

The Journey of New Hope

Jaekyung Lee

I feel grateful to both WERA and IEA for supporting my month-long visit to the University of Pretoria, South Africa. It gave me an unforgettable and invaluable opportunity to immerse myself in this research journey. My experiences there were eye-opening and transformative. During my stay there, I have learned a lot about this beautiful nation and people. I met and collaborated with many great researchers, including Dr. Liesel Ebersohn, Dr. Funke Omidire, and other colleagues. I also visited a variety of local schools, including urban and rural, public and private, mainstream and special schools, where I met many dedicated education leaders and practitioners who strived to transform students' lives.

As a Korean-American education researcher, I wanted to find out cross-cultural insights and policy lessons that South Africa can learn from Korea; despite many differences, both share historical trauma of oppression and resilience. I have conducted research using TIMSS (IEA international assessment data) to examine protective factors that influence academic resilience among at-risk students. Then I gave my research talk entitled "Transforming Lives through Education: A Comparative Study of Korea and South Africa." In this seminar, I enjoyed sharing my research and interacting with local audience. Some key findings include: (1) Post-apartheid education inequality persists in South Africa where progress towards narrowing the racial/ethnic achievement gaps is reversed after the pandemic, and (2) South Africa lags behind Korea in achievement, not only because of higher adversities and lower assets but also due to more negative adversity effects (i.e., greater vulnerability) and less positive asset effects (i.e., less returns on education).

The key takeaway of my study implies "untapped potential", that is, "waste of talents and resources", possibly due to systemic inequalities and inefficiencies in South Africa. It calls for removing systemic barriers such as racism, conflict and corruption, while breaking the vicious cycle of poverty, unequal education and unemployment. Notwithstanding such challenges, I have seen some signs of resilience and hope for changes, particularly among educators and students. Systemic education reform requires a comprehensive set of policy enablers such as more funding, higher standards, better teachers, stronger accountability, more capacity-building and incentives. Further, it calls for collective efficacy with cultural shifts from deficit/status quo mindset to asset/growth mindset.

Thirty years ago, Nelson Mandela gave a powerful vision for new South Africa, that is, "one nation, one people with freedom and justice for all". This dream is still alive and resonates

among people in the world as well as South Africa. As Mandela said, education is the most powerful weapon to change the world. Like the 'Cape of Good Hope' which symbolizes the potential for a new route, we as educators and education researchers should hope and fight for the better world. *"A dream is not a dream until it is shared by the entire community" (Khoi proverb).*