Country Report — Republic of Korea

Track 2 · Relationships, Belonging, and Well-being in the AI Era

The Well-being the Compass Points To

How AI Can Return Education to Connection, Not Automation

Cho Hee-jung

Elementary School Teacher, Gyeonggi Province, Republic of Korea

AI·Digital Lead Teacher, Gyeonggi Provincial Office of Education

Opening — The Compass

Distinguished guests and colleagues from around the world, it is an honor to be here with you.

I am an elementary school teacher from the Republic of Korea, where I have stood beside children in the classroom for the past twenty-two years.

I would like to begin with a small object that has guided travelers for a thousand years: a compass.

> **Every compass points somewhere. The OECD Learning Compass points to one place — well-being.**

The OECD Learning Compass 2030 was named a “compass” for a reason. It does not hand us a fixed route; instead, it provides our students a direction: the capacity to find their own way toward the well-being of themselves and the world around them.

Today I want to ask a simple question: In the age of AI, is our needle still pointing there, or has it quietly shifted elsewhere?

I. The Vanished Destination

Korea is known as an education powerhouse. Our students consistently rank at the very top of international assessments. And yet, in those same surveys, our children report some of the lowest levels of life satisfaction in the developed world.

How can both be true? I believe it is because, somewhere along the way, we have reduced a large word to a small one.

The compass points to well-being, but in Korea, that destination is too often reduced to a single word: “learning” — and learning, all too often, signifies only a test score.

This quiet reduction also shapes how we, as teachers, perceive technology. When a new AI tool appears, we naturally ask, “Does this tool help students learn?” It is a valid question, but it is not the only one. We rarely stop to ask a second, more crucial question: “Does this tool contribute to a child's well-being?”

This is not only Korea's blind spot. However, in a country moving as fast as ours, the cost is profound. A quiet emotional distance can grow between people who sit in the same room all day.

II. Return to the Essence

Korea is now striving to recalibrate its course. This year, the central axis of our national AI and digital training for teachers is no longer merely a catalogue of tools; rather it is our new Teacher Competency Framework for AI and Digital Education.[2]

Its purpose is clear. For years, teacher training in Korea chased the latest tools, changing with constantly with each new technology that appeared. This framework asks us to turn back to something we had overlooked along the way: to step back from the tools and look first at the curriculum, at the child, and at the essence of teaching itself.

To do this, the Korean Ministry of Education built the framework on three core values.

The first is education for human dignity. Even as AI advances, the center of education remains the human being, and technology is never the goal, but only a tool that serves a student's growth and life.

The second is the growth of every student. By using data to understand each child deeply, we ensure that not one child is left behind.

And the third is the teacher's own expertise: the insight and the emotional support that belong to the teacher alone, and the commitment to keep growing alongside one's colleagues.

The framework even devotes a section to what it does not require. It states plainly: if a technology does not contribute to a student's growth, it is better not to use it at all.

Three core values, unfolding into three domains, seven competencies, and twenty-one indicators. But beneath all that structure runs a single, stubborn insistence: the goal is never the technology. The goal is the child.

III. What Is the Essence?

Let me revisit at what we have just seen.

> **We asked: “Does this AI help students learn?”**
>
> **Then the nation declared: “Return to the essence of education.”**
>
> **But what, exactly, is that essence? The policy named the direction — but left the content undefined.**

This is the space where I stand. Not above policy, and not beneath it — but inside the blank it left behind. A policy can point to a door, but someone still has to walk through it and furnish the room.

And so I offer my answer — the answer of one teacher, from one classroom:

> **The essence has a name. Its name is well-being, relationship, and connection — the very place the compass had been pointing to all along.**

IV. So I Began — In My Classroom

If well-being is the destination, then I wanted to begin walking toward it, not toward a higher score. So, I started small, in my own classroom. I built an emotion-recording web app entitled, “How is my heart today?”

Twice a day — once in the morning when they arrive, and once before they go home — the children record their hearts. They choose an emoji, and from a set of twenty-four words, they tap the ones that fit: “excited,” “happy,” “tired,” “I want to rest,” and more. Finally, they move an energy slider from one to ten.

This simple act rests on a foundational insight from neuroscience. When people name an emotion — when a child taps the word “tired” — research calls this “affect labeling.” Lieberman and colleagues at UCLA showed that naming an emotion reduces activity in the amygdala, the brain's alarm center.[1] The child does not suppress the feeling, instead they observe and understand it more clearly.

But this app was never only about me monitoring them. Its deeper purpose was to let the children see one another.

Inside the app, a child can see how the friends around them are feeling today. And slowly, something began to happen. A child would turn to another and say: “You're tired of your academy today too? So am I.” “I can't wait for lunch either.” “I'm exhausted too.”

