

"Children Dying Inside:" A Critical Analysis of Education in South Korea

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J. M. Beach

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### **Abstract**

This article analyzes education in South Korea. It presents a brief history of Korea and East Asian education. It also explores the dynamic relationship between the public and private spheres of education in South Korea. A case study of Korean English Preparatory Academy (KEPA) is used to examine the financial, social, and psychological costs of education in South Korea, as well as analyze one particular private academy that is profiting off of "education fever," which is a phrase that labels Korean's obsession with education and social status. Education is big business in South Korea, but whose interest does education serve: society, individuals, or private corporations? Ultimately, I conclude that education in South Korea is driven by a cultural preoccupation with social status and class, as well as by free-market capitalists seeking profit, and only marginally with the private economic returns of a post-secondary degree, let alone the holistic development of the individual. Education in South Korea is not about skill based learning nor is it about individual student development, and to that extent, I examine in the conclusion whether the Korean system of education is just, and whether it should be a model for the rest of the world to follow.

## Introduction

During the 1990s free market enthusiasts pronounced a “new” type of economy<sup>1</sup> that was spreading across the globe. This new economy was a post-industrial “knowledge” economy focused on the development of “human capital” and new forms of technology. For the past twenty years the strong correlation between education, economic opportunity, and social class has been under scrutiny, hence, finding ways to increase educational opportunity has become a prominent public policy issue.<sup>2</sup> The economic necessity of increased education, especially college degrees and credentials, has become a new “gospel” and a “secular faith.”<sup>3</sup> Today, insecure people all across the world feel immense pressure to gain increased amounts of education in order to hold onto middle-class social status, let alone to seek increased economic mobility. Nowhere is this pressure felt more than in South Korea.

Since the 1990s South Korea has caught the spotlight of global attention as one of the four “Asian Tigers.” This moniker denoted the “miracle” socio-economic transformation from an underdeveloped, autocratic third-world backwater into a developed, free-market, high-skilled economy and democratizing society. South Korea has become famous for its highly educated population, soaring industrial productivity, and innovative technology. In global policy circles South Korea is being heralded as an economic model, not only for developing states, but also for advanced market democracies.<sup>4</sup> South Korea is also held up as a model for education by various

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York: Anchor, 2001); Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter? Myths about Education and Economic Growth* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor, 2000); Paul Morris, “Asia’s Four Little Tigers: A Comparison of the Role of Education in their Development,” *Comparative Education* 32, no. 1 (March 1996): 95-109.

<sup>3</sup> W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson, *The Education Gospel: The Economic Power of Schooling* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Wolf, *Does Education Matter?*, x.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Borthwick, *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007); Eum Mee Kim, *The Four Asian Tigers: Economic Development and the Global Political Economy* (Burlington, MA: Academic Press, 1998); Youngil Lim, *Technology and Productivity: The Korean Way of Learning and*

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policy wonks<sup>5</sup> and some renowned educational scholars.<sup>6</sup> International policy makers point to its highly educated population (one of the highest in the world), its high levels on international achievement tests, and its "efficient educational system," which produces notable results on little public funding - the South Korean government invests in education "well below" the international average.<sup>7</sup>

However, upon closer examination, South Korea not only has a troubled free-market economy and embattled political democracy, but its "intense" "obsession" with education borders on psychosis. And despite some claims of an "efficient" educational system, South Korea has some serious issues that undermine the quality of its educational system and it boasts one of the *most expensive*, if not the most expensive, educational systems in the world, with most of the total cost borne on the backs of middle-class parents. When it comes to education, South Korea is suffering from "education fever," a concept that Koreans themselves have used to label their particular malady.<sup>8</sup> While national statistics paint a pretty portrait, the underlying reality is a nightmare, especially for the young, who are pushed into a highly competitive and stressful social environment from a very early age. The American public has recently been exposed to this relentless form of education through the media hype over Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the*

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*Catching Up* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Ian Williams, "Korean Model Triumphs Over West," *Asia Times Online* (Nov 17 2009).

<sup>5</sup> David Azocar, "Korean Educational Model: A Good Pattern for Chile to Follow," *Chilean Library of Congress* (June 13 2008) <asiapacifico.bcn.cl/en>; "A Slow Learning Curve," *Holding Its Breath: A Special Report on Egypt*, *The Economist* (July 17 2010): 10-12. *The Economist* often uses South Korea as a positive example of a developing country that used education to bolster economic success, as it does in a cross-cultural comparison with Egypt in the above article.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Linda Darling-Hammond, "Korea's Climb to Extraordinary Attainment," *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future* (New York, 2010), 173-181.

<sup>7</sup> Wolf, *Does Education Matter?*, 41; Michael J. Seth, *Education Fever: Society, Politics, and the Pursuit of Schooling in South Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 2, 7; Michael J. Seth, "Korean Education: A Philosophical and Historical Perspective," *Korean Education*, Young-Key Kim-Renaud, R. Richard Grinker, & Kirk W. Larsen, eds. (Washington, DC, 2005), 3.

Tiger Mother, a relatively moderate account compared with the experiences of children in South Korea.<sup>9</sup>

International educational reformers and policy makers are focused on increasing years of schooling, increasing educational achievement on standardized tests, increasing access to post-secondary institutions, and increasing the attainment of post-secondary degrees. But rarely does anyone ask, why? And further, are the means (not least of all the stress and strain on children) worth the ends? The standard reply, which has become a policy mantra, is that education furthers national economic growth and global competitiveness, while enriching the individual consumer. These economic ends are offered as the supreme value of human life.<sup>10</sup> But there is no evidence to prove that more schooling, more achievement on standardized tests, more access to college, or more college degrees will bring more national economic growth. Alison Wolf perceptively argued, "Just because something is valuable, it does not follow that yet more of it is by definition a good idea." Besides the unexamined connection between education and economic growth, no one bothers to ask, what does all this education cost - not just financially, but in human terms, socially and psychologically? But questioning the global "secular faith" in education, as Alison Wolf pointed out, "places one somewhere between an animal-hater and an imbecile."<sup>11</sup> South Korea is not alone in being "obsessed" with education.<sup>12</sup> The whole world seems to be in the grip of education fever.

I intend to focus the later of these two unexamined questions in order to critique the global obsession with education. Specially, I examine the financial, social, and psychological costs of education in South Korea, as well as analyze one particular private academy that is

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<sup>9</sup> Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (New York, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Grubb and Lazerson, *The Education Gospel*; Wolf, *Does Education Matter?*, ix-xi.

