



Program-Based Certification and Competitive Appointment: The Institutional Logic and Policy Implications of South Korea's Teacher Certification System

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Abstract: Using a sequential gatekeeping framework, this study analyzes how South Korea allocates quality-assurance responsibility across teacher preparation, qualification assessment, institutional capacity diagnosis, and competitive appointment. Policy document analysis and historical institutional analysis were applied to Korean laws, policy documents, examination materials, and relevant scholarship available through August 2026. The findings show that program-based certification and position-based appointment operate as functionally differentiated gates: a teaching certificate confirms a basic qualification, whereas public-school appointment allocates limited posts. Elementary preparation is concentrated, while secondary preparation follows multiple pathways whose formal equivalence depends heavily on common standards and institutional oversight. This differentiated structure distributes quality judgments across several actors, but its balance is unstable. Oversupply and the high stakes of appointment have made the appointment examination the de facto dominant gate, generating curricular and behavioral washback. Capacity diagnosis has facilitated supply adjustment, yet its linkage to quota reductions may also encourage compliance-oriented evaluation and obscure regional or subject-specific needs. The study contributes a system-level explanation of how formally distinct gates interact and argues that teacher-entry reform should align the function, evidence base, and accountability of each gate rather than rely on a single examination or institutional procedure.

Keywords: South Korea; teacher certification system; teacher education; non-examination qualification assessment; teacher appointment examination; sequential gatekeeping

1. Introduction

The teacher certification system is a foundational institution through which the state defines entry requirements for the teaching profession and safeguards the quality of the teaching workforce. It is not completed by a single examination but operates through an institutional chain comprising teacher preparation, certification, and appointment. Certification determines whether an applicant has met the basic professional standards for teaching, whereas appointment selects among qualified candidates according to the number and requirements of available positions. Conflating the two may lead researchers to misidentify the actual threshold for entry into teaching and to treat a recruitment instrument as though it were a licensing examination. South Korea provides a particularly instructive case because the principal route to certification is embedded in state-recognized preparation programs, while appointment to public schools is governed by a separate competitive examination.

Existing studies have examined South Korea's teacher certification system from several perspectives. Some have traced the historical development and basic structure of teacher preparation (Kim et al., 2012); others have focused on the institutions, curricula, and certification pathways for elementary or secondary teachers (Im et al., 2016; Park, 2019). A further body of research has analyzed the content structure and quality-control functions of the public-school teacher appointment examination and its washback effects on preservice preparation (Kwak, 2019; Ro, 2019), while critically examining the tendency of teacher education program evaluation to become formalistic (Ro, 2025). These studies provide an important foundation, but three limitations remain. First, much of the literature focuses on a particular school level, subject, or institutional component and lacks an integrated account of the relationships among teacher preparation, qualification assessment, institutional evaluation, and appointment. Second, existing research tends to describe how individual arrangements operate while paying insufficient attention to the quality-assurance responsibility assigned to each component and to the tensions among them. Third, recent policy changes under conditions of low fertility—including reductions in preparation capacity, stronger institutional accountability, and reforms intended to enhance practical preparation—have not yet been fully incorporated.

The resulting analytical gap is not simply a shortage of descriptive information. What remains insufficiently explained is how multiple entry gates divide quality-assurance responsibility, how these formally distinct gates interact, and under what conditions one gate comes to dominate the others. This gap matters both analytically

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and practically. Without a system-level account, the Korean case can be reduced to the misleading claim that teachers qualify through a national examination, while policy borrowing may isolate either “non-examination” certification or competitive appointment from the institutional conditions that make it function. By conceptualizing teacher entry as sequential gatekeeping, this study explains the Korean system as a configuration of differentiated but interdependent judgments rather than as a collection of separate policy instruments.

Accordingly, the study examines the historical development, current structure, and recent reform of South Korea's teacher certification system. It asks how quality-assurance functions are allocated among preparation, qualification assessment, institutional capacity diagnosis, and appointment; how this allocation has changed at major institutional turning points; and what tensions arise when formally distinct gates become misaligned. The study's principal contribution is to show that the effectiveness of a teacher-entry system depends less on the number of gates than on whether each gate has a clear decision object, an appropriate evidence base, and an accountable decision maker. On this basis, it evaluates the strengths and limitations of the Korean system and considers implications for reforming China's teacher certification system.