To look into one's own heart is a small act. But when that small act is shared, it becomes something larger — comfort. A child feels, perhaps for the first time, “I am not the only one. Someone else feels this too.”

This app was never a system for monitoring children's emotions. It was a small doorway — a passage through which children could reach first their own hearts, and then the hearts of the

friends beside them.

In the first version, I only measured emotions, and energy. In the second version, I added one more space: a blank line where a child could write, freely, anything at all. I built it because I wanted to do more than measure how they felt. I wanted to listen to the words they reached for on their own.

Why did the tool change? Because my question had deepened — from “How do they feel?” to “What does their language reach toward?”

And once I added that blank line, the traces began to pile up. Some of them looked like pure nonsense: strings of letters, sounds that mean nothing at all. But I love these traces, every one of them. Because in each scribble I can see that one child's own language, their own thoughts, the shape of their personality.

One child cheered for a baseball team, win or lose. Another counted down the days to a video game. One wrote, again and again, that they did not want to go to their academy. And one, on a morning when I arrived at school late after a visit to the hospital, wrote: “Teacher, when are you coming?” That small line of worry comforted me as much as anything I had ever given them. These are not data points; each one is a child.

This is what makes this possible for any of us. We now live in an age of “vibe coding.” Vibe coding is a new way of making software: instead of writing code line by line, you simply describe in plain language what you want, and generative AI builds it for you. With it, anyone can create a real tool without any technical expertise at all. The barrier that once stood between a teacher and the tool she imagined is gone.

And this changes what the truly difficult part of building is. Making the tool is no longer difficult. The difficult part is knowing what to build, and who to build it for.

> **If the teacher's gaze is turned toward the child in the classroom, we can build any tool for well-being.**

What matters now is no longer the skill to build; it is where the teacher's gaze is turned. Anyone can build the tool. But no machine can automate a gaze that is turned toward the human being, toward a child's growth.

And this is exactly what our national framework declares: the goal is not the technology. The goal is the child's growth.

V. What the Data Said

Let me show you what the children's hearts recorded. I will share two independent collection periods, each about one month long. What matters most is not any single number, but the fact that the same patterns appeared in both. When a pattern repeats across two separate months, it is no longer a coincidence. It is a signal.

The first pattern surprised me. Common sense says children arrive fresh and leave drained. The data said the opposite. In the first period, the average energy rose from 7.31 in the morning to 7.87 before dismissal. In the second period, it rose from 7.55 to 8.12. On both occasions, the children left school with more energy than they arrived with.

The second pattern told me what lifted them. When I read the free-writing lines, the children's energy did not rise for academic reasons. It rose in anticipation: “We're going to the baseball stadium tomorrow!” “Finally — it's Friday!” What moved them was not achievement. It was something to look forward to, and someone to share it with.

And here is the part I find most convincing, because I did not arrange it. The free writing and the emotion-word counts pointed to the same thing, on their own. As anticipation filled the written lines, the word “excited” − barely in the top ranks before − rose to become one of the most chosen words of all. Two different kinds of data reached the same conclusion, independently. I did not steer them there. The children's own records showed it.

But there is something I need to be careful about here. On the surface, this looks like good news: the children are overwhelmingly positive, calm, and happy. A skeptic might say, “If they are this happy, why do we need the tool at all?”

Here is my answer: The aggregate brightness is not the point. The point is that when a heart is recorded every single day, you can finally see the day a child who is always bright suddenly goes dark. A one-time survey can measure a mood; only a daily record can reveal a departure from a child's own baseline. And that is exactly where the story turns from a chart into a face.

The One Child

By this point, I had over seven hundred records. I could not read them all with my own eyes. So, I asked the AI a simple question, in plain language: “Which child had the lowest energy?”

The AI pointed to one child — a child who, over the course of a single month, had recorded an

energy of one, the lowest possible, four separate times. On each of those days, the negative words arrived not one at a time but all at once: “sad”, “angry,” “irritated,” “afraid,” “lonely.” And on those same days, written by the child's own hand, was one recurring line: “I want to be alone.”

There was a rhythm to that child's lowest days. They fell on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Those were the days the child attended an after-school academy, far from home and heavy with homework. The child was not being drained by school. The child was being drained by the academic race that surrounds school.

So, I reached out to the child's mother. She replied, and I share her words only in essence, with her privacy protected: “The academy is far, and the homework is heavy. I have known my child is struggling, and I have been wondering what to do. Thank you for talking with me about this.”

Notice what the AI did, and what it did not do. It did not comfort that child in my place. It did not counsel the mother. It only pointed to a place I had not yet seen. Reaching the child was still the work of a person. Of a teacher.

We keep asking what AI can do. But that child did not need technology.