<sup>11</sup> Wolf, *Does Education Matter?*, x-xi.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

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profiting off of "education fever." Education is big business in South Korea, but whose interest does education serve: society, individuals, or private corporations? Ultimately, I conclude that education in South Korea is driven by a cultural preoccupation with social status and class, as well as by free-market capitalists seeking profit, and only marginally with the private economic returns of a post-secondary degree. Koreans do not seem concerned with any intrinsic value placed on the process of education, nor is education a vehicle for economic mobility or individual development. Thus, I argue in the conclusion, South Korea should not be seen as a global educational exemplar. In contrast, the South Korean educational model should serve as a warning: beware the grip of "education fever."

### **A Very Short History of South Korea**

The small country of Korea has been largely unnoticed by the rest of the world until the mid-twentieth century. For much of its three thousand year history, Korea was an autonomous kingdom, conquered briefly only three times: by the T'ang dynasty of China in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, by the Mongols in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and finally by Imperial Japan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Japanese were the most brutal of the three colonizers, establishing a police state, a legal system of racial discrimination, and forced modernization.<sup>13</sup> During World War II, Korea country was liberated by the United States. After the war, Korea remained a strategic asset, along with newly conquered Japan, as the US sought to redevelop East Asia while protecting the region against perceived communist threats from Russia and China.<sup>14</sup> Korea became one of the first major conflicts in the global Cold War to contain communism and it ended in a draw. In fact, the Korean war is still not officially over. No peace treaty was ever signed. Mild hostilities and

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<sup>13</sup> Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: Norton, 2005), 148-49; Seth, *Education Fever*, 49.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-10.

incivilities continue between North and South Korea (and the U.S. keeps a military presence permanently based in the South). With the help of several decades of U.S. foreign aid and economic advisors, South Korea has transformed itself into a developed, quasi-democratic country that has one of the world's most vibrant economies, especially in the technology sector. From 1965 to 1978 South Korea's GNP grew around 9 percent annually, which decreased slightly to 8 percent from 1978 to 1997, hence the term "tiger" economy.<sup>15</sup>

Yet South Korea remains an authoritarian and class-based society with deep social, political, and economic inequalities. For much of its independent existence in the twentieth century, South Korea was ruled by military dictators and autocratic presidents. Its post-war political history was punctuated with social unrest and several high ranking political assassinations. "Korean-style democracy" developed slowly and unevenly, a decades-long gap between democratic rhetoric and authoritarian government. After years of official repression under military governments, political reforms finally came in the mid-1980s as a direct result of a "mass movement for democracy." Free National Assembly elections took place in 1985, labor organizing was legalized in 1987, and a "civilian regime" finally controlled the country by 1993.<sup>16</sup> The foundation of South Korea's vibrant economy is based on a history of Western investment, state-sponsored capitalism, police state repression, and the oligarchic control of major industries by wealthy families (*chaebol*), comprising a super-elite who often above the rule of law.<sup>17</sup>

Since the Asian financial crisis in 1997-1998, the South Korean economy has greatly expanded, due in part to an increase in the public consumption of goods, which along with

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<sup>15</sup> Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*; Seth, *Education Fever*, 117.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 364, 384, 392-95, 402.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 205, 317, 373; Ki-baik Lee, *A New History of Korea*, trans. Edward W. Wagner (Seoul: Ilchokak, 1984), 383-84; "Return of the Overlord," *The Economist* (April 3 2010), 71-73.

education credentials, have become the dominant markers of class distinction. But not everyone has benefited from Korea's expanding economy and increased access to educational institutions. Inequality has intensified and there is "a growing disparity" between rich and poor measured by consumption patterns, residential segregation, and access to quality education, especially quality higher education. Recent trends indicate a "new pattern of social inequality" that is an ever present threat to the majority of South Koreans.<sup>18</sup> And of course traditional gender inequality persists in full-force negating for many women any social mobility due to academic degrees. According to *The Economist*, "Only 60% of female South Korean graduates aged between 25 and 64 are in work - making educated South Korean women the most underemployed in OECD countries."<sup>19</sup> In 1994 women constituted only 8.6 percent of the workers in the top fifty corporations and in 1997 women held only 27 percent of all the professional jobs.<sup>20</sup>

Not only are the numbers of impoverished and underemployed still a problem, there has also been increasing unemployment and growing job insecurity for white collar workers. Over the past decade, Koreans have suffered setbacks from less protective labor laws, increased competition in the skilled labor market for fewer full-time jobs, and the introduction of neoliberal business models, like increased use a flexible, contingent, and low-paid labor force that can be easily hired and fired in reaction to business cycles.<sup>21</sup> Plus, the educationally driven culture of South Korea turns out many more college graduates than can be adequately employed

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<sup>18</sup> Hagen Koo, "The Changing Faces of Inequality in South Korea in the Age of Globalization," *Korean Studies* 31 (2007): 1-18; Jae Hoon Lim, "Class Reproduction and Competing Ideologies in Korean Education," *Korean Education*, Young-Key Kim-Renaud, R. Richard Grinker, & Kirk W. Larsen, eds. (Washington, DC, 2005), 17.

<sup>19</sup> "Profiting from Sexism," *The Economist* (Oct 21 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 245; Laura Nelson, *Measured Excess: Gender, Status, and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Koo, "The Changing Faces of Inequality in South Korea in the Age of Globalization"; Andrew Eungi Kim and Innwon Park, "Changing Trends of Work in South Korea: The Rapid Growth of Underemployed and Job Insecurity," *Asian Survey* 46, no. 3 (May/June 2006): 437-56; Nelson, *Measured Excess*; Dennis Lett, *In Pursuit of Status: The Making of South Korea's "New" Urban Middle Class* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998).

in the economy.<sup>22</sup> While South Korea is near the top in turning out more college educated students each year, it ranks near the bottom in terms of actually employing these college graduates. As Michael J. Seth pointed out, "In 1995, only 61 percent of college graduates were able to find jobs within six months of receiving their degrees, despite the booming economy and a labor shortage."<sup>23</sup> While South Korea has made some improvement, it still lags most other developed economies. A recent OECD report found that only 77.1 percent of college graduates in 2008 were employed, compared to 87.8 percent in the U.K. and 83.1 percent in the U.S.<sup>24</sup> The problem has only gotten worse as economic growth has slowed and the amount of college graduates have increased. The private rate of return for a college degree has been declining, although their value as a symbol of social status remains undiminished.<sup>25</sup>

It is not clear if the state will enact new policies to help the majority of Korean citizens and counter balance rising economic inequality, or if the country is slipping backwards towards its autocratic and impoverished past. While Korea has established democratic institutions, it is still not a fully democratic country. In 2009 more than 3,300 Korean professors at 50 different universities signed manifestos and marched in protest stating, "The freedom of expression and assembly, judicial independence, basic human rights and justice are seriously in retreat."<sup>26</sup> Korean historian Bruce Cumings has noted, "Hierarchy and inequality were deeply ingrained in Korean society until just the past few decades, and for many Koreans these remain not just 'facts of life' but *ideals* of how to organize a proper society [author's emphasis]."<sup>27</sup> There is a "great

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<sup>22</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *South Korea*, revised version, *World Data on Education*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: UNESCO, Oct 2006), 30.