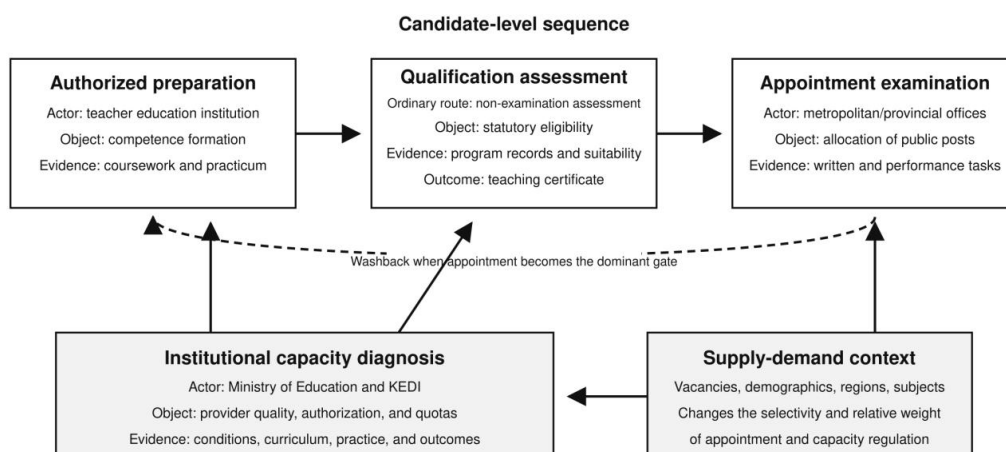
2. Analytical Framework and Method

2.1 Sequential gatekeeping and the allocation of quality-assurance responsibility

Gatekeeping refers to institutional judgments about who may enter, continue in, or obtain formal recognition within a profession. In teacher education, standardized tests are often treated as gatekeeping devices because they screen candidates at entry to or exit from preparation (Barnes & Cross, 2023). A focus on a single test, however, cannot explain systems in which judgments are distributed across universities, central government, evaluators, and employers. This study therefore develops a sequential gatekeeping framework. It distinguishes three candidate-level gates—teacher preparation, qualification assessment, and appointment—from an organizational gate, institutional capacity diagnosis, which regulates which programs may prepare teachers and at what scale.

Each gate is analyzed through four questions: who makes the judgment, what is being decided, what evidence is used, and what consequence follows. Preparation programs determine whether candidates have completed an authorized process of professional learning and generate curricular and practicum evidence. Qualification assessment determines whether an individual meets nationally prescribed requirements for a teaching certificate. Capacity diagnosis judges the conditions and performance of preparation providers and may maintain, reduce, or withdraw their authorization and quotas. Appointment examinations select certificate holders for a limited number of public-school positions. The framework treats these functions as interdependent but not interchangeable. Its central proposition is that multiple gates improve quality assurance only when their decision objects and evidence bases are differentiated and aligned. When labor-market scarcity and high-stakes selection make appointment the dominant gate, its criteria can reorganize candidate behavior and preparation curricula upstream; when program evaluation is tied directly to quotas, a quality-assurance gate can simultaneously become an instrument of workforce regulation.

Figure 1 *Sequential Gatekeeping in South Korea's Teacher-Entry System*



Note. Solid arrows indicate candidate progression or regulatory influence; the dashed arrow indicates appointment-examination washback on preparation.

Historical institutionalism complements this cross-sectional framework by explaining how the allocation of gatekeeping responsibility changes over time. Critical junctures are periods in which institutional choices expand and produce durable trajectories, while subsequent arrangements may be reproduced or adjusted incrementally (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). The analysis therefore does not treat the present system as a

timeless design. It traces how specialized preparation, statutory certification, open competitive appointment, and capacity-linked evaluation were layered onto one another and how demographic contraction has altered the relative weight of these gates.

2.2 Document corpus and analytical procedure

The study combines qualitative policy document analysis with historical institutional analysis. Document analysis was used as a systematic procedure for reviewing and interpreting legal, administrative, and research texts rather than as a summary of isolated sources (Bowen, 2009). The core primary-source corpus comprised 10 institutional documents available through August 2026: four legal instruments governing teacher qualifications and appointment, and six national or provincial policy, implementation, and examination documents covering teacher education reform, admissions adjustment, institutional capacity diagnosis, qualification procedures, first-stage appointment questions, and a provincial appointment plan. Seven studies and policy reports on the Korean system were used to reconstruct historical development, compare preparation pathways, and examine implementation effects. Three additional methodological and theoretical works informed the analytical framework.

Documents were included when they met at least one of three criteria: they defined the legal authority or substantive requirements of a gate; documented a major reform or implementation procedure; or provided empirical or historical evidence about relationships among preparation, certification, evaluation, and appointment. Current legal provisions were checked against the Korean Law Information Center. Recent policies, manuals, and examination materials were taken from the Ministry of Education, the Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation, and a Metropolitan or Provincial Office of Education. English versions of statutes were used where authoritative translations were available; Korean-language policy documents were read in the original, with titles romanized and translated in the reference list. Key terms were cross-checked between Korean legal usage and their English renderings to avoid equating *geomjeong* with a conventional written licensing examination.

Analysis proceeded in two stages. First, each document was entered into an analytical matrix recording the responsible actor, decision object, evidence requirements, formal consequence, and relationship to other gates. This coding generated four categories: competence formation in preparation, individual qualification recognition, program-level quality and capacity regulation, and position-specific selection. Second, the documents were ordered chronologically and examined for changes in the allocation of responsibility across these categories. The four historical periods are bounded by institutional turning points rather than equal chronological intervals: the establishment of specialized preparation in 1895; post-liberation reconstruction and the legalization of qualifications after 1945; the introduction of open competitive appointment in 1991; and the reform agenda initiated in 2021 under demographic contraction. These boundaries identify changes in the architecture of entry control, not every change in teacher education policy.

For terminological consistency, **teacher certification refers to the overall process and legal status associated with obtaining a teaching certificate. Qualification assessment is used for the statutory determination known in Korean law as gyowon jageok geomjeong; although official English titles often translate geomjeong as "examination," it is not necessarily a written test. Non-examination qualification assessment refers to the ordinary program-based route (musihom geomjeong) through which eligible candidates are assessed without a separate standardized licensing test. Appointment examination** refers only to the post-certification competitive selection procedure for public-school positions. These terms are used consistently throughout the remainder of the article.

3. Historical Development of South Korea's Teacher Certification System

South Korea's teacher certification system did not develop by replacing teacher preparation with examinations. Rather, it evolved through continuous adjustment among the goals of expanding teacher supply, assuring preparation quality, ensuring equitable access to appointment, and responding to demographic change. From a functional perspective, its development involved the assignment of teacher preparation to specialized institutions, the progressive legalization of certification, the separation of certification from appointment, and the linkage of preparation capacity to institutional quality. Changes in the allocation of responsibility for entry into teaching divide this development into four stages.

