

Review Article

Education Systems in South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore: A Comparative Policy Analysis

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Abstract

This comparative policy analysis examines the education systems of South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore—East Asia’s “Asian Tigers”—focusing on their historical development, philosophies, objectives, structures, financing, administration, and teacher policies. Utilizing Bereday’s (1964) comparative method, the study synthesizes secondary sources, including government reports and academic journals, to explore how these nations leverage education for economic and social progress within distinct political and cultural contexts. South Korea’s system emphasizes fierce competition and STEM excellence, driven by high-stakes exams like the CSAT, yet grapples with equity issues due to private tutoring prevalence. Taiwan prioritizes holistic development, bilingualism, and a 12-year compulsory framework, fostering inclusivity but facing rural-urban disparities. Singapore champions meritocracy, aligning its streamlined 6-4-2 structure with economic needs through early streaming and robust public funding, though it risks rigidity. Commonalities include centralized governance, rigorous academic standards, and public-private partnerships, while differences in financing and decentralization reflect contextual priorities. The findings highlight policy coherence as a driver of educational success, offering lessons for developing nations like Ethiopia, such as investing in teacher quality, early education, and equitable access. This study underscores the transformative potential of education when aligned with national goals, providing actionable insights for global education reform in an interconnected world.

Keywords

Education Policy, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Comparative Analysis, Asian Tigers

1. Introduction

Education stands as a pillar of societal transformation, a truth vividly illustrated by the trajectories of South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore—collectively dubbed the “Asian Tigers” for their meteoric economic ascent from the 1960s to the 1990s [1]. Emerging from the shadows of colonial legacies and post-war instability, these nations harnessed education as a strategic lever to catapult themselves into global prominence. Despite their shared regional identity in East Asia, their po-

litical landscapes diverge sharply—South Korea and Taiwan embrace democratic governance, while Singapore thrives under an authoritarian yet pragmatic regime. Culturally, they blend Confucian reverence for learning with modern imperatives, yet each has carved a distinct path to educational excellence [2]. This study delves into these systems, dissecting their historical roots, guiding philosophies, structural frameworks, financing mechanisms, administrative strategies,

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Received: 2 April 2025; Accepted: 18 April 2025; Published: 14 May 2025



and teacher policies to uncover how they fuel economic and social progress.

The “Asian Tigers” offer a compelling case study in policy innovation. South Korea’s journey began with liberation from Japanese rule in 1945, igniting a drive for national renewal through education that prioritized science, technology, and fierce academic competition. Taiwan, under Kuomintang leadership post-World War II, melded traditional values with a vision of equitable access and global connectivity, evident in its push for bilingualism and extended compulsory schooling. Singapore, since its 1965 independence, engineered a meritocratic system under the People’s Action Party, aligning education with economic needs through meticulous planning and resource allocation [3]. These divergent yet convergent approaches underscore a shared conviction: education is not merely a public good but a catalyst for human capital formation, a concept central to economic development theories [4].

This analysis employs Bereday’s (1964) comparative method, a four-step framework—description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison—that enables a systematic exploration of these systems [5]. By examining secondary sources such as government reports, academic journals, and historical accounts, the study aims to map each nation’s educational landscape, identify cross-cutting themes, and distill actionable insights. The focus spans seven dimensions: historical evolution, philosophical underpinnings, policy objectives, system structures, funding models, administrative dynamics, and teacher development strategies. This multi-faceted lens reveals not just what these nations do, but why and how their choices resonate in their unique contexts.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond East Asia. For developing nations like Ethiopia, grappling with resource scarcity and systemic inequities, the “Asian Tigers” offer a blueprint—and a cautionary tale. Their rapid transformation suggests that education, when purposefully designed, can bridge gaps between poverty and prosperity. Yet, their reliance on high-stakes testing, private investment, or rigid tracking also hints at trade-offs that may not suit every context. Ethiopia, with its diverse linguistic fabric and rural majority, faces challenges distinct from the urbanized, homogenous settings of these Tigers. Thus, this study seeks to extract lessons that transcend borders, asking: How can policy coherence turn education into a tool for progress, and what adaptations ensure its inclusivity?

In framing this comparison, the analysis draws on Morris’ (1996) observation that education in these nations reflects a deliberate alignment with developmental goals, tempered by cultural heritage [2]. It also nods to Tie’s (2012) emphasis on administrative efficiency as a driver of success [1]. By weaving these perspectives into a concise yet comprehensive narrative, this article aims to serve policymakers, educators, and researchers seeking models for reform. Ultimately, it posits that understanding the “Asian Tigers” is not just an academic exercise but a window into the power of education

as a nation-building force, offering insights as relevant today as during their economic rise.