<sup>23</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 247.

<sup>24</sup> Cho Jae-eun, "Too Many Grads Fight for Too Few Jobs," *Joong Ang Daily* (Oct 18 2010).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*; Lett, *In Pursuit of Status*.

<sup>26</sup> Hwang Jang-jin, "Intellectuals Engage in War of Ideologies," *The Korea Herald* (June 11 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 12.

contradiction" in South Korean society.<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, its people and political leadership profess democratic and egalitarian ideals; however, the Korean social structure continues to be organized as a hierarchical status system, especially its social relationships, educational institutions, business culture, and political culture. Nowhere is this contradiction felt more than in South Korea's educational system.

## **Public Education in South Korea**

In East Asia state sponsored education and a cultural emphasis on credentialed knowledge workers has been a venerated tradition for a long time. In what is often called "Confucian" culture, academic degrees have been the primary markers of social distinction and economic mobility for over two thousand years. The hereditary locus of aristocratic power became blended with a meritocratic educated bureaucracy, which created a "mixed aristocratic/bureaucratic ruling class."<sup>29</sup> Educational institutions stressed rote memorization of the Chinese language, classical Chinese texts, ritualized socialization, writing, and the arts.<sup>30</sup> And while Confucian and neo-Confucian educational principles did stress individual development as "self cultivation," the emphasis of formal schooling, especially in later neo-Confucian institutions, focused more on situating the individual within the hierarchical "structure" of society. Thus, much of a student's instruction was geared toward a socialization process, whereby, one learned proper social discourse, deference to superiors, and traditional rituals.<sup>31</sup> Instruction culminated

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<sup>28</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 144; Lim, "Class Reproduction and Competing Ideologies in Korean Education," 17.

<sup>29</sup> James B. Palais, "Confucianism and the Aristocratic/Bureaucratic Balance in Korea," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 44, no. 2 (Dec 1984): 427-68.

<sup>30</sup> Palais, "Confucianism and the Aristocratic/Bureaucratic Balance in Korea"; Clark W. Sorensen, "Success and Education in South Korea," *Comparative Education Review* 38, no. 1 (Feb 1994): 10-35; Fredrick W. Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China* (New York: Knopf, 1971); Lett, *In Pursuit of Status*, 35.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Charles Kalton, *The Neo-Confucian World View and Value System of Yi Dynasty Korea* (Diss., Harvard University, Sept 1977), 6, 7, 9, 82; Lett, *In Pursuit of Status*, 15.

in a final "examination" that served as the gateway to a social title and a position in the state bureaucracy. This East Asian educational system produced a small population of literate and cultured elites, trained in a traditional and largely unchanging body of ethical and technical knowledge. In South Korea these literate and elites, known as *yangban*, served as ministers in a "rigidly hierarchical bureaucracy" and ran the day to day operations of the state.<sup>32</sup> The *yangban* class became hereditary during Choson dynasty (1392-1910), thus, access to quality education and the civil service examination became restricted by birth. Thus, the Korean system of schooling "primarily served as a means of allocating power, privilege, and status."<sup>33</sup>

This ancient system was largely destroyed in Korea by the occupation of Imperial Japan, as ethnic Koreans were largely segregated from the ruling Japanese society and its racist system of schooling. A minority of Koreans were educated in Japanese dominated schools in the Japanese language, but Koreans were restricted in access to both upper levels of education and to upper levels of the job market.<sup>34</sup> After the liberation of Korea, a quasi-democratic constitution was enacted, including a series of education laws in 1949, which called for 6 years of compulsory free education and non-compulsory tuition-based middle schools, high schools, and colleges. South Koreans embraced Western democratic ideals, especially free public schooling, and they pushed their children towards the only viable avenue for upward social mobility and the middle class. There was a "spontaneous" and "exuberant rush" for more and more schooling even though the country lacked schools, textbooks, and qualified teachers.<sup>35</sup> In 1964 elementary enrollments exceeded 90 percent of the cohort population, by 1979 middle school enrollments

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<sup>32</sup> Palais, "Confucianism and the Aristocratic/Bureaucratic Balance in Korea;" Sorensen, "Success and Education in South Korea;" Seth, *Education Fever*, 9-12.

<sup>33</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 12; Lett, *In Pursuit of Status*, 19-21.

<sup>34</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 19-31.

<sup>35</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 46-47.

exceeded 90 percent, and by 1994 high school enrollments exceeded 90 percent.<sup>36</sup> Today, South Korea has one of the highest percentages of school-age population enrolled in both K-12 and higher education, around 99 percent enrollment in middle school, over 96 percent in high school, and close to 70 percent in some form of higher education.<sup>37</sup>

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, South Korea has combined the older "Confucian" values with modern notions of meritocracy, consumer capitalism, and western educational models.<sup>38</sup> Public schooling became not only an economic ladder to the middle class, but academic achievement also conferred social status and prestige.<sup>39</sup> However, public schools in Korea have a bad reputation for poor quality due to lack of funding, outdated curriculum, exam oriented classes, autocratic and untrained teachers, large classes, and ancient pedagogical techniques that include rote memorization, standardized tests, and corporeal punishment. Korean schools are also highly tracked from middle-school and they relentlessly sort students based on a variety of standardized tests. Student start preparing for these high stakes tests in primary school.<sup>40</sup> Its no surprise that superior achievement scores are still highly correlated with socio-economic status, as wealthier families can afford more private education to prepare students for these tests.<sup>41</sup> This system has been called "examination hell" (*sihom chiok*) or "examination mania."<sup>42</sup> The pinnacle of K-12 public schooling is the National University Entrance Examination, whereby, only the best and brightest students make it into the top tier Korean universities and on to the best jobs. Some

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<sup>36</sup> Sorensen, "Success and Education in South Korea," 16; Hong Sah-Myung, "The Republic of Korea," *Schooling in East Asia: Forces of Change*, R. Murray Thomas and T. Neville Postlethwaite, eds. (Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press, 1983), 208-09.

<sup>37</sup> UNESCO, *South Korea*; Hye-Jung Lee, "Higher Education in Korea," Center for Teaching and Learning, Seoul National University (Feb 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Sorensen, "Success and Education in South Korea;" Philip G. Altbach, "Twisted Roots: The Western Impact on Asian Higher Education," *Higher Education* 18, no. 1 (1989): 9-29.