> **That child needed a relationship. The technology sent the signal; the relationship reached the child.**

VI. School Generates Well-being

Return, for a moment, to that first surprising number: energy that rose across the school day. And place beside it what we just learned: that a child's lowest points fell on the days he left our building for an after-school academy.

Put together, these two facts overturn a common assumption. People often imagine school as the place that exhausts our children. The data tells a different story:

> **School is not a place that drains children — it is a place that generates well-being.**

School is where they meet friends, share anticipation, and find something to look forward to. It is a social space where well-being is nurtured. And in that space, the teacher is not a delivery system for content. The teacher is the person who notices — and who remains.

VII. It Was Not Just Me

You might reasonably wonder whether this is simply one sentimental teacher and her app.

Last July, I led a training session for AI and digital lead teachers in my region. I gave them an open invitation: “With generative AI, build a web app of your own — something to ease the workload at school, or to use in your own lessons. Whatever you needed.”

And this is what some of them chose to build. One teacher made a form called “Heart Talks with Teacher,” a quiet space for a child to write when a friendship is hurting or they need the teacher's help. Another made a “Classroom Feelings Mailbox,” which gathers each child's mood into a shared word cloud, so the whole class can see how everyone is feeling that day. No one had assigned this. Given a free hand, more than one teacher turned, on their own, toward the very same thing — the child's heart.

This told me something important: the longing to care for a child's well-being is not one teacher's idiosyncrasy. It is a shared, latent need across our profession, waiting only for a tool to release it. And notice: that training itself was a moment of connection, in which AI linked one teacher to another, around the same quiet hope.

VIII. The Public Role of AI

This points to what public education's AI must prioritize. Korea is an IT powerhouse, yet a digital divide runs quietly across our households, shaped by the degree of support each family can provide. In such a landscape, the AI of public education must not become one more advantage for those who already have many.

It must be something that reaches the child who might otherwise be overlooked, and reaches them first. Remember that one child, quietly worn down and asking to be left alone? Without a daily record, that child's difficulty could have passed unnoticed. The value of such a tool is not in what it automates, but in whose struggle, it helps a teacher see in time.

The same attention belongs to our slower learners and to any child who feels, for whatever reason, as if they are standing outside the circle. What each of them needs is not a more advanced technology, but to be noticed and to hear, “You are not outside this room. You are one of us.”

IX. The Irreplaceable Teacher

So where does this leave the teacher in the age of AI? Let me turn once more to Korea's

national framework. One of its twenty-one indicators asks teachers to reflect on the role that technology cannot replace: to observe a student, to weigh the context, and to offer emotional support. It is written there as an official standard.

AI can point. It cannot walk. AI can send a signal at midnight across seven hundred rows of data, but it cannot sit beside a tired child on a Thursday afternoon and ask, gently, “Are you okay?” That remains ours. And it has always been ours.

The socio-emotional expertise to read a child's heart and to stay beside it is not a skill AI is about to take from us. On the contrary, it is the very thing that AI − by handling what it handles well − finally frees us to do more of.

X. A Compass Without a Map

I have shared Korea's story. But I want to close by widening the view, because this is not Korea's question alone.

We have a compass, but we do not yet have a map.

The direction is clear. The OECD Learning Compass has pointed it out for us. But the map for how to walk that direction inside an AI-filled classroom has not been finished by anyone, in any country, yet.

Why is the map still blank? I believe it is because technology races ahead, and our institutions run breathless behind it. But as long as we only chase the tools, we will always fall behind, because the tools never stop changing.

So, our axis must not be the tool. It must be education itself — the curriculum, the child, the essence. The tools change every year. No, faster than that: the change every month. The essence of education does not. Anchor ourselves to what does not move, and the racing of technology can no longer knock us off course.

I do not believe anyone, yet, holds the finished answer. And if that is true, then perhaps this is not a report I am giving you. Perhaps it is an invitation.

So, let us draw that map together.

Closing — The Needle

I began with a compass, and I will end with one.

Through everything I have shared today, the direction never changed.

> **All along, the needle has been pointing to one place — well-being, relationship, and connection.**

If there is one sentence I hope you carry out of this room, let it be this one:

> **“The power of AI is not automation or efficiency; it is connection — one person reaching another.”**

So, let us focus not on the tools, but on connection. Because in the end, what matters more than any technology is a warm gaze turned toward the human being.

That gaze is the one thing no machine can automate. And it is the one thing every teacher in this room already carries.

Thank you.

References

1. Lieberman, M. D., Eisenberger, N. I., Crockett, M. J., Tom, S. M., Pfeifer, J. H., & Way, B. M. (2007). Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling disrupts amygdala activity in response to affective stimuli. *Psychological Science*, 18(5), 421–428.
2. Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea (2024). *Teacher AI·Digital Education Competency Framework*.