Happy Grade 8* project where all Grade 8s would be freed from curriculum studies or examinations and have a chance to explore different career options either for a duration of a semester or for a year. As the overarching vision of Moon's proposal was largely in line with the right-wing NFP's FSI, despite the many concerns over the sustainability of the FSI, the subsequent left-wing DPK government led by Moon could not simply discard the existing FSI as it would have signalled the left-wing's lack of a coherent vision. So instead, the government constantly promoted the efficacy of FSI and proceeded to expand the initiative to a year-long programme (The Government of the Republic of Korea 2020).

Similarly, the overarching policy signifier of happiness remained in the DPK government's policy language as well, despite the government's earlier call for a paradigm shift from 'the era of people's happiness' to 'the era of people's sovereignty' (National Planning Committee 2017, 7). On the 75th national liberation anniversary of the country in 2020, President Moon reiterates the Pursuit of Happiness clause in the Constitution and announced it as the goal of the government:

> realize an age of Article 10 of our Constitution, in which all citizens shall be assured of human worth and dignity and have the right to the pursuit of happiness … [and to fulfil] … the spirit of Article 10, which stipulates the individual's right to the pursuit of happiness, as the goal guiding the incumbent government. (Moon quoted in Lee 2020, para. 1)

The term 'happiness' was then used as a modifier for many of the government's educational initiatives, such as *the Happiness Education District Project (haengbok gyoyuk jigu saup)* which sets out to promote local educational communities wherein schools and local communities communicate and cooperate with each other. Interestingly, the name '*Happiness' Education District* is often used interchangeably with '*Innovation' Education District*, according to the region in which the project

is implemented, revealing that the floating nature of the term left ample room for resignification.

Since the inauguration of the Moon Jae-in's left-wing DPK government, the term 'innovation' has been at the core of the government's economic agenda under the slogan of *innovative growth*. However, the sociotechnical imaginaries associated with technological developmentalism and the 4IR, as well as the meanings the government associated with the innovative growth slogan showed few differences to the right-wing NFP's slogan of creative economy. For example, the DPK government justified the promotion of innovative growth by arguing:

> It is necessary to establish an economic model of fairness and innovation that can alleviate the suffering and anxiety of the people caused by low-growth, deepening of economic uncertainty and social inequality, and by the unfair economic structure. (National Planning Committee 2017, 9)

Both the creative economy slogan and HEP led by Park's right-wing NFP government, and the innovative growth slogan and education policies led by Moon's left-wing DPK government are solidly grounded in the discourses of the future imaginaries. Just as the former stressed cultivating 'creative talents of the future', who possess both 'humanistic imagination' and 'creative power in scientific technology', through an integrated curriculum of liberal arts and science, and software education (MOE 2014b), the left-wing DPK government reiterated the expansion of software education and STEAM research as a steppingstone for 'creative convergence talents' (MOE 2017, 87) and 'innovative talents' (MOE 2021, 11).

This demonstrates how the floating and 'unfixed' meaning of 'happiness' allowed a form of implicit bipartisanship between the two opposing parties to develop, which extended beyond the realm of education policy, as one of the policy intermediaries explained:

> The government has put the word 'happiness' in all the policies they produced. Politicians would talk about the happiness of the people, but they neither measured the level of happiness nor came up with direct programs that would increase the feeling of happiness. Happiness is just added as a modifier to all the policies the government has been carrying out, even to those that are not directly related to happiness. (Policy intermediary Interview #2, 2021)

Such bipartisan support for the role of education in 'cultivating talents' for the future economy is concerning in many ways. First, *alternative visions* of both education and what the aspirable future would look like are likely to be policed and erased by the political powers, resonating what Smith and Tidwell (2016) described as 'bounded imaginaries'. Second, the contradictions apparent in their 'floating' use of 'happiness' in education policy discourses go unchallenged due to the absence of check and balance mechanisms. This brings to the possibility of 'epistemological delusion' as Tröhler (2021) recently pointed out in his criticism towards the extant research that echoes (at a surface level) the 'globality' embedded in their unit of study (e.g. the use of PISA results in national policymaking). While Korean policymakers speak of 'happiness education' in terms of opening up a space for individuals to pursue their dreams and talents, the dominant imaginary embedded in their happiness discourses calls for the importance of equipping individuals with both positive and happy mindset, as well as with the skills and competencies

essential for the realisation of the country's sociotechnical imaginaries, namely technological developmentalism.

Discussion and conclusion

A close look at the policy framework and discourses of the two governments revealed surprising divergences from the initial proposal and legitimation of 'happiness' as a humanistic antidote to a wide array of social problems that emerged as a crisis prior to the national elections. HEP became a floating signifier, where the ambiguity of the term 'happiness' enabled continuous resignifications with distinct, or even disparate, meanings, associated with creativity, character, humanistic imagination, and digital skills, that were the competencies which the governments deemed as essential for the future economy. This article corroborated previous research that analysed how global humanitarian goals such as lifelong learning and GCE have been redefined to fit with neoliberal economic principles and a human capital agenda (Auld and Morris 2019; Elfert 2017; Goren and Yemini 2018; Grey and Morris 2022).

