

IDEC 2009 KOREA

IDECS (International Democratic Education Conferences) have been held in different countries every year since 1993. Relevant websites are www.e-idec.org, www.idenetwork.org and www.EducationRevolution.org. Up until now the only Asian IDECs have been in India and Japan, so IDEC 2009 Korea had a particular importance. Unfortunately it met with an unexpected problem. The story is told here in the form of slightly edited emails, first from the Korean organisers and then from Moe Zimmerberg, from the Tutorial School in New Mexico.

News from Korea

IDEC 2009 KOREA will be held on 1st~8th Aug 2009.

PSAE (People's Solidarity of Alternative Education), the Nationwide network of democratic schools and learning centers, and KPAAE (Korean Parents' Association for Alternative Education) are the Key organisations and young students from various democratic schools and homeschoolers are the main force in the Organising Committee. They are very excited at the idea of meeting people from all over the world, especially students from other democratic schools and homeschoolers, so they want to set up a lot of programs for the young people to enjoy.

Please let your young fellows know about this and come to Korea.

IDEC 2009 KOREA will be organised in three parts:

Part1: IDEC with people involved in Democratic Education at Kangwon University in Chuncheon city. 1~5 Aug

Traditional IDEC programmes including speeches, workshops and events.

Chuncheon city is about 100 km east of Seoul, the capital city.

If you want to arrive earlier than 1st Aug, we can arrange home-stay and transport for you in a family of democratic schools, but early application will help us a lot to organise this.

Part2: Peace and Ecology program in Demilitarized Zone, 6~7 Aug

Korea is the last place from the Cold War era in the world which was divided into two countries by the US and USSR after the second world war, and it remains divided against the wishes of the Koreans. We still believe we can be unified like the West and East Germany, but nothing seems to be easy politically as you may see in the news.

The Demilitarized Zone is the most symbolic place to show the current situation between South Korea and North Korea. It is also an important place environmentally as the place has been largely untouched by humans and has kept its natural beauties.

Part3: Alternatives in Education EXPO and Closing Festival in Seoul, 8 Aug: A one-day EXPO to introduce Alternatives in Education to the Korean public.

The new conservative government pushes hard on neo-liberal education policies by introducing national-wide exams, performance tables and elite schools. It is very important for us to let the Korean people know exam results and competition are not the only way in education and that there are various alternative ways of education. With you, our international friends, we can show them various schools and democratic ways of learning.

There will be also a great fun street festival as our closing event in Seoul. You will experience the endless all-night city.

Tae Wook Ha

IDEN Newsletter, July 2009: A message from Korea

We are currently organizing the time schedules and rooms for the workshops. Some of the topics that you've raised to be discussed are the following:

- Establishing a school and some troubles that follow
- Handling difficult children
- The importance of play and a good model
- The importance of a personal choice
- The importance of creating a space for traditional academic setting
- The advantages and disadvantages of "free space"
- The benefit of students having the power to hire/fire staff members

Alternative Education's spoiled image & the problems of the pseudo-alternative school

Introductions of various alternative/democratic schools worldwide

Current issues of a freshly starting democratic school

The status of democratic schools in an unsupportive/poor neighbourhood

These are the rough collection of the topics that you've raised and we are more than happy to hear more about your plans for workshops.

July 21

The Cancellation of the IDEC 2009 KOREA

Regrettably Organizing Committee of IDEC 2009 KOREA informs you that IDEC 2009 KOREA scheduled to be held between August 1 to 8 is inevitably cancelled officially due to INFLUENZA (H1N1) which is rapidly spreading over the world.

For the last few months, Organizing Committee has been closely monitored outbreak and spread of the virus. While the number of its infectee remarkably increases worldwide, the deductive cases of secondary infections have broken out in some part of Korea. To make matters worse, The World Choir Championship Korea 2009 was immediately called off after one international participant's case caused 15 fatal¹ and 35 suspected cases. In actual the fatal and suspected cases have substantially been increasing in Korea. as a result of this circumstance, many international events here in Korea, especially for children and youngsters, have been cancelled.

On 20th of August², IDEC 2009 KOREA Organizing Committee had a lengthy discussion with specialists participating 50 people from hosting and collaborating organizations and voted twice to make this hard decision. Needless to say, all of you must have had high expectations for the IDEC 2009 KOREA, but after full consideration of predictable problems about your health and security, we could not help but make a tough decision to cancel the IDEC 2009 KOREA.

¹ This is actually a mistranslation. The word should probably have been "confirmed".