3.1 The beginnings of specialized preparation and colonial regulation (1895-1945)

Modern teacher preparation in Korea began with the establishment of Hanseong Normal School in 1895, the first modern teacher education institution founded by the state (Kim et al., 2012). By incorporating teacher preparation into the construction of a modern school system, Hanseong Normal School replaced entry based solely on traditional learning or local reputation with organized coursework in a specialized institution. As the modern school system expanded, normal schools gradually became the principal institutions for preparing elementary teachers, and teacher preparation acquired increasingly specialized and institutionalized features.

After 1910, teacher preparation in Korea was incorporated into the school administration system of Japanese colonial rule. The establishment of institutions, curriculum content, certification, and appointment all served the operation of the colonial school system, while teacher certification functioned primarily as a means of status

confirmation and administrative control (Kim et al., 2012). Although this period established an organizational model of preparing teachers in specialized institutions, it did not yet produce a modern certification system centered on common professional standards and the quality of teacher education. Its principal institutional significance lay in completing the transition from non-institutional selection to specialized preparation, thereby creating an organizational basis for the postwar legalization of teacher certification.

3.2 Legalization of certification and the formation of university-level teacher education (1945-1990)

After 1945, South Korea began rebuilding its national education system. The Education Act enacted in 1949 specified teacher categories, qualification requirements, and preparation institutions, thereby establishing an initial legal foundation for teacher certification (Kim et al., 2012). The departure of Japanese teachers, rapid expansion of basic education, and growth of the school-age population produced serious teacher shortages for an extended period after the war. Policy therefore initially prioritized expanding teacher supply and subsequently raised the level of preparation once quantitative demand had been addressed.

The upgrading of elementary teacher education was particularly pronounced. From 1951 to 1961, elementary teachers were prepared mainly in three-year normal schools at the upper-secondary level. Beginning in 1962, these normal schools were gradually upgraded into two-year universities of education. From 1982 onward, the two-year institutions were reorganized as four-year universities, progressively establishing bachelor's-level preparation for elementary teachers (Park, 2019). Unlike the relatively concentrated route for elementary teacher preparation, growing demand for subject teachers during the expansion of secondary education encouraged multiple preparation pathways. In addition to colleges of education, departments of education in general universities, approved teacher certification programs in general universities, and graduate schools of education entered the field, creating a system in which different types of higher education institutions jointly supplied secondary teachers (Im et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2012).

This period produced the basic structure that continues to characterize South Korean teacher education. Elementary teacher preparation adopted a concentrated model involving a limited number of institutions and a clearly defined target group, whereas secondary teacher preparation developed an open model involving multiple institutions and pathways. Despite differences in institutional form and curriculum structure, certification in both models was obtained primarily through state-recognized preparation programs and their prescribed curricula. By specifying preparation institutions, curriculum content, and qualification standards, the state embedded qualification assessment in preservice preparation. Teacher education institutions consequently became the primary actors responsible for assuring the quality of entry into the profession.

3.3 Institutional separation of certification and competitive appointment (1991-2020)

The introduction of open competitive appointment in 1991 marked a major turning point in South Korea's teacher-entry system. Previously, graduates of national and public teacher education institutions received preferential placement in national and public schools, whereas graduates of relevant programs in private universities competed for the remaining positions. To eliminate differences in access to public-school employment among graduates of different institutions, South Korea introduced open competitive appointment in 1991. In principle, all newly appointed teachers in national and public schools were thereafter required to take a selection examination administered by a Metropolitan or Provincial Office of Education (Kwak, 2019). This reform severed the direct link between graduation from particular institutions and public-school appointment, transforming a teaching certificate from an approximate sufficient condition for public employment into a necessary condition for competing for a position.

South Korea subsequently refined its multi-level system of entry safeguards through legislation, institutional evaluation, and appointment examinations. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1997 specified the categories of, and basic standards for, qualifications for teachers in regular schools. The Educational Officials Act and related appointment regulations prescribed the principles, authority, and procedures governing the open selection of national and public-school teachers (Educational Officials Act, 1981; Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1997). Since 1998, the Ministry of Education has periodically evaluated teacher education institutions, assessing preparation conditions, curricula, teaching practicum, and program outcomes and progressively linking the results to financial support, admission quotas, and authorization to prepare teachers (Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea, 2026a). Quality assurance for certification thus expanded from the review of individual coursework to the evaluation of preparation programs and their host institutions.

The open appointment examination was also repeatedly adjusted during this period. Since 2014, the secondary teacher appointment examination has maintained a relatively stable two-stage structure. The first stage focuses on education, subject-matter content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. The second stage assesses teaching performance and suitability for appointment through such components as lesson planning, teaching demonstrations, in-depth interviews, experiments, or practical skills; the precise combination is determined by each Metropolitan or Provincial Office of Education according to subject and regional needs (Kwak, 2019). This reform layered a competitive appointment gate onto the existing program-based qualification route, while institutional evaluation added an organizational gate governing preparation providers.

3.4 Supply adjustment and quality restructuring under demographic contraction (2021-present)

In the 2020s, the decline in the school-age population caused by low fertility altered the underlying conditions of South Korea's teacher education system. The central policy problem was no longer a generalized shortage of teachers but the coexistence of an overall surplus in preparation capacity with differentiated needs across regions and subjects. Against this background, teacher education policy gradually shifted from expanding supply toward controlling capacity, improving curricula, and restructuring teacher competence.