The analysis also revealed the active role of the state in delineating the national visions of the future. Korea is one of the few countries in which 'the right to pursue happiness' is specified in the Constitution as a fundamental right. By echoing the Constitution, the two governments promoted happiness as an overarching national vision and that, by introducing the HEP, the country is providing a 'safety net' for individuals to realise their dreams and talents. But at the same time, a recurring policy discourse emerged, across both the right- and left-wing governments, that it is through HEP that the country can cultivate creative, innovative, and ultimately *happy* human capital who are well-equipped for the opportunities and challenges that the 4IR brings. In other words, the promotion of happiness as both an overarching national policy vision and an aim of education policy created a neoliberal vision of an 'ideal citizen'. Based on the analysis of the corpus of policy documents the 'ideal citizen' is one who is 'happy' (by having a positive character and mindset) and is capable of contributing to the country's 'creative and innovative' future economy through individual skills, talents, and competencies (e.g. creativity, problem-solving skills) they have developed through the HEP (see also Kim and Kim 2021).

This resonates the earlier observation of Wrenn (2016, 461) that a neoliberal project often gains ground, if not reinforced, by articulating the rhetoric of the welfare state, instead of rejecting it. The HEP – despite being portrayed as a 'safety net' that ensures equal opportunities for individuals in their pursuit of dreams and talents – appears to have morphed into alternative visions of 'workfare' and responsibility of the self, which conveniently transform the labour market to adapt to the needs of the future economy. But, as Wrenn argued, the project is also sustained by an 'anti-welfare' rhetoric, where individuals, as citizens, are portrayed by the state as 'selves of a particular type, with individualised subjectivity as well as similar kinds of emotions, aspirations, and hopes waiting to be recognised and fulfilled' (Brunila and Ylöstalo 2020, 343). This suggests that, whilst the governments retained their welfarist position by portraying themselves as providers of HEP as a 'public good' (Kim 2004), individuals are, in essence, responsibilised for their 'unhappiness' and performance of non-cognitive skills (or lack thereof).

Sociotechnical imaginaries in Korea have long been rooted in technological solutionism with an instrumental view of science and technology as a vehicle for economic

growth (Kim 2015; Kim 2018). The growing social concerns about exacerbating socioeconomic polarisation and 'unhappiness' have thus created challenges to these techno-developmentalist STIs and led to the introduction of 'happiness' as an alternative vision of social order. However, while it is striking to see that the two governments' futuristic visions of the 4IR did not differ greatly, it is equally concerning that the existing techno-developmentalist STIs have confined the political rhetoric of happiness within a narrow functionalistic focus on competence and skills, most notably creativity (Grey and Morris 2022). This not only reveals that HEP was built on positive psychology-based human resource development purposes, but also the two governments' untroubled conflation of happiness and creativity, failing to acknowledge the mixed views towards the relationship between the two (Acar et al. 2021; Simonton 2014). The 'conflation' of the two may enable the Korean government to distance itself from its long-standing imaginary of technological developmentalism (Kim 2018), especially by bringing '(first-class) humans' at the forefront of the discussion (OECD 2019, 3). But whether this 'distancing' was successful remains questionable as 'happiness', which used to be considered predominantly a cultural artefact, is increasingly entangled with the country's neoliberal project. A similar pattern can be found in Singapore which, in the pursuit of student well-being and holistic education in a highly competitive school system (Klerides 2021; Le and Edwards 2022), introduced a series of reforms that are aimed to prepare students for the future economy by linking 'creativity' and 'critical thinking' to the idea of enhancing social-emotional competencies of students (Ng 2020; Tan et al. 2017). Whether this nexus of creativity-happiness is sustainable is also questionable, especially considering that the OECD is now planning to align its upcoming 'Creative Thinking' assessment in PISA 2022 with the idea of preparing students for the future job market, instead of promoting 'happiness'.

This article, therefore, builds on an extensive literature in both Comparative Education and STIs around the different discursive strategies both national governments and international organisations use to advance their economic and political agendas (Auld and Morris 2021; Schiølin 2020). This article suggests that by using 'humanistic' floating signifiers such as happiness, both the polysemic nature of the term and the complexity embedded within the 'education ensemble' are not only reduced but also selectively defined to advance specific (economic) imaginaries of the future.

Note

1. Since its introduction, the FSI received great interest where, following the operation of pilot program in 42 lower-secondary schools in 2013, the number of schools voluntarily implementing the reform reached up to 2,551 (79.6% of all lower-secondary schools in Korea) by the end of 2015 (MOE 2015b). In light of the interest expressed by the public, in 2016, the Korean government officially implemented this system in all lower-secondary schools.

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