<sup>39</sup> James Robinson, "Social Status and Academic Success in South Korea," *Comparative Education Review* 38, no. 4 (Nov 1994): 506-530; Lett, *In Pursuit of Status*, 159.

<sup>40</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 157.

<sup>41</sup> Robinson, "Social Status and Academic Success in South Korea;" Sorensen, "Success and Education in South Korea;" Koo, "The Changing Faces of Inequality in South Korea;" Seth, *Education Fever*, 88-90, 142.

<sup>42</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 140.

have dubbed the South Korean educational system a “testocracy.”<sup>43</sup> If a student gets into a top-tier university, success. If not, failure. As one scholar summarized the predicament of schooling in South Korea, “The crux of the matter is that this system is too competitive, too exam-oriented with a single preoccupation to prepare students for college entrance exams.”<sup>44</sup>

The pressure to perform and earn academic distinction to increase social prestige and economic stability is not new to East Asia, as has already been discussed. But there has been a recent development that has changed the whole dynamic of education in this region. Up until the 19th century the primary language of instruction in Korean schools was Chinese and Chinese texts were almost exclusively studied.<sup>45</sup> With the occupation of Japan in the late 19th and 20th century, Japanese was the primary language of instruction.<sup>46</sup> The most notable change to East Asian schooling in the late 20th century, especially in South Korea, has been the shift from Chinese to the English language, which has become the *lingua franca* of the globalized world.<sup>47</sup>

English is taught not only as a foreign language in K-12 schools, but it is also used as a primary language of instruction in secondary schools and higher education. In South Korea, students have to start learning English in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, if they have not already started to learn it sooner in private schools. By high school, Korean students spend about 4 hours a week learning English in public schools, plus extra curricular classes at private *hagwons*. Many Korean colleges and universities require a foreign language test in English before admittance and

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<sup>43</sup> Sorensen, “Success and Education in South Korea,” 17; Sah-Myung, “The Republic of Korea,” 229.

<sup>44</sup> Koo, “The Changing Faces of Inequality in South Korea,” 11; Seth, *Education Fever*, 140.

<sup>45</sup> Lett, *In Pursuit of Status*, 35, 164.

<sup>46</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 20-29.

<sup>47</sup> David Crystal, *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Robert Phillipson, “English for Globalization or for the World’s People?” *International Review of Education* 47, no. ¾ (July 2001): 185-200; David Nunan, “The Impact of English as a Global Language on Educational Policies and Practices in the Asia Pacific Region,” *TESOL Quarterly*, 37, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 589-613; Patricia Davis-Wiley and Stephen G. Wiley, “English as Korea’s Second Language,” *International Education*, 30, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 41-49; Alan Brender, “To Compete, South Korean Universities Step Up Use of English,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 52, no. 17 (Dec 2005): A40. On globalization see: Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives* (London: Routledge, 2002); Frank J. Lechner and John Boli, eds., *The Globalization Reader* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2000).

mandate anywhere from 3 to 12 credits of English for a standard degree. And once a student graduates from college, many businesses require TOEIC or TOEFL scores for a job or promotion.<sup>48</sup> Speaking English has become an "essential element in the admissions process from middle school through college."<sup>49</sup> One scholar has argued,

English skill has become widely regarded as a measure of one's competence in this age of globalization. Those with low English competency are regarded as outdated and lacking proper socio-cultural aptitude required for the global business environment... Increasingly, English proficiency is what distinguishes between the first-class and the second-class employees in the globalized economy sectors...English is now an essential requisite for survival.<sup>50</sup>

With a growing emphasis on increased levels of credentialed education for socio-economic status and fluency in English, East Asian students, especially in South Korea, are doubly pressured to perform.

In South Korea, as in other Asian countries, education is seen as a competition, not a process of individual development. Family and society push students to succeed, where success is measured in exam scores, English language acquisition, placement at elite universities, white collar jobs at corporate firms, and all the trimmings of Western consumer capitalism. This institutionalized drive for academic, social, and economic success has been captured in a Korean phrase (*kyoyungnyol*), which can be translated as "education mania" or "education fever."<sup>51</sup> The relentlessness of this type of education has been recently debated in the United States in relation to the phenomenon of "tiger mothers."<sup>52</sup> In South Korea, it is not just the mothers who push

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<sup>48</sup> Nunan, "The Impact of English as a Global Language on Educational Policies and Practices in the Asia Pacific Region," 600-601; Koo, "The Changing Faces of Inequality in South Korea," 13.

<sup>49</sup> KEPA CEO, "From Blended Learning to Critical Learning" (May 15 2009), KEPA Papers.

<sup>50</sup> Koo, "The Changing Faces of Inequality in South Korea," 13.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas R. Ellinger and Garry M. Beckham, "South Korea: Placing Education on Top of the Family Agenda," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 78, no. 8 (April 1997): 624-625; Sorensen, "Success and Education in South Korea," 21, 23.

<sup>52</sup> Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (New York, 2011); Sandra Tsing Loh, "My Chinese American Problem - and Ours," *The Atlantic* (April 2011) 83-91.

children to excel at school. The whole society is consumed by “education fever,” an intensifying epidemic which threatens the well being of a whole generation of Korean youth.

## **Private Education in South Korea**

The post-war construction of public schooling was centered only on the elementary level. Middle school through university was left to private institutions and private sources of funding, mostly tuition paid by parents. Private schools constituted around 40 to 50 percent of all secondary schools in South Korea and over 65 percent of institutions of higher education. In the two major cities, Seoul and Pusan, around 75 percent of all high schools were private academic high schools and 90 percent of university students attended a private school. Michael J. Seth explained, "In general, the higher and more prestigious the level of schooling, the greater the share of enrollments in private institutions."<sup>53</sup>

Because of the frantic push for academic success, different forms of private schooling have dramatically increased over the last two decades in order to profit from “education fever.” There are four types of private education in South Korea: private K-12 schools, private colleges and universities, private tutoring, and *hagwons*. Private primary schools represent a small portion of schools overall, as most students enroll in state funded institutions. Private primary schools were actually illegal until 1962 when this ban was dropped because the state did not have the teachers or facilities to accommodate the flood of students enrolling in school.<sup>54</sup> Because public middle schools and high schools are non-compulsory and tuition-based, private schools occupy a large part of the 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade educational sector. Private schools present themselves as a quality alternative to public schooling. In the early 1990s, around 30 percent of middle

