

First ICMI-East Asia Regional Conference on Mathematics Education: A Personal Report

Kyungsoon Jeon

The First International Commission on Mathematical Instruction, East Asia Regional Conference on Mathematics Education (ICMI-EARCOME) was held at the National University of Education in Chungju, Korea from August 17 through 21, 1998. The ICMI-EARCOME was the first international conference for mathematics education held in Korea and was organized by the cooperative efforts of three East Asian countries—Korea, Japan, and China. There was a significant number of participants from other countries such as Australia, Philippines, Singapore, United Kingdom, and the U.S. English was the official language of the conference.

It was interesting for me to observe that researchers from Korea, Japan, and China claimed that they perceived serious problems in the mathematics education in their countries in spite of the high achievement of their students in international comparison studies such as SIMS and TIMSS. They claimed that their mathematics education is in crisis. And they attributed the crisis to the highly competitive educational systems in their societies and the role of mathematics as a gatekeeper in the competitive system.

Professor Dianzhou Zhang, from East China Normal University, addressed the success of the students from East Asia regions in the TIMSS results in a plenary talk. He pointed out that pupils' excellent performance in the international study should not be equated with success of mathematics education in these countries. In fact, his point was quite similar to my observation of the ICME-EARCOME in general.

Considering the impact that the TIMSS results have had in much of the U.S. society, I thought it was noticeable that there was not much discussion on the students' good performance on the TIMSS. As far as I understood, there was no atmosphere of taking the TIMSS results as something to be proud of among the three countries. In some sense, I thought the educators from the three countries seemed to try to be blind the TIMSS results intentionally. Rather, they thought high performance on the TIMSS was the reflection of the problems that their educational systems have.

The presentations from educators and researchers from the three countries dealt with topics such as curriculum development, teaching and learning, and teacher education programs from elementary to postsecondary, and they discussed national curriculum, national entrance examination, and efforts to find a balance between these two. They also discussed some topics from history of mathematics, and sociomathematical norms among the countries.

Dr. Ryosuke Nagaoka from University of the Air, Japan did an interesting presentation about Japan's effort to innovate mathematics education. In his paper entitled "A complicated social complex of diverse factors which make efforts in vain to innovate mathematics education in Japan ICMI," he presented several factors that are against the intents of mathematics reform in Japan: lower status of teachers after the school reform after World War II; bureaucracy that is unwilling to take a responsible leadership in carrying out challenging innovations in the education system; a bureaucracy that is weak for accepting a new global trend and at the same time is stubborn against self-examination; a naive optimism among innovators who do not foresee the

need to maintain an integrated and organic collaboration of school teachers and university professors; and a huge gap between secondary and university level education.

While studying in America, I have heard many comments about the differences in achievement, and in the ways of teaching and learning between Japan and the U.S. Even though I am a Korean, a student from an Asian country, it has been true that I have no better knowledge about the education in Asia except for the knowledge from my own educational experience as a student. Therefore, it was an important opportunity for me to participate in the ICMI-ASIA conference. First, I was able to have a glimpse of insiders' views about the status of mathematics education in the three countries. Second, I was able to understand how the three Asian countries are also struggling with different problems in their educational systems.

I remember an impressive remark that Professor Zhang made. about the mathematics education in China. He said that if a line is drawn in order to place each country in terms of various aspects of mathematics education in each country, then he would put China on the left-hand side of the line, Korea near the middle, Japan a little beyond, and the U.S. near the right-hand side. Then he commented that the Chinese educators' work will be to move the China's place to the middle of the line.

I understood his talk as a mathematics educator's vision for having better education. I think this is what we all want and should try to pursue in our field. As I mentioned earlier, the ICMI-EARCOMET was the first conference held in Korea with cooperative work from many Asian countries. Hopefully, there will be more opportunities like this one in that region so that many people's ideas and visions about mathematics education can be openly discussed.

Kyungsoon Jeon is a doctoral student at the University of Georgia. Her interests are teachers' beliefs and change, and preservice teacher education. Her e-mail address is kjeon@coe.uga.edu .

Date last modified: 28 September 2000.

URL: <http://jwilson.coe.uga.edu/DEPT/TME/Issues/v9n1/5jeon.html>