² July. The stress is taking its toll.

July 22nd An email from Tae Wook Ha

Dear Friends

I assume that you already know about the official cancellation of IDEC 2009 KOREA emailed from its organizing committee. It was really a tough decision to us after many consultations with few parents of democratic schools who are medical doctors, medical specialists and government officials at the Korea Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC), a lengthy meeting with about 50 people from all the organisations preparing IDEC 2009 KOREA, voting and re-voting. Contrary to our expectation and hope, the spread of 'INFLUENZA A (H1N1)' is getting wider in Korea and parents and teachers of young children from democratic schools have growing concerns on holding IDEC 2009 KOREA as scheduled. IDEC 2009 KOREA has been prepared by a consortium of 15 different organizations involved in alternative education scene in Korea and we had to listen to the growing concerns from its members.

However, all the members of Managerial Committee of IDEC 2009 KOREA, mainly young people from democratic schools and home-schools aged 15~19 who have been the main forces to organize IDEC 2009 KOREA, found this cancellation very difficult to accept. They think their hard work for the last 6 months were ruined by this decision and would like to seek an alternative way to held IDEC 2009 KOREA. Despite the fact that a half of international events were cancelled recently in Korea, there are still another half keep going after letting its international and domestic participants know about the situation with the virus.

Given these facts, about 20 youngsters and some adult supporters are looking for an alternative way to hold IDEC. It needs to be smaller than we originally planned, but we believe having IDEC every year is still important and we have some responsibility to offer that in any possible form. Furthermore, it is also important to make the young people's efforts worth while. I am wondering how many of you would like to travel to Korea regardless of the official IDEC 2009 KOREA cancellation and despite the H1N1 virus.

From the Organising Committee

We are slowly recovered from shock of the cancellation and working hard to arrange things to support those who still decide to come to Korea despite the virus alert and the official cancellation of IDEC 2009 KOREA.

1. Organizing Committee will arrange a pick-up service for you from the airport but we need to use public transport from the airport to city center in Seoul and you need to pay the fare.
2. Accommodation between 29 July - 8 Aug will be provided. It will be one of democratic school in/around Seoul. We are trying to arrange a simple breakfast (Bread, Milk, Cereal...) but you have to sort out the rest of your meal.
3. We are organizing a 4days (3nights) camp at Jeonin School in Chuncheon city and would like to invite you to join. It will be between 3 Aug (Mon) ~ 6 Aug (Thu) 2009.

There will be a small fee for your food/accommodation. (Probably less than \$50)

You may use this opportunity to meet the young people, teachers and parents who took a main roles to organise IDEC 2009 KOREA and meet each other coming internationally and share idea/opinions.

We are expecting around 100 people there including those of you who are in Korea at the period.

4. Visiting democratic schools will be arranged during 30 July~2 Aug and 7~8 Aug.
5. Young people here at the organizing committee are ready to help you to guide on your tour/travelling depending on their schedule.

Please note their English speaking level is varied.

This is official support from the organizing committee of IDEC 2009 KOREA to those who still decide to come to Korea.

From Moe Zimmerberg

July 31st

We arrived on the 29th. We have been staying at Banji's school - the Gil School. The people from Windsor House, in Vancouver, were already here and the IDEC staff people made a beautiful dinner for us.

The next day Banji took us for a walk around the neighborhood including the local Buddhist Temple where a woman made Korean tea, Dok-cha, for us. Then we went to hear the chanting. Afterwards we were treated to a free lunch for our good intentions for all beings.

More and more people arrive everyday. It's very fun and exciting to have the IDEC grow around us slowly. Everyday brings us more interesting and interested people. People full of life with sparkle in their eyes.

August 8th

The historians can debate for millenniums (at great institutional expense) about whether or not this was an official IDEC, but for me it was. It was the 2009 gathering of democratic educators, students, parents and NGOs and it was in Korea, and it was great.

The first 4 days were spent at the Gil School. Banji very generously donated her space to the IDEC travelers, as well as the organizing committee. Originally, only a few of us were going to stay there, but with the last minute organizational changes, it became *the* IDEC location for those 4 days. Many thanks to Banji and the Gil School for hosting us and allowing us to all gather in the same place.

We were well taken care of: Picked up at the airport, walked around the neighborhood to orient ourselves and fed free lunches at the local Buddhist Temple. We were also taken to some local markets in downtown Seoul, Dongdemun and Namdemun.

During these 4 days we got to know the Korean organizers and learned about each others' lives and schools. Mike Weimann and Meta have started a new school in Berlin; it's doing very well in its third year, despite the doubts that inevitably coincide with founding a new school. Reshef and Meital in Israel

continue to work in their newish school in a underprivileged neighbourhood in Hadera, although I think Meital is moving to another school. Nao in Thailand has started a middle/high school in the village near Whispering Seed. Windsor House was almost able to move to a better building than the one we saw at last year's IDEC. The Tutorial School had a wonderful year culminating in a graduation, our first in 4 years, complete with a standing ovation for our new graduate Maya Mascarena's thesis.

We visited four alternative schools in the Seoul area. The Mindule School started as a drop-in center for drop-outs (school refusers) and continues to be a resource for homeschoolers. The Haja Center has focused on media and the performing arts. We were treated to a performance of Brazilian music which so impressed me that I had to cut out during the Q and A to grab the musicians for a jam session. Music is a form of communication that needs no translation and builds wonderful bonds of connection across cultures.

The next day we visited the Gwang Myung YMCA Byeopssi School, which had a beautiful space, especially the bountiful garden and outdoor grove for the older students, and the San Children's School, for a delicious lunch and a rousing performance of traditional Korean percussion.

We split up for dinner and shopping before returning to the Gil School to clean up in preparation for the next 3 days of our adventure: the IDEC camp at the Jeonin School in Chuncheon City.

Jeonin School is a boarding school; they hosted the international participants and the organizers, as well as students and teachers and parents from the Korean alternative school networks. I think around 100 of us were fed and housed. One night we had a "meat party." I'll leave the definition to your imagination.

We had a chance to make presentations about our schools, including Maya's workshop on teacher evaluation. All the teachers had to leave the room while Maya helped the Korean students through an evaluation of some of them – a first time for most of them! We also had a workshop on traditional Korean percussion. The San Children's School taught us how to play the instruments. This workshop was so popular that we split into 2 groups and performed for each other after learning a few songs.

The formal sessions were all about the "cancellation" of IDEC 2009, the reasons, the feelings, the global implications. Even the discussion of IDEC 2011 ended up being about whether or not it should be in Korea to make up for the cancellation.

Two comments stand out for me: Silbi (you may remember him with his guitar if you were at the IDECs in India, Australia, or Vancouver) compared democratic education to the flu virus, saying that it is a virus which is strong and spreading. Also a parent, who is an acupuncturist, suggested that we have to believe that we can heal ourselves. To which I added that believing we can heal ourselves is the same thing as believing we can educate ourselves.

We also made IDEC history by adding international video conferencing to two of the sessions. It took us a while to work out all the technical bugs but it was great, especially during the IDEC meeting, to have contact with participants in Australia, Israel and the UK.

The students who organized for the 2009 conference really felt like the "rug was pulled out from under them" by the cancellation and wanted to have the chance to do a full-on IDEC in 2011. Unfortunately they didn't have enough support from other Korean organizations that night to commit. They needed some time to pull a coalition together, so we decided that we couldn't make a decision that night. The decision, based on written or video application, will be made by former IDEC organizers, after fully experiencing the IDEC 2009 youth group's feelings. If a decision cannot be made by then, it will go to the 2010 IDEC in Israel in April.

The IDEC 2009 was organized mostly by teenagers. There was a suggestion to establish a global youth collaboration for preparing future IDECs from the perspective of young people. This seems to mean that the Korean teenagers who organized this IDEC are keen to connect with Israeli teenagers who might be interested in making sure that the adults don't completely control IDEC 2010 and disregard the kids.

After spending all this time together, the international travelers were enjoying each other so much that when the Gandhi school offered to host us for a few days we jumped at the offer. They picked us up from the Jeonin School and drove us everywhere we needed to go. They fed us, housed us, and even threw a party for us!

The most fascinating thing was the visit to the ancient city of Andong. Some of the students of the Gandhi School had a grandmother who actually lived in a house in this cultural museum and was a descendant of the Prime Minister of Korea some 500 years ago (that's one step down from the king). They've hosted the Queen of England, Bushes one and two and now, the foreign participants of IDEC.

The following morning we participated in a ceremony for a new building at the Gandhi School, complete with offerings and rice wine thrown to the 4 directions and a feast at the end. We also got to see the traditional percussion we had learned in its context and so were able to understand it better.

I'm going to call this the end of the IDEC 2009. From here we split up and regrouped into smaller units and mostly toured around Korea. Lets call it 10 days of workshops, presentations, meetings, school visits, and cultural field trips. Sounds like an IDEC to me.