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<sup>53</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 82-83, 135.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

school students and over 50 percent of high school students attended a private school.<sup>55</sup> Seoul National University is the only prestigious public university. The rest are private schools. Thus, the vast majority of university students are enrolled in a private institution, around 90 percent overall.<sup>56</sup> Outside of formal schooling there is also a robust business of private tutoring, which is legally regulated, but due to its size and highly idiosyncratic nature, it is practically free of oversight and hard to generalize.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, the most popular form of private schooling is the *hagwon*. A *hagwon* is a private, for-profit educational institution that delivers instruction seven days a week. The legal hours of operation are 5am to 10pm, although many *hagwons* open after regular school hours (3-4pm) and stay open until late at night, some past 1am.<sup>58</sup> In 2008 there was a move to eliminate all restriction on hours of operation so that *hagwons* could stay open all night, but this measure went down to defeat, later narrowly upheld by the Constitutional Court in 2009.<sup>59</sup> *Hagwons* enroll students from pre-school age through high school, and they come in a wide variety of forms. Many of them focus on single subject areas, like math, English, piano, or golf. There are even military-style boot camps run by retired soldiers, focusing on physical drills to test the endurance and pain threshold of students.<sup>60</sup> But some of the largest *hagwons* present themselves as comprehensive preparatory academies, like KEPA, the focus of this study. These comprehensive academies offer a multi-leveled array of academic classes, including English, Chinese, TOEFL exam prep, literature, history, philosophy, and debate.

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<sup>55</sup> Sorensen, "Success and Education in South Korea," 18.

<sup>56</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 82-83, 135.

<sup>57</sup> Lee Soo-yeon, "Hagwon Close, but Late-Night Education Goes On," *Joong Ang Daily* (Aug 17 2009).

<sup>58</sup> Bae Ji-sook, "Should Hagwon Run Round-the-Clock?" *Korea Times* (March 13 2008).

<sup>59</sup> Kim Tae-jong, "Seoul City Council Cancels All-Night Hagwon Plan," *Korea Times* (March 18 2008); Park Yu-mi and Kim Mi-ju, "Despite Protests, Court Says Hagwon Ban Is Constitutional," *Joong Ang Daily* (Oct 31 2009).

<sup>60</sup> John M. Glionna, "South Korean Kids Get a Taste of Boot Camp," *Los Angeles Times.Com* (Aug 21 2009).

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The primary purpose of most private education is to prepare students for the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which are the formal placement exams for college. The entire country adjusts its schedule on CSAT day: the government orders business to modify the work day to clear the roads for students heading to the test; all nonessential workers, both government and private, are told to report late to work; construction work near schools is halted; motorists are informed not to honk their horns; thousands of police are mobilized to handle traffic; the Korean stock market opens late and closes early; flights at all of the nation's airports are restricted; the U.S. military suspends aviation and live-fire training; and adults flock to churches to pray for their child's success. The results of the CSAT are considered the "crowning life achievement" of a student. Good scores place students in Korea's top universities, which is the primary factor in finding a good job after college.<sup>61</sup>

In 1970 there were about 1,421 *hagwons* in South Korea, but most of these closed during the 1980s. The autocratic President Chun Doo-hwan decreed that private education was illegal so as to promote an equal educational playing field, but this ban was later ruled unconstitutional. *Hagwons* were legalized in a regulated market in 1991, and by 1996 private tutoring was also legal.<sup>62</sup> In 1980, before the ban took place, about 1/5 of Korean students received some form of private education: 13 percent of elementary school students, 15 percent of middle school students, and 26 percent of high school students. In 1997 over half of Korean students were being privately educated: 70 percent of elementary students and 50 percent of middle and high school students. By 2003 Koreans were spending around \$12.4 billion on private education,

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<sup>61</sup> James Card, "Life and Death Exams in South Korea," *Asia Times Online* (Nov 30 2005). Seth, *Education Fever*, 1.

<sup>62</sup> Casey Lartigue, "You'll Never Guess What South Korea Frowns Upon," *Washington Post* (May 28 2000); Card, "Life and Death Exams in South Korea;" Seth, *Education Fever*, 185.

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which was more than half the national budget for public schooling.<sup>63</sup> In 2003 about 72.6 percent of Korean students were privately educated. Parents were spending between 10 to 30 percent of family income on private schooling.<sup>64</sup> By 2008 there were around 70,213 *hagwons* and Koreans spent almost 21 trillion won (around \$17 billion) on private education.<sup>65</sup> Because the state has never funded much of the educational system, parents bear most of the burden of educating their children in the private educational market. Because of this, South Korean families spend more on education than in most other countries, around 69 percent of the total price, making the South Korea "possibly the world's costliest educational system."<sup>66</sup>

The Korean *hagwon* sector in particular is one of the major factors driving up the costs of education. They have begun to sell their services on the internet, thus expanding an already growing market.<sup>67</sup> By the 1990s it was one of the "fastest growing of South Korea's many booming industries."<sup>68</sup> It is becoming so profitable that it has now begun to attract Western private equity firms. The Carlye Group invested around \$20 million in Topia Academy, Inc., one of the largest *hagwons* in South Korea.<sup>69</sup> KEPA has also attracted over \$2 million in foreign private equity investment.<sup>70</sup> *Hagwons* are also becoming a global phenomenon, following Korean immigrants abroad and attracting non-Korean students. In 2009 there were 183 academic *hagwons* and 73 art and music *hagwons* in Orange County, California alone.<sup>71</sup> In 2007 KEPA spun-off a new company, KEPA America, Inc., as an independent entity with its own

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<sup>63</sup> Koo, "The Changing Faces of Inequality in South Korea," 12, 14.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph E. Yi, "Academic Success at Any Cost?" *KoreAm: The Korean American Experience* (Oct 1 2009); Lartigue, "You'll Never Guess What South Korea Frowns Upon."

<sup>65</sup> Moon Gwang-lip, "Statistics Paint Korean Picture," *Joong Ang Daily* (Dec 15 2009); "Lee Seeks to Cut Educational Costs," *Korea Herald* (Aug 14 2009).

<sup>66</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 172, 187.

<sup>67</sup> Choe Sang-hun, "Tech Company Helps South Korean Students Ace Entrance Tests," *The New York Times* (June 1 2009).

<sup>68</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 185-86.

<sup>69</sup> Hwang Young-jin, "Equity Fund Bets on Cram Schools," *Korea Times* (n.d.), KEPA papers.

<sup>70</sup> KEPA, "The KEPA America Mission," corporate email (Nov 13 2007), KEPA papers.

<sup>71</sup> Yi, "Academic Success at Any Cost?"