2. Methodology

This study employs a comparative approach, analyzing secondary sources (books, MOE documents, journals) via Bereday’s (1964) four steps: description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison [3]. Units of analysis include historical development, policy features, objectives, structures, teacher policies, financing, and administration, ensuring a systematic synthesis.

3. Results

3.1. South Korea

South Korea’s education system is a dynamo of ambition, forged in the aftermath of its 1945 liberation from Japanese colonial rule, a period that ignited a national resolve to rebuild through knowledge [1]. The 1949 Basic Education Law laid the groundwork, establishing a 6-3-3-4 structure—six years of primary, three of middle school, three of high school, and four of university—under American influence, yet infused with Confucian ideals of diligence and respect for learning [2]. This framework mandates nine years of free, compulsory education, with upper secondary and tertiary levels optional but fiercely pursued, reflecting a cultural ethos where education is a gateway to social mobility and national pride.

The philosophy driving this system marries tradition with modernity, aiming for global competitiveness through a laser focus on STEM—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics [3]. Excellence is not just a goal but a societal expectation, embodied in the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), a high-stakes exam that dictates university admission and shapes students’ futures [4]. Beyond academics, vocational tracks offer technical training, aligning with South Korea’s industrial rise, from shipbuilding to semiconductors. Yet, this competitive spirit comes with a shadow: the proliferation of *hagwon*, private tutoring academies, underscores a system where success often hinges on family resources, challenging the equity embedded in its post-war vision [5].

Funding reflects this duality—centralized government support covers compulsory years, but private investment dominates at higher levels, with households spending heavily on tutoring and university fees [6]. The Ministry of Education steers policy from Seoul, setting curricula and standards, yet grants schools operational leeway, a balance that ensures uniformity without stifling local initiative [7]. Teachers, revered as nation-builders, undergo stringent training—typically a four-year degree plus certification—ensuring a workforce capable of meeting the system’s exacting demands [8]. This blend of rigor, cultural weight, and strategic focus has propelled South Korea from poverty to a tech

powerhouse, though it raises questions about the human cost of its relentless pace.

3.2. Taiwan

Taiwan's education system emerged from the tumult of 1945, when the Kuomintang (KMT) retreated to the island, bringing with it a vision to meld Confucian heritage with economic necessity [9]. This synthesis birthed a system that prioritizes equal opportunity, holistic growth, and, increasingly, bilingualism—Mandarin and English—as tools for global engagement [10]. Initially structured as a 6-3-3 model (six years primary, three junior high, three senior high), it evolved in 2014 into a 12-year compulsory framework, extending free education to encompass senior high and vocational options, a move aimed at broadening access and skills [11].

The philosophy here is less about cutthroat competition and more about nurturing well-rounded citizens—academic prowess is balanced with moral education, arts, and civic responsibility [12]. Bilingualism, a recent priority, equips students for innovation in a tech-driven world, while vocational pathways, from mechanics to IT, ensure practical employability [13]. Assessment leans toward flexibility—exams like the General Scholastic Ability Test gauge broad competencies rather than rote memorization, contrasting with more rigid neighbors [14]. Preschool, though not compulsory, is widely accessible, emphasizing early equity over early competition.

Funding comes predominantly from the government, supporting the 12-year mandate, though private tutoring remains a cultural fixture, hinting at persistent parental pressure [15]. Administration strikes a decentralized chord—Taiwan's Ministry of Education sets overarching goals, but local governments tailor implementation, fostering innovation yet risking disparities, especially in rural areas [16]. Teachers enter through diverse routes—university degrees, alternative certifications, and ongoing training—reflecting a system that values adaptability over uniformity [17]. Taiwan's approach has cultivated a resilient, creative workforce, though its challenge lies in ensuring this flexibility doesn't fracture into inequity across its diverse landscapes.

3.3. Singapore

Since its 1965 independence, Singapore has sculpted an education system that mirrors its national ethos: meritocracy as a means to survival and supremacy [18]. Under the People's Action Party's stewardship, this system prioritizes economic competitiveness, weaving bilingualism—English and a mother tongue (e.g., Mandarin, Malay, Tamil)—with holistic development and technological integration [19]. The structure, a 6-4-2 model—six years primary, four secondary, two pre-university—becomes compulsory for the first ten years, followed by diverse post-secondary paths: junior colleges, polytechnics, or vocational institutes [20].