In 2021, the Ministry of Education released the Development Plan for the Elementary and Secondary Teacher Training System, which proposed more continuous teaching practicums, stronger preparation for interdisciplinary and multi-subject teaching, and a gradual reduction in secondary teacher preparation capacity through institutional restructuring (Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea, 2021). In 2024, the Ministry further announced a 12% reduction in the combined admissions quota of the 10 universities of education beginning in the 2025 academic year, while supporting curriculum improvement and an expanded role in the continuing education of in-service teachers (Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea, 2024). This adjustment indicates that elementary teacher education, long organized through a relatively closed preparation system, has also begun to reduce supply proactively in response to demographic change.

Capacity diagnosis of teacher education institutions has become an important policy instrument for adjusting the supply of secondary teachers. The results of the sixth-cycle capacity diagnosis, released by the Ministry of Education in 2026, covered relevant programs at 139 universities. Programs rated C, D, and E faced reductions of 30%, 50%, and complete withdrawal of authorization, respectively. The combined preparation quota of departments of education in general universities, teacher certification programs, and graduate schools of education was expected to decline by approximately 3,000 places. Except for teacher certification programs in general universities, for which adjustments would mainly take effect in 2028 because of the timing of students' entry into the programs, other quota changes were scheduled in principle to begin in the 2027 academic year (Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea, 2026a). These reforms do not simply abolish multiple pathways such as university-based teacher certification programs or graduate schools of education. Rather, they more closely link institutional evaluation, admissions quotas, and authorization to prepare teachers, imposing differentiated contraction and quality accountability across pathways. Teacher education policy has consequently moved from emphasizing supply expansion and higher-level preparation to simultaneously regulating the quantity, institutional quality, and competence structure of teacher preparation. The certification system has likewise expanded beyond determining whether individual applicants have completed prescribed preparation to governing the full process of which institutions prepare teachers, at what scale, and at what level of quality.

4. Current Structure and Key Features of South Korea's Teacher Certification System

South Korea's current architecture can be described through five components: legally prescribed qualification standards, authorized preparation pathways, individual qualification assessment, institutional capacity diagnosis, and public-school appointment. The following subsections specify how each component operates.

4.1 Program-based certification

Korean law requires teachers to meet statutory qualification standards and hold the corresponding certificates. Article 21 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Article 22 of the Early Childhood Education Act stipulate that teachers must satisfy the qualifications listed in the relevant appendices and obtain a certificate examined and granted by the Minister of Education (Early Childhood Education Act, 2004; Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1997). In this context, "examination" refers to an assessment of whether an applicant meets statutory conditions and cannot be equated directly with a written test. The Decree on the Qualification Examination for Teachers distinguishes between examination-based and non-examination qualification assessments. For ordinary preservice teachers, the principal route to initial certification is a non-examination qualification assessment conducted after the completion of prescribed preparation in a state-recognized teacher education program (Decree on the Qualification Examination for Teachers, 2024; Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea, 2026b).

A non-examination assessment does not mean that completion of a degree automatically or unconditionally leads to certification. Applicants must still satisfy the educational, major-course, professional education coursework, academic performance, teaching practicum, and teacher aptitude requirements for the relevant certificate. They must also complete required components such as first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation training and gender-sensitivity education. Preparation institutions must verify that applicants are not subject to any statutory grounds restricting the acquisition of a qualification (Early Childhood Education Act, 2004; Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1997; Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea, 2026b). Following legislation and the annual practice manual, institutions review applicants' coursework, grades, practicum records, and supporting materials and process certification applications through the prescribed procedures. The Minister of Education retains the statutory authority to assess qualifications and issue certificates, while teacher education institutions are responsible for delivering preparation, generating evidence, and verifying documentation.

Thus, what South Korea's “non-examination” route waives is a separate standardized written certification test outside the preparation program. Quality judgments are based primarily on course grades, practicum records, and evidence of professional suitability accumulated during preparation rather than on a single standardized examination taken after graduation. Certification is therefore embedded within teacher preparation, and preparation institutions serve both as providers of professional knowledge and competence and as important agents in the assessment of initial qualifications. Compared with a separate national certification examination, this arrangement places greater emphasis on continuity throughout preparation. Its effectiveness, however, depends more heavily on whether institutions rigorously implement national standards and whether external bodies effectively oversee the quality of different programs.

4.2 A classified and graded certificate structure

South Korean teaching certificates are differentiated along three dimensions: school level and type, teaching subject or professional function, and qualification grade. First, regular teaching qualifications correspond primarily to kindergarten, elementary school, secondary school, and special school. Each category applies to a particular educational stage and reflects stage-specific differences in teachers' professional knowledge and preparation requirements. Second, the certificates of secondary-school regular teachers and assistant teachers, as well as those of some special-school and vocational teachers, specify the authorized teaching subject. Certificate holders are expected in principle to teach the subject stated on the certificate (Decree on the Qualification Examination for Teachers, 2024; Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea, 2026b). Third, school-support roles—including specialized counselors, librarian teachers, health teachers, and nutrition teachers—have distinct professional teaching qualifications, and their acquisition must also be aligned with the corresponding professional education or occupational credentials (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1997).

In terms of grading, regular teacher qualifications are centered on Grade II and Grade I certificates. The regular teacher (Grade II) certificate is the principal initial qualification awarded upon completion of preservice teacher education and indicates that the holder meets the basic standard for teaching at the corresponding school level or in the relevant subject. A regular teacher (Grade I) certificate generally requires the applicant to hold a Grade II certificate, possess the prescribed years of educational experience, and complete the relevant qualification training; some pathways are also linked to graduate education (Early Childhood Education Act, 2004; Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1997). Grade I therefore functions primarily as a form of post-entry professional advancement. Grades I and II are statutory grades of teacher qualification and should not be equated directly with the ranks in China's professional title system for teachers. Beyond regular teacher qualifications, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Early Childhood Education Act also prescribe qualifications for principals, assistant principals, and head teachers. Principal and assistant principal qualifications correspond primarily to school management positions, whereas the head teacher qualification is intended for teachers with extensive educational experience and outstanding competence in teaching and research (Early Childhood Education Act, 2004; Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1997). This classified and graded structure creates a relatively explicit correspondence between certificates and school positions: categories by school level define the basic scope of teaching, subject designations delimit the instructional field, specialized qualifications correspond to school-support functions, and grades connect preservice preparation with post-entry development. Certificate holders who wish to teach beyond the authorized scope generally need additional coursework, an added qualification, or a separate recognition process.

4.3 Preparation pathways: Concentrated elementary preparation and multiple secondary pathways

Elementary teacher preparation in South Korea is highly concentrated. It is provided mainly by 10 national universities of education, the relevant elementary education program at Korea National University of Education, and designated elementary education programs at Jeju National University and Ewha Womans University—commonly described as 13 principal institutions or programs (Park, 2019). Candidates complete a four-year undergraduate program comprising the full range of elementary school subjects, educational studies, subject-specific pedagogy, and teaching practicum, after which they apply for an elementary regular teacher (Grade II) certificate. Importantly, “13 preparation institutions” does not mean “13 universities of education.” Treating institutions that have merged, been renamed, or do not exist as separate universities of education would create factual inaccuracies.

Secondary teacher preparation is more diverse. Colleges of education and their subject education departments constitute the core pathway, while departments of education in general universities, approved teacher certification programs within general universities, and graduate schools of education may prepare teachers in authorized subjects. These pathways differ in organization and intensity, but candidates seeking the same category of qualification must satisfy the national minimum curriculum and certification requirements. Multiple pathways expand opportunities for subject specialists to enter teaching while making the equivalence of graduate competence across different preparation experiences a central issue for quality assurance.

Kindergarten teachers may acquire an initial qualification through relevant early childhood education programs in universities or junior colleges, approved teacher certification programs, and corresponding graduate programs. Special-school teacher preparation requires coursework in special education and is linked to teaching

competence at the kindergarten, elementary, or secondary level. The common feature across these pathways is not the name of the institution but the requirement that the program be authorized to prepare candidates for the relevant certificate and that candidates complete the corresponding major and professional education requirements.

4.4 Qualification standards: Dual control through curricular evidence and institutional quality

The direct subject of non-examination qualification assessment is the individual applicant, but its effective operation depends on prior regulation of preparation programs. For a secondary-school regular teacher (Grade II) certificate, for example, teacher education programs generally must ensure that candidates complete at least 50 credits of major coursework and at least 22 credits of professional education coursework. The major component includes foundational subject knowledge and subject-specific pedagogy, while the professional education component includes educational theory, professional foundations, and school-based practicum. Operational rules also establish requirements for average grades in major and professional education courses, teacher aptitude and personality tests, first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation training, teaching practicum, and gender-sensitivity education (Im et al., 2016; Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea, 2026b).

This arrangement incorporates two forms of quality control. The first is an individual-level completion review, through which preparation institutions verify coursework, grades, practicum, and suitability evidence according to common rules. The second is program-level capacity diagnosis: the Ministry of Education and the Korean Educational Development Institute periodically evaluate preparation conditions, curricula, practical training, and outcomes and respond by commending programs, maintaining quotas, reducing quotas, or withdrawing authorization to prepare teachers (Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea, 2026a).

4.5 Appointment to public schools: Combining nationally shared standards with local selection

Holding a teaching certificate does not automatically confer a school position. Under Article 11 of the Educational Officials Act, public-school teachers are, in principle, newly appointed through open selection. Appointing authorities may also designate a service area or school in advance according to vacancies and operational needs (Educational Officials Act, 1981). In practice, the 17 Metropolitan and Provincial Offices of Education issue annual notices, determine recruitment quotas, and administer examinations according to teacher demand and subject vacancies. The Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation provides professional support for developing common written examination questions and materials, but final recruitment is not conducted through a single nationwide allocation by the Ministry of Education.

The secondary-school teacher appointment examination generally comprises two stages. The first is a common written examination in which education typically carries 20 points and Subject Specialization A and B together carry 80 points. The specialized component covers both subject-matter content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge and relies mainly on essay, short-answer, and constructed-response formats rather than exclusively on multiple-choice questions (Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation, 2025; Kwak, 2019). In the second stage, each Metropolitan or Provincial Office of Education sets components such as lesson planning, teaching demonstrations, in-depth interviews, experiments, or practical skills according to regional and subject-specific needs. For example, the Gyeonggi Province notice for the 2026 academic year scheduled experiments or practical skills, teaching demonstrations, and in-depth interviews after the first-stage written examination, indicating that local appointment procedures assess not only written knowledge but also fit for the position and teaching performance (Gyeonggido Office of Education, 2025). Applicants generally must also satisfy announced conditions such as the Korean History Proficiency Test; health and nutrition positions require the relevant professional credentials.