CEO. The mission statement of KEPA America, Inc. was to "extend the KEPA network's market to new territories like the US, Canada, Mexico, and South America."<sup>72</sup>

While many Koreans consider private education superior to K-12 public education, the private sector is not without its flaws. For one, the ability to utilize private sector schooling is highly correlated to family income, which contributes to rising inequality through unequal access to quality education and through unequal preparation for elite universities. Private schools, tutoring, and *hagwons* serve only those who can pay, so they largely benefit the wealthy.<sup>73</sup>

*Hagwons* also take their profit motive too far. Business practices routinely determine educational practices. These institutions inflate grades, teach to standardized tests, and place more emphasis on marketing than teaching.<sup>74</sup> It also seems that these institutions have been systematically overcharging parents for services, which promoted a rebuke by the President in 2009. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology reported the 67 percent of *hagwons* overcharged, 74 percent of foreign language institutes, with more than 40 percent charging twice the standardized tuition level set by the government. But enforcement is almost impossible, not least because of the lack of government officials. In southern Seoul there are about 5,000 *hagwons* but only three civil servants monitoring the district.<sup>75</sup>

*Hagwons* also employ teachers who have limited knowledge of subject matter and no training or experience as educators. The only qualification to teach in Korea is a bachelor's degree from a Western university, no matter the subject. Few instructors have any previous teaching experience and most know nothing of curriculum or student learning. One critic sarcastically claimed, "Business owners with suspect educational credentials seem content to hire

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<sup>72</sup> KEPA, "The KEPA America Mission."

<sup>73</sup> Koo, "The Changing Faces of Inequality in South Korea," 31.

<sup>74</sup> KEPA papers.

<sup>75</sup> Kim Tae-jong, "Hagwon Easily Dodge Crackdown," *Korea Times* (Oct 26 2008); Kang Shin-who, "67 Percent of Private Cram Schools Overcharge Parents," *Korea Times* (April 14 2009).

foreign staff with equally suspect educational credentials to pretend to teach (more like entertain) children in some kind of a babysitting service designed more to generate fast profit rather than quality education."<sup>76</sup> There have also been widespread complaints by foreign teachers that *hagwons* do not live up to the terms of employment contracts.<sup>77</sup>

The most serious flaw with private education, and with "education fever" more broadly in Korea, is the damage done to children. Korean culture places a lot of emphasis on exams and college placements, which creates a "pressure-cooker atmosphere."<sup>78</sup> Thus, most *hagwons* use a "teach-for-the-test" curriculum that focuses on the memorization of information, standardized multiple-choice tests, and test-taking techniques. Diane Ravitch has insightfully critiqued such high stakes testing where the curriculum is reduced to "test-taking skills:" Students "master the art of filling in the bubbles on multiple-choice tests, but [cannot] express themselves, particularly when a question requires them to think about and explain what they had just read."<sup>79</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond has also noted the limitations of standardized testing: "Researchers consistently find that instruction focused on memorizing unconnected facts and drilling skills out of context produces inert rather than active knowledge that does not transfer to real-world activities or problem-solving situations. Most of the material learned in this way is soon forgotten and cannot be retrieved or applied when it would be useful later."<sup>80</sup>

With such a curriculum students are "trained, not educated,"<sup>81</sup> and this training rewards students for endurance and trickery, not learning. Korean students rarely understand the information being taught to them, they are not taught to critically analyze information, and they

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<sup>76</sup> "Unforeseen Dangers of Korea's *Hagwon* Culture," *Asian Pacific Post* (Jan 10 2006).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., Limb Jae-un, "English Teachers Complain about Certain *Hagwon*," *Joong Ang Daily* (Dec 8 2008).

<sup>78</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 192.

<sup>79</sup> Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic, 2010), 107-108, 159.

<sup>80</sup> Darling-Hammond, *The Flat World and Education*, 70.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 109.

cannot apply information to other contexts. Students simply become "expert memorizers" of "de-contextualized" facts that can only be used to take standardized tests.<sup>82</sup> This teach-for-the-test curriculum "stifle[s] creativity, hinder[s] the development of analytical reasoning, ma[kes] schooling a process of rote memorization of meaningless facts, and drain[s] all the job out of learning."<sup>83</sup> High stakes exams also leads to widespread cheating, grade inflation, and outright bribery.<sup>84</sup>

But there is a much more serious problem for students. *Hagwons* take up a lot of extra time for classes and homework, add additional pressure for academic performance, and induce more stress on already overburdened students. Students already spend a lot of time studying for regular school exams, but the addition of *hagwons* and private tutors takes up a lot of time during the week, leaving most students with little to no free time. Students routinely are in school, studying, or engaged in private education for up to 18 hours a day, seven days a week. One student explained, "I have to get up at 7 in the morning. I have to be at school by 8 and lessons finish at 4. Then you go to a *hagwon* and when you arrive home, it's around 1 o'clock in the morning."<sup>85</sup> The Korean Teachers and Education Worker's Union claims that high school students sleep on average 5.4 hours a day, although a recent academic study found that the average sleep time was slightly higher, around 6.5 hours a day.<sup>86</sup> The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Family Affairs has issued warnings about student's irregular meals and lack of sleep. About 40 percent of elementary and middle school students skip meals because they lack

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<sup>82</sup> Rose Senior, "Korean Students Silenced by Exams," *The Guardian Weekly* (Jan 15 2009); Card, "Life and Death Exams in South Korea."

<sup>83</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 170.

<sup>84</sup> Card, "Life and Death Exams in South Korea."

<sup>85</sup> Hyun-Sung Khang, "Education-Obsessed South Korea," *Radio Nederland Wereldomroep* (Aug 6 2001).

<sup>86</sup> Bae Ji-sook, "Should *Hagwon* Rune Round-the-Clock?;" Soonjae Joo, Chol Shin, Jinkwan Kim, Hyeryeon Yi, Yongkyu Ahn, Minkyu Park, Jehyeong Kim, and Sangduck Lee, "Prevalence and Correlates of Excessive Daytime Sleepiness in High School Students in Korea," *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 59 (2005): 433-440.

a break in their busy daily schedule.<sup>87</sup> There is a popular student proverb, "If you sleep for four hours a night, you'll get into the college of your choice - if you sleep for five hours, you fail."