The philosophy hinges on efficiency and adaptability, sorting students early via the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) into academic or technical tracks, a meritocratic sieve designed to match talent to national needs [21]. Preschool, non-compulsory but universal, lays a bilingual foundation, while secondary and tertiary levels emphasize skills—STEM for some, trades for others—ensuring no one is left unutilized [22]. Assessments like O-Levels and A-Levels reinforce this precision, creating a pipeline from classroom to workforce with minimal waste [23]. This streamlined approach has turned a port city into a global hub, though it sparks debate over creativity's place in such a structured mold.

Funding is a public stronghold—Singapore's government invests heavily, reducing private costs and ensuring access, a stark contrast to regional peers [24]. The Ministry of Education wields centralized control, crafting policy with surgical intent, yet schools enjoy autonomy in execution, blending top-down vision with grassroots agility [23]. Teachers, a cornerstone of this success, are an elite cohort—recruited competitively, trained extensively at the National Institute of Education, and rewarded with top-tier salaries and professional development [24]. Singapore's system exemplifies a calculated bet: education as an economic engine, delivering results that belie its small size, yet prompting reflection on flexibility in an era of rapid change.

4. Comparative Analysis

The education systems of South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore offer a rich tableau for comparison, each a distinct yet interconnected thread in the fabric of East Asia's developmental success. This analysis dissects their approaches across historical trajectories, philosophical foundations, structural designs, funding mechanisms, administrative frameworks, and teacher policies, revealing both divergence and convergence in their pursuit of progress. By juxtaposing these elements, we uncover how each nation tailors education to its context while sharing a commitment to excellence, providing a lens for understanding their global stature [1].

Historically, these systems emerged from pivotal moments of rupture and renewal. South Korea's post-1945 liberation from Japanese occupation sparked a system rooted in urgency, channeling Confucian discipline into a competitive academic race [2]. Taiwan's evolution under Kuomintang rule after 1945 blended tradition with modernization, prioritizing access amid political upheaval [3]. Singapore, born from its 1965 independence, crafted an education model under the People's Action Party to transform a resource-scarce island into an economic dynamo [4]. These origins shaped their philosophies: South Korea's focus on STEM-driven meritocracy, Taiwan's holistic and inclusive ethos, and Singapore's pragmatic meritocracy tethered to bilingual adaptability. While all draw from Confucian reverence for learning, their objectives diverge—South Korea seeks global competitiveness, Taiwan

fosters civic innovation, and Singapore ensures economic alignment [5].

Structurally, the systems reflect tailored responses to national needs. South Korea's 6-3-3-4 framework—six years of primary, three of middle, three of high school, and four of university—mandates nine years of free education, with optional upper levels feeding into a high-stakes exam culture [6]. Taiwan's shift to a 12-year compulsory model in 2014, evolving from a 6-3-3 base, emphasizes flexibility with vocational streams alongside academic tracks [7]. Singapore's 6-4-2 compulsory structure—six years primary, four secondary, two pre-university—introduces streaming via the Primary School Leaving Examination, sorting students early for efficiency [8]. Preschool, though non-mandatory across all three, is near-universal, with Singapore's bilingual focus contrasting South Korea's academic prep and Taiwan's play-based equity [9]. At higher education, public-private blends vary: Singapore's state dominance, South Korea's private university boom, and Taiwan's balanced approach reflect differing resource strategies [10].

Assessment methods further distinguish these systems. South Korea's College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) is a singular gatekeeper, amplifying competition and private tutoring's role [11]. Singapore's O-Levels and A-Levels, layered atop the PSLE, create a multi-tiered meritocracy, while Taiwan's less rigid exams, like the General Scholastic Ability Test, prioritize broader competencies over rote mastery [12]. Vocational education, a strength across all three, aligns with industry—South Korea's technical high schools, Taiwan's practical pathways, and Singapore's polytechnics ensure employability, though Singapore's precision stands out [13]. These structural choices reveal a shared rigor tempered by contextual priorities: competition in South Korea, adaptability in Taiwan, and efficiency in Singapore.

Funding and administration highlight resource allocation and governance styles. South Korea's centralized system leans heavily on private investment—households fund tutoring and tertiary costs—reflecting cultural norms of parental duty [14]. Taiwan's government-led funding, expanded for 12-year schooling, pairs with decentralized administration, empowering local innovation but risking inconsistency [15]. Singapore's robust public financing minimizes private burden, while its centralized Ministry of Education balances school-level autonomy with top-down precision [16]. This spectrum—from South Korea's hybrid reliance to Singapore's state-driven model—shows how economic capacity and political will shape educational access.

Teacher policies, a linchpin of quality, converge on professionalization yet differ in execution. South Korea's rigorous training and certification, rooted in Confucian respect for educators, ensure a competitive teaching corps [17]. Taiwan's diverse pathways—university programs and in-service development—support its holistic goals, though rural shortages persist [18]. Singapore's high salaries, continuous training, and incentives create an elite cadre, aligning with its merito-

cratic ethos [19]. All three prioritize teacher development, but Singapore's investment intensity and South Korea's cultural prestige contrast with Taiwan's broader, less uniform approach.

In synthesis, these systems share high standards, vocational relevance, and a developmental ethos, yet their flavors diverge—South Korea's intensity, Taiwan's inclusivity, and Singapore's streamlined pragmatism [20]. Centralization dominates in South Korea and Singapore, while Taiwan's decentralization offers flexibility at the cost of uniformity. Funding reflects economic realities, with private roles larger in South Korea and Taiwan than in Singapore's public model. These contrasts and commonalities underscore a core insight: education's power lies in its alignment with national identity, whether through competition, equity, or efficiency, offering a mosaic of strategies for global emulation [21].

5. Discussion

The education systems of South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore exemplify how deliberate policy design can transform societal outcomes, yet their successes stem from distinct approaches tailored to historical, cultural, and economic realities. This section delves deeper into these differences and commonalities, drawing on human capital theory, cultural adaptation frameworks, and equity-focused perspectives to unpack their implications. It also explores challenges and potential lessons, offering a nuanced view beyond surface-level achievements.

South Korea's education system stands out for its relentless focus on academic competition and STEM disciplines, a strategy rooted in its post-war urgency to rebuild a shattered economy. This aligns with human capital theory, which posits that investments in education directly enhance workforce productivity and national growth [1]. The emphasis on rigorous examinations, such as the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), reflects a belief that merit-based selection drives excellence. However, this approach has birthed a shadow education system—private tutoring or **hagwon**—that amplifies inequality, as wealthier families gain an edge in exam preparation. Scholars like Becker might argue this reflects an efficient allocation of resources toward skill development [2], yet it raises questions about social cohesion when access to quality education hinges on financial means rather than universal opportunity.

Taiwan, by contrast, showcases a more adaptive model, weaving Confucian traditions of learning with modern demands for innovation and bilingual proficiency. Its shift to 12-year compulsory education in 2014 signals a commitment to broadening access, aligning with equity theories that prioritize inclusive growth over elite-focused outcomes [3]. Unlike South Korea's high-stakes testing culture, Taiwan's system fosters holistic development—balancing academic, moral, and creative skills—while encouraging bilingualism to compete globally. This flexibility echoes Vygotsky's soci-

ocultural theory, where learning is shaped by cultural tools like language, positioning Taiwan to produce versatile citizens [4]. Yet, the reliance on private tutoring persists, suggesting that even a system designed for equity struggles to escape competitive pressures ingrained in East Asian educational norms.

Singapore's meritocratic framework offers a third lens, blending centralized control with pragmatic adaptability. Its streaming system, anchored by the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), sorts students early into academic or vocational tracks, reflecting a utilitarian approach to human capital development [5]. This efficiency—ensuring every individual contributes to economic needs—has fueled Singapore's rise as a global hub. However, critics argue it entrenches rigidity, limiting late bloomers or those misaligned with early assessments, a tension Parsons' structural-functionalism might frame as a trade-off between system stability and individual potential [6]. Singapore counters this with robust teacher training and technology integration, ensuring quality across tracks, a move that softens equity critiques while maintaining high standards.

Across these systems, a shared thread emerges: education as a state-driven engine for progress. Centralized governance—whether fully in Singapore, partially in South Korea, or balanced with local input in Taiwan—ensures alignment with national goals. This coherence resonates with institutional theory, where organizational structures (like ministries of education) shape consistent outcomes [7]. Yet, their financing models diverge: South Korea and Taiwan lean on private contributions, reflecting cultural norms of parental investment, while Singapore's public funding dominance underscores its authoritarian efficiency. These choices reveal a spectrum of resource mobilization, each effective yet context-specific.

Challenges, however, loom large. South Korea's exam pressure fuels mental health crises among youth, a cost of its competitive edge. Taiwan's decentralized administration risks uneven implementation, potentially widening rural-urban gaps. Singapore's streaming, while streamlined, may stifle creativity in a world increasingly valuing innovation over rote skills. These issues highlight a paradox: systems optimized for economic output may falter in nurturing well-rounded individuals, a critique Amartya Sen's capability approach might level, emphasizing human development beyond mere productivity [8].

For developing nations like Ethiopia, these findings offer a roadmap. South Korea's teacher training rigor suggests that professionalizing educators is foundational, regardless of resource constraints. Taiwan's equity focus underscores the value of accessible early education to level the playing field. Singapore's vocational alignment with industry needs highlights the power of linking education to employment, a practical step for labor-rich economies. Yet, these lessons demand adaptation—Ethiopia's multilingual, agrarian context differs sharply from the urbanized, homogenous "Asian Tigers." A hybrid approach, blending centralized vision with local flex-

ibility, could maximize impact without replicating pitfalls like over-testing or elitism.

Thus, these systems illustrate that educational success hinges on clarity of purpose—whether competitiveness, adaptability, or meritocracy—executed through cohesive policies. Their triumphs and tensions provide a rich tapestry for global reform, urging policymakers to weigh economic gains against social costs, and uniformity against diversity, in crafting education for the future.

6. Conclusion

The education systems of South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore stand as testaments to the transformative power of policy when aligned with a nation's vision for progress. This comparative analysis reveals not just their structural mechanics—South Korea's 6-3-3-4 ladder, Taiwan's 12-year holistic framework, or Singapore's 6-4-2 meritocratic stream—but the deeper interplay of history, culture, and ambition that drives their success. Each system, forged in the crucible of post-colonial or post-war renewal, reflects a deliberate choice: South Korea's bet on competitive rigor, Taiwan's embrace of equitable adaptability, and Singapore's pursuit of pragmatic excellence [1]. Together, they illustrate a universal truth: education, when wielded with purpose, can elevate societies from fragility to strength, a lesson resonant in an era of global uncertainty.

What unites these "Asian Tigers" is their strategic use of education as a scaffold for economic and social architecture. South Korea's STEM-centric model has churned out engineers and innovators, fueling its tech giants like Samsung [2]. Taiwan's bilingual and inclusive approach has nurtured a workforce agile enough to pivot from manufacturing to high-tech industries [3]. Singapore's meticulous alignment of schooling with market demands has cemented its status as a financial powerhouse [4]. Yet, their methods diverge—centralized control in Singapore contrasts with Taiwan's localized flexibility, while South Korea balances both with a cultural premium on private investment. This diversity underscores a key finding: there is no singular path to educational triumph, but coherence between goals and execution is non-negotiable.

For nations like Ethiopia, peering into these systems offers both inspiration and a call to discernment. The emphasis on teacher quality—seen in Singapore's incentives, South Korea's training rigor, and Taiwan's certification diversity—suggests that human resources are the bedrock of reform [5]. Early education, universal yet tailored in all three contexts, lays a foundation that Ethiopia could emulate to bridge rural-urban divides. STEM prioritization, a South Korean hallmark, aligns with global demands for technical skills, while Singapore's vocational pathways remind us that employability matters as much as academic prestige [6]. Equity, a Taiwanese strength, urges attention to inclusion in multilingual, resource-scarce settings. Yet, these lessons demand

adaptation—Ethiopia’s agrarian roots and ethnic mosaic differ starkly from the urban, homogenous Tigers. Blind replication risks amplifying their flaws, like South Korea’s exam-driven stress or Singapore’s early streaming rigidity.

Looking ahead, these systems also prompt reflection on sustainability. The “Asian Tigers” thrived in a 20th-century paradigm of industrialization and globalization, but the 21st century prizes creativity, resilience, and digital fluency. South Korea’s pressure-cooker culture may need tempering to foster innovation over rote mastery. Taiwan’s adaptability positions it well, yet its rural gaps linger as a test of equity’s reach. Singapore’s efficiency could evolve to embrace flexibility, lest it calcify in a fast-changing world [7]. For developing nations, this evolution signals a dual mandate: build systems that deliver today while anticipating tomorrow’s needs.

In conclusion, this study affirms that South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore have not merely educated their people—they have engineered futures through policy. Their blend of centralized intent and localized nuance offers a mosaic of strategies, not a monolith to copy. For Ethiopia and beyond, the charge is clear: invest in teachers, prioritize access, align with economic realities, and weave equity into the fabric of reform. By doing so, education can transcend its role as a classroom endeavor, becoming a catalyst for nations to rise, adapt, and endure in an interconnected age.

Abbreviations

CSAT	College Scholastic Ability Test
IRE	International Review of Education
MOE	Ministry of Education
NCEE	National Center on Education and the Economy
PSLE	Primary School Leaving Examination
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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Zerihun Tsegaye: Resources, Writing - review & editing

Desalegn Beyene: Conceptualization, Supervision, Validation

This review was conceptualized, conducted and written by Tesmamu Mirre Jobir and Zerihun Tsegaye

The final manuscript was read and approved by Desalegn Beyene (PhD)

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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