Table 1

Teacher category	Qualification	Main educational requirements	Additional requirements	Institutional features	Legal basis
Kindergarten teacher	Regular teacher (Grade II)	Graduate of a university department of early childhood education; or graduate of a university, junior college, or equivalent institution who completed the prescribed childcare and professional education credits while enrolled; or holder of a master's degree after majoring in kindergarten education at a graduate school of education or a graduate-school department of education designated by the Minister of Education.	A qualified assistant teacher may obtain the regular teacher (Grade II) qualification after at least two years of educational experience and the prescribed in-service training.	Emphasizes an early childhood education background while recognizing routes based on junior-college or equivalent education plus childcare and professional education coursework.	Early Childhood Education Act, Appendix 2 (related to Article 22[2])
Elementary teacher	Regular teacher (Grade II)	Graduate of a university of education; or graduate of a college of education with a major in elementary education; or holder of a master's degree after majoring in elementary education at a graduate school of education or a graduate-school department of education designated by the Minister of Education.	A qualified elementary assistant teacher may also obtain the corresponding qualification after at least two years of educational experience and the prescribed in-service training.	Entry relies heavily on universities of education and specialized elementary education programs, reflecting strong school-level specialization.	Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Appendix 2 (related to Article 21[2])
Secondary teacher	Regular teacher (Grade II)	Graduate of a college of education; or holder of a master's degree from a graduate school of education or a graduate-school department of education designated by the Minister of Education; or graduate of a university department of education; or graduate of a university or industrial university who completed the prescribed professional education credits while enrolled.	A qualified secondary assistant teacher may enter the regular-teacher qualification track after at least two years of educational experience and the prescribed in-service training.	Provides comparatively diverse routes through colleges of education, university-based teacher certification programs, and graduate-level preparation.	Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Appendix 2 (related to Article 21[2])
Special-school teacher	Regular teacher (Grade II)	Graduate of a special education department in a university of education or college of education; or graduate of a special-education-related major in a university or industrial university who completed the prescribed professional education coursework; or graduate of a special-education-related major who then earned a master's degree in special education at a graduate school of education or designated graduate school.	Holders of a kindergarten, elementary, or secondary regular teacher (Grade II) certificate may obtain a special-school teaching qualification through required supplementary education or a master's program in special education.	Emphasizes a special education background while allowing regular teachers to convert their qualifications through supplementary education or graduate study.	Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Appendix 2 (related to Article 21[2])
Specialized teachers (health, nutrition, counseling, etc.)	Grade II qualification	Typically requires graduation in a relevant field from a university, industrial university, or junior college. Some positions require a professional license, such as a nursing or dietitian license. Specialized counselors may qualify by graduating in counseling or psychology and completing professional education credits, or by earning a master's degree through a relevant graduate school of education program.	A Grade I qualification generally requires relevant professional teaching experience after Grade II certification and completion of qualification training.	Combines educational credentials, professional qualifications, and professional education coursework.	Early Childhood Education Act, Appendix 2; Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Appendix 2; Decree on the Qualification Examination for Teachers

Overview of Educational Requirements for Entry to Teaching in South Korea

Note. Compiled from Appendix 2 of the Early Childhood Education Act, Appendix 2 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the Decree on the Qualification Examination for Teachers (Decree on the Qualification Examination for Teachers, 2024; Early Childhood Education Act, 2004; Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1997).

Table 2
Formats of the First-Stage Secondary Teacher Appointment Examination

Examination component	Education	Subject Specialization A	Subject Specialization B
Domain	Education	Subject-specific pedagogy (25%-35%) Subject content (65%-75%)	Subject-specific pedagogy (25%-35%) Subject content (65%-75%)
Duration	60 minutes	90 minutes	90 minutes
Item format	Essay	Fill-in and constructed-response items	Fill-in and constructed-response items
Number of items	1 item	4/8 items	2/9 items
Points per item	20 points	2/4 points	2/4 points
Subtotal	20 points	40 points	40 points

Table 3
Content and Scope of the First-Stage Secondary Teacher Appointment Examination

Session	Examination paper	Content and scope
First session	Education	Determined in accordance with Appendix 3 of Ministry of Education Notice No. 2020-240 (October 30, 2020) and the relevant transitional provisions. The scope includes introduction to education, philosophy and history of education, curriculum, educational evaluation, educational methods and technology, educational psychology, sociology of education, educational administration, and student guidance and counseling.
Second and third sessions	Subject Specialization A and B	Questions are based on the basic required subjects or domains prescribed for each type of teaching qualification and designated subject. Content comprises subject-specific pedagogy (25%-35%) and subject content (65%-75%). Subject-specific pedagogy includes theories of subject education and the relevant national curriculum standards issued before the appointment examination notice. Special provisions apply to electrical, electronic, and mechanical subjects.

Note. Tables 2 and 3 were compiled from first-stage examination materials published by the Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation (2025).

5. Evaluation of South Korea's Teacher Certification System and Its Implications

Viewed through the sequential gatekeeping framework, the Korean system combines distributed responsibility with unequal pressures across gates. Its strengths and limitations can therefore be assessed in terms of functional differentiation, equivalence across pathways, appointment-examination washback, and the dual use of capacity diagnosis for quality assurance and workforce adjustment.

5.1 Multi-level safeguards and the division of entry functions

The principal advantage of the Korean system is that no single actor is formally responsible for every quality judgment. Preparation institutions develop competence and generate longitudinal evidence through coursework and practicum; qualification assessment verifies statutory minimums; capacity diagnosis oversees program conditions and outcomes; and local education offices select for specific vacancies. This division permits different forms of evidence to be considered at the stage for which they are most relevant and prevents annual vacancy numbers from directly redefining the national minimum for certification. It also preserves a professional role for teacher education rather than reducing entry entirely to test performance.

Distributed gatekeeping is effective, however, only when the gates remain differentiated and connected. Course completion is weak evidence if programs do not demonstrate what candidates can do; appointment testing becomes duplicative if it merely reassesses general educational knowledge; and institutional diagnosis loses substantive force if it rewards documentation rather than improvement. The Korean design therefore illustrates the theoretical proposition

advanced in this article: adding gates does not automatically strengthen quality assurance. The decisive issue is whether each gate has an appropriate object of judgment, credible evidence, and a feedback relationship that does not allow one gate to displace the others.

The Korean experience suggests that reform of China's teacher certification system should first clarify the functional boundaries among preparation, certification, and recruitment. Teacher education programs should be responsible for the process through which professional competence is developed; certification should determine whether applicants meet nationally uniform basic standards; and recruitment by local authorities and schools should focus on fit with a particular school level, subject, and set of school responsibilities. China's current teacher qualification examination plays an important role in opening access to the profession and ensuring basic fairness. Reform should therefore neither simply abolish the examination nor replicate South Korea's non-examination assessment. Instead, it should reduce duplication between qualification and recruitment examinations in areas such as education and subject knowledge and prevent repeated selection on the basis of the same forms of knowledge. Only when assessment content is allocated according to the function of each stage can evidence from preparation, certification examinations, and position-specific evaluation become complementary.

5.2 Multiple preparation pathways and assurance of qualification equivalence

South Korea permits multiple pathways for secondary teacher preparation, including colleges of education, departments of education in general universities, approved teacher certification programs, and graduate schools of education. Multiple pathways broaden the pool of potential teachers and respond to differences among subject areas and personnel needs, but they also raise the issue of qualification equivalence. A four-year teacher education degree, a teacher certification program added to a general academic major, and graduate-level conversion preparation differ in aims, duration, curricular integration, and professional identity formation, yet may all lead to the same regular teacher (Grade II) certificate (Im et al., 2016). Common requirements for curricula, credits, and grades ensure minimum inputs but do not demonstrate equivalent outcomes. Practice opportunities are also limited. Most elementary preparation institutions provide approximately 9–10 weeks of practicum across four years, whereas secondary candidates generally complete one four-week practicum regardless of institutional pathway; in secondary preparation, this brief placement must cover observation, teaching, and classroom management (Im et al., 2016).

The 2025 capacity-diagnosis results provide more direct evidence that quality concerns are not distributed evenly across pathways. All 45 colleges of education were rated A or B, as were 85 of 89 departments of education in general universities. By contrast, only 43 of 115 general-university teacher certification programs received A or B, while 72 were rated C, D, or E; among 65 graduate schools of education, 36 received A or B and 29 received C or D (Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea, 2026a). These results substantiate institutional variation more clearly than a general claim that equivalence may be problematic. They do not, however, establish differences in individual graduate competence because the ratings aggregate program conditions, curricula, practical education, and outcomes and are not publicly linked to common measures of graduates' classroom performance.

Table 4
Capacity-Diagnosis Results by Secondary Teacher Preparation Pathway, 2025

Preparation pathway	Units assessed	A	B	C	D	E
Colleges of education	45	27	18	0	0	0
Departments of education in general universities	89	49	36	4	0	0
Teacher certification programs in general universities	115	7	36	47	22	3
Graduate schools of education	65	7	29	27	2	0

Note. A indicates ministerial commendation; B, maintenance of the existing quota; C, a 30% quota reduction; D, a 50% quota reduction; and E, withdrawal of authorization. Compiled from the Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea (2026a).

Capacity diagnosis is therefore a partial response rather than proof of equivalence. It assumes that common institutional indicators validly represent preparation quality, that ratings are comparable across differently organized pathways, and that high-stakes consequences will stimulate improvement. Ro (2025) shows that a narrow conception of teacher quality and quota-linked accountability can instead produce fear-based compliance, encouraging institutions to organize documentary evidence around indicators. The public diagnosis results reveal between-pathway differences, but they may mask variation among subjects or programs within the same institution and do not demonstrate that a higher rating predicts more effective classroom practice. Qualification equivalence consequently requires common graduate competence standards and externally moderated performance evidence in addition to course minima and institutional ratings.

For China, opening entry to the teaching profession and maintaining the professional integrity of certification are not mutually exclusive. The key question is whether different preparation pathways can provide comparable evidence of competence. While retaining a common qualification examination, China should strengthen the accreditation of teacher education programs and incorporate curriculum structure, faculty conditions, practicum quality, graduate performance,

and capacity for continuous improvement into program evaluation. For high-quality accredited programs, structured practicum assessments, teaching portfolios, course performance, and graduation-level competence assessments could be used as important evidence for certification. Applicants who have not received systematic teacher education should demonstrate that they meet the same standards through a common examination and supplementary practice-based assessment. Every pathway must show, against transparent and verifiable criteria, that candidates have attained the same basic teaching competence; otherwise, an open examination route risks becoming a low-cost means of obtaining a certificate.

5.3 Competitive appointment and the reconstruction of practice-based evidence

When teacher supply persistently exceeds demand for public-school positions, the appointment examination shifts from a post-certification recruitment procedure to the de facto dominant gate. Washback operates through a chain of incentives rather than through examination format alone. First, scarcity makes the result decisive for access to secure public employment. Second, the stable weighting and score-based screening of the first stage signal which forms of knowledge have the greatest immediate return. Third, candidates rationally reallocate time toward education and subject-specialization content that can be scored reliably in writing. Fourth, demand for examination relevance can feed back into university courses, reducing attention to practicum, collaborative inquiry, and forms of professional learning that are difficult to score in a short test (Coolahan et al., 2004; Im et al., 2016; Kwak, 2019).

This mechanism has consequences at behavioral, curricular, and professional levels. At the behavioral level, examination preparation competes with sustained participation in schools. At the curricular level, examinable content can become the operational definition of worthwhile learning even when formal program aims are broader. At the professional level, candidates may come to equate readiness with mastery of assessable knowledge rather than with the capacity to diagnose learning, build relationships, collaborate with colleagues, or support students as homeroom teachers. Ro's (2019) study of novice secondary teachers is instructive: participants reported that content-focused preparation had limited significance in parts of their school work, while care and support responsibilities assumed greater practical importance. Washback thus narrows not only what candidates study but also the conception of teaching that dominates preparation.

Written assessment nevertheless remains defensible for comparing subject knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge across large candidate pools. The problem is gate dominance, not the existence of testing. South Korea has attempted to broaden the evidence base through teaching demonstrations, in-depth interviews, experiments, and practical skills in the second stage. These assessments can sample planning, explanation, and situational judgment, but they remain short simulations conducted before evaluators rather than sustained work with real students. They have limited capacity to assess long-term curriculum enactment, diagnosis of learning difficulties, classroom relationships, family communication, and professional collaboration. Local control also permits contextual adaptation while producing differences in components, weights, and scoring standards. The policy challenge is therefore to retain national comparability without allowing the written stage to determine candidate learning upstream or treating a short performance as a substitute for longitudinal practice evidence.

For China, the implication is the need to establish an evidence chain spanning preparation, certification, and recruitment. During preparation, candidates should undertake sustained practicums with guidance and feedback, with university faculty and school-based mentors jointly assessing lesson planning, classroom enactment, student assessment, and professional reflection. At the certification stage, structured practicum assessments, teaching portfolios, and case analysis can supplement written tests and interviews. At the recruitment stage, assessment should examine fit with specific curricula, student groups, and school responsibilities. To reduce variation across institutions and regions, a common competence framework, scoring rubrics, exemplars, and assessor training should also be established. In short, evidence accumulated across different stages should be used to determine whether candidates can promote the learning and development of real students.

5.4 Contraction of preparation capacity and teacher supply-demand adjustment

In recent years, South Korea has responded to the declining school-age population and teacher oversupply by reducing admissions quotas at universities of education, cutting the capacity of low-rated programs, and withdrawing authorization from some programs (Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea, 2024, 2026a). Linking diagnosis to quotas can phase out persistently weak provision and partially reduce the imbalance between certificate holders and public-school vacancies. It also reduces pressure on the appointment examination to regulate supply indirectly through intense competition. In this sense, preparation capacity is part of both certification quality assurance and teacher workforce governance.

Combining these two purposes within one instrument also creates risks. The diagnosis model assumes that institutional ratings are sufficiently valid to justify both judgments about quality and decisions about future supply. Yet the published results do not show whether ratings predict graduates' teaching performance or appointment outcomes, and institution-level grades may conceal stronger and weaker subjects within the same provider. High-stakes quota consequences may intensify the compliance behavior identified by Ro (2025): providers have incentives to optimize reported indicators and documentary evidence, while experimentation whose benefits are difficult to quantify may become less attractive. More fundamentally, a national quality rating does not indicate whether a program supplies teachers in a locally scarce subject or region. A program can be comparatively weak yet strategically necessary, or comparatively strong yet contribute to persistent oversupply. Treating diagnosis as an automatic quota algorithm therefore risks conflating quality assurance with workforce planning.

Aggregate contraction does not necessarily produce corresponding improvements in preparation quality or the structure of teacher competence. A smaller school-age population mainly reduces demand under conventional staffing standards, whereas future schools may require more capacity in interdisciplinary teaching, digital education, inclusive education,

mental health, and career guidance. A nationwide decline in total teacher demand may also coexist with local shortages in rural areas, special education, vocational education, and particular subjects. If quotas are reduced mainly according to national student numbers and institutional ratings, policy may alleviate overall surplus while aggravating imbalances across regions and subjects. Capacity diagnosis should therefore inform, rather than mechanically determine, differentiated decisions that combine program quality, subject demand, regional access, and the feasibility of supported improvement.

In China, where a declining school-age population coexists with staggered peaks across educational stages and divergent demographic trends across regions, teacher supply-demand adjustment must move from aggregate control toward differentiated forecasting. Authorities should regularly publish teacher-demand information by school level, subject, and region, taking into account changes in the school-age population, class-size policy, curriculum reform, teacher retirement, and regional mobility. This information should be linked to the configuration of teacher education programs, admissions capacity, and graduate employment. Certification should continue to maintain stable national baseline standards and must not lower the threshold for teaching in response to shortages in particular regions or subjects. Preparation and recruitment policy can instead address structural shortages through targeted preparation, additional interdisciplinary coursework, regional service agreements, and supported qualification-conversion programs. Programs with persistent oversupply and weak quality can be gradually contracted through accreditation and admissions adjustment, while pathways in fields of urgent national or regional need can be expanded without compromising professional standards.

The Korean experience demonstrates that teacher supply and demand cannot be left to adjust passively through competition in the appointment examination. Demographic projections, preparation capacity, the qualification structure, and staffing needs must be coordinated to avoid transferring the costs of imbalance to preservice teachers and to ensure that different regions and student groups have access to qualified teachers while the overall teaching workforce contracts.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study draws primarily on laws, policy documents, publicly available examination materials, and relevant scholarship. It focuses on the basic structure of initial certification for regular teachers and appointment to public schools in South Korea and cannot exhaust the institutional differences among certificate categories, preparation pathways, and regions. Policy text analysis mainly reveals institutional design and its underlying logic; it is insufficient to test cross-institutional consistency in non-examination qualification assessment, the scoring reliability of appointment examinations, or the actual effects of adjustments to preparation capacity. Future research should draw on Korean-language scholarship, institutional case studies, examination and employment data, and interviews with relevant stakeholders to compare policy implementation and outcomes across school levels, regions, and preparation pathways.

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