This pressure to perform leads to serious physical harm and psychological distress. Parents and teachers routinely beat students that do not perform well academically. A study published in 1996 found that "97 percent of all children reported being beaten by parents and/or teachers, many of them frequently."<sup>88</sup> Many students turn to suicide as the only escape from this relentless pressure to perform. Statistics are not routinely kept on this issue, but limited data are frightening. Around 50 high school students committed suicide after failing the college entrance exam in 1987. An academic study published in 1990 revealed that "20 percent of all secondary students contemplated suicide and 5 percent attempted it."<sup>89</sup> And the problem is only getting worse. Two recent surveys found that between 43-48 percent of Korean students have contemplated suicide. From 2000 to 2003 over 1,000 students between the ages of 10 and 19 committed suicide. Families also suffer. In 2005 a father was so distressed over his son's bad grades that he torched himself, his wife, and their daughter outside his son's school in shame.<sup>90</sup>

## **"Children Dying Inside:" Instructional Ritual and Student Resistance**

Korean English Preparatory Academy<sup>91</sup> was founded in 1999 by a private English language tutor. It began as a small private school with only a few instructors. Now it is a

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<sup>87</sup> Bae Ji-sook, "Should *Hagwon* Rune Round-the-Clock?."

<sup>88</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 168.

<sup>89</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 166.

<sup>90</sup> Card, "Life and Death Exams in South Korea."

<sup>91</sup> This is a case study of Korean English Preparatory Academy (KEPA), a pseudonym for one of the largest and most prestigious *hagwons* in South Korea. I was hired on a one-year contract to teach English for KEPA, and I conducted research while I was on site. The primary method of investigation was qualitative ethnography, which included observations, interviews, and surveys. Ethnographic data was supplemented and corroborated by primary document collection and analysis. Corporate documents are referred to by title, but names of the corporation and individuals have been altered or in some cases left anonymous.

publically traded corporation in the “education industry,” and one of the most prestigious *hagwons* in South Korea. KEPA has over 250 instructors and hundreds of staff on 65 campuses spread across Seoul and every major city in Korea. Citing the success of Coca Cola and McDonalds, KEPA has also initiated the “globalization of our business” to capture a share of the international ESL market. Towards this end KEPA has initiated a joint venture with a group from Zhing-Hwa University in China. KEPA has also spun off a separate corporate entity, KEPA America, Inc., which was designed to export the hagwon model to the American continent. And KEPA created an English language immersion school in British Columbia, Canada.<sup>92</sup>

To deal with an unskilled and transient workforce, the organization is built on the foundation of authoritarian managers who enforce a rigid classroom management routine called the "KEPA method." Almost every three hour class follows the same basic structure and each activity is rigidly planned down to the minute. This class structure is repeated for 9 weeks, on the 10th week a standardized achievement test is administered (speaking, reading, listening, and writing), and then the 11th-13th weeks are back to the normal routine. Every three month term follows the exact same structure, and there are never any breaks between terms.

Except for the college prep courses, every class follows the same basic routine. The first five minutes is attendance and homework review. The homework is a combination of vocabulary exercises, filling in blanks, and writing a paragraph summary. Grading homework consists of a quick glance at a workbook to make sure all blanks are filled in (there is no inspection for understanding or accuracy). Students earn an A+ if all homework is completed and an F is nothing is done. If at least some blanks are filled then they earn a B. These are the

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<sup>92</sup> “Blog commentary by administrative staff in response to CEO interview,” KEPA papers; CEO, “The Road Not Taken,” Corporate email, KEPA papers; S. T., “My KEPA Story,” (Dec 12 2007), KEPA papers.

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only three grades an instructor is allowed to give. Next is a "review" test on vocabulary. Students are assigned 45 vocabulary words, 45 synonyms, and 10 phrase length "chunks" to memorize each week. The average score is 50 percent (10/20 questions), which earns a B grade. A score of 10 percent (2/20 questions) earns a C- grade. These grades are set by R&D. Then there is a 10 minute long whole class "student counseling" discussion, in which instructors explain homework, "motivate" students by publically recognizing high performers and scolding low performers, and if there is time, conduct "student rapport" activities, such as language games, like 20 questions, telephone, or riddles. The next two hours are devoted to a brief skill lecture and then reading or listening exercises, leading up to a reading or listening comprehension quiz. The final activity of each class is a group "critical thinking project" based on the day's content theme. Students are given prompts and asked to prepare a group oral presentation, which they will speak in front of the class. The class is supposed to evaluate each group and a winning group is chosen by the instructor.<sup>93</sup>

On the surface, this basic structure seems to pack a range of language-based activities into a well organized three hour block. Time is given to vocabulary, skill acquisition, skill practice, skill test, writing, group work, and oral presentations. And in fact, high performing students are able to use this structure to practice and polish their English skills. However, there is almost no time for individual feedback or correction, thus, there is very little opportunity for students engage the material and learn new skills. Furthermore, KEPA's curricular materials are inappropriately advanced for most students, thus, students struggle to understand the lesson's conceptual topic and advanced vocabulary words. Elementary students in the basic reading and listening programs are taught about beneficial bacteria, hyperinflation, competing scientific

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<sup>93</sup> KEPA, "Reading and Writing: Track A Program Guide," (Aug 19 2009); KEPA, "Student Counseling Guidelines," (June 25 2009). KEPA papers.

theories of species extinction, or cryogenics. In the more advanced classes, elementary and middle school students use American college textbooks with sophisticated essays and they are introduced to logic argumentation, fallacies, and expository writing. Most students are completely overwhelmed, not only by the advanced conceptual topics, but also by the extremely advanced vocabulary. The majority of students in every class routinely fail the reading or listening comprehension quiz. The average score hovers around 50 percent or lower. Students struggle to comprehend the material thrown at them each week, let alone developing their language skills.

The KEPA pedagogical structure itself is to blame. Due to the rigid time and activity structure, there is no opportunity for instructors to explain each week's topic, nor is there any time for the class to engage in discussion. The whole focus of the class is preparing students to take the standardized multiple choice question test during the second hour, which is meant to prepare them for the standardized final exam week 10. In fact, the whole KEPA curriculum is built around the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and a host of other standardized tests, which are the formal placement exams for academic high schools and colleges. Despite KEPA's rhetoric about language acquisition, blending learning, and critical thinking, this *hagwon* is only concerned about one goal: preparing students to take standardized tests in the English language. Thus, the primary instructional activity that KEPA management places at the center of the KEPA method is "test-taking skills." In training sessions and from management comments, the primary instructional activity is to help students "refine fundamental test-taking skills" so that they can "obtain the best iBT score possible." This is the central mission of KEPA. Classroom activities focus not on discussion or understanding written texts or oral texts, instead they focus on standardized test

question types, strategic approaches to text taking, note taking, and summary writing. This also explains the difficult nature of the textbooks because TOEFL and other standardized tests use "excerpts from college-level textbooks." Thus, students read or listen to college-level texts, not because it is developmentally or educationally appropriate, but because it is necessary to acclimatize them to standardized test taking.<sup>94</sup>

There is no room in the KEPA method to make weekly topics interesting, relevant, or even understandable to most students. This alienates and frustrates even willing students. But most classrooms are not filled with willing students, especially when they read middle school. There is an underlying reality behind Korean private schooling: it is culturally mandatory. Because of the general "education mania" in Korea, parents enroll students in private education all week long. Some students go to *hagwons* and private tutors seven days a week for up to six to eight hours a day. After an informal class discussion on how students are overworked in Korea, I had one of my students approach me after class. He informed me that he has to go to 13 *hagwons* a week, each assigning homework, plus his regular school and homework. He said he had no choice. His parents make him go. Many students report that they are always going to *hagwons* or doing homework, they have no free time, and they sleep only four to six hours a night.

Thus, many students in KEPA classrooms are completely unresponsive and do the very least just to get by because they know schooling is simply a test of endurance, and they how to work the KEPA system. As long as students fill out their book, stay quiet during class, and do at least some homework then they will earn passing grades. Many students will just stare at the walls during class. The week 10 standardized achievement tests are also rigged to accommodate

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<sup>94</sup> KEPA, "Global Track Overview: Standardized Tests, What Are They and Why Do Students Take Them?" (n.d.); KEPA, "Effective Questioning," Faculty Handout (n.d.); KEPA, "IBT Reading Question Types," Faculty Handout (n.d.); KEPA, "TOFEL iBT Reading," Faculty Handout (n.d.). KEPA papers.

these unresponsive students. The same tests are used over and over again, grading is curved, and students will advance to higher classes if their parents complain. KEPA offers a highly ritualized environment that demands very little from students other than displaying the proper behavior. There is a subtle truce between instructors and students. Many students play the *hagwon* game to keep up the appearance of schooling; however, a close look into their blank eyes reveals a silent, enduring resistance. Sometimes this resistance turns into open hostility. One student explained, There is "conflict between teachers and the students which leads to an uncomfortable learning environment."<sup>95</sup>

I engaged students often about their educational circumstances in order to understand how they perceive schooling, *hagwons*, and the pressure to perform. 92 percent of the students I surveyed (n = 59) said they went to school 6 days a week, while on average spending just over 5 days a week at private education (either a *hagwon* or a tutor). 19 students (32%) spent 7 days a week at private education. Students averaged about 4.2 hours a day at private education, with 6 students (10 %) spending an average of 7+ hours a day at private education. On average students went to 4 different *hagwons* or private tutors, with 7 students going to 7+ *hagwons* or private tutors. On average students spent 4.2 hours a day on homework, although over 20 percent said they spent 7+ hours a day on homework. When asked how much "free time" students had during the day, the average response was 2.5 hours, with 39 percent responding only 1 hour. On average students got 7.6 hours of sleep a night, with 15 percent saying they got only 5-6 hours of sleep.

I also asked students to write about what they liked or disliked about the *hagwan*. Most students repeat the same basic evaluations: too much homework, too many tests, too much stress

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<sup>95</sup> "Student Writing," KEPA papers. On the antagonistic power struggle between students and teachers see Willard Waller, *The Sociology of Teaching* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961).

to perform, and not enough break time to eat and go to the bathroom. One student wrote, "they spend lots of time in doing KEPA homework, no time to do school homework, and no time to study other subjects." Most disturbingly is the repeated comments about how much "stress" all the class time, homework, and tests put on students. One college prep student wrote, "The Korean school system puts too much pressure on students. The stress that the students have to carry on their backs is very heavy that some students fall down, never reaching their goals. Do we have to do it this seriously? I absolutely DON'T think so." Another college prep student wrote something similar, "Everyday I have to go academies...everyday I have to finish homework...I get tired, stressed usually, when I am busy. I am hated of doing this uninterested thing...Usually I feel negative of this busy life. But I'm continuing this life because I'm being forced." Two elementary students verbalized in quite shocking language how this stress makes them feel: "Children dying inside" and "Children die inside (test kill children)." A couple of students said they "hate" KEPA and want to "destroy it."<sup>96</sup>

## Conclusions

Taking the ethical vantage point of Amartya Sen's "impartial spectator,"<sup>97</sup> I want to make a few observations about the South Korean pursuit of "education fever" and the social role of *hagwons*, like KEPA, in order to ask a basic question: Is the South Korean educational model just or fair? Specifically, I want to use Sen's "capability approach" to look at the means and ends of "satisfactory human living" and the extent to which an individual not only "ends up doing," but also what that individual is "in fact able to do" and whether or not that individual is able to

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<sup>96</sup> "Student Writing," KEPA papers.

<sup>97</sup> Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 124.

freely choose any particular course of action.<sup>98</sup> As Sen explains, "A theory of justice - or more generally an adequate theory of normative social choice - has to be alive to both the fairness of the processes involved and to the equity and efficiency of the substantive opportunities that people can enjoy...Neither justice, nor political or moral evaluation, can be concerned only with the overall opportunities and advantages of individuals in a society."<sup>99</sup>

The ends of South Korean education look very attractive. Today, South Korea has one of the highest percentages of school-age population enrolled in both K-12 and higher education, around 99 percent enrollment in middle school, over 96 percent in high school, and close to 70 percent in some form of higher education.<sup>100</sup> South Korea has also been the site of a "miracle" socio-economic transformation from an underdeveloped, autocratic third-world backwater into a developed, free-market, high-skilled economy and democratizing society. South Korea deserves credit for its highly educated population, soaring industrial productivity, and innovative technology, but at what cost and to whom?

In 2008 Korean families spent almost 21 trillion won (around \$17 billion) on private education.<sup>101</sup> South Korean families spend more on education than in most other countries, around 69 percent of the total price, making the South Korea "possibly the world's costliest educational system."<sup>102</sup> And students are pushed from as early as kindergarten or the 1st grade to not only perform well in regular schooling, but also to go to private tutors and *hagwons* so that they can prepare for the high stakes testing in middle school, high school, and the college entrance exam. Most students study all day for seven days a week and get less than eight hours

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 234-35, 238.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 296-97.

<sup>100</sup> UNESCO, *South Korea*; Hye-Jung Lee, "Higher Education in Korea," Center for Teaching and Learning, Seoul National University (Feb 2009).

<sup>101</sup> Moon Gwang-lip, "Statistics Paint Korean Picture," *Joong Ang Daily* (Dec 15 2009); "Lee Seeks to Cut Educational Costs," *Korea Herald* (Aug 14 2009).

<sup>102</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 172, 187.

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of sleep a night. These students are pushed to study and succeed on standardized tests, they are pushed to become fluent in English, and they are pushed to get into the most prestigious high schools and universities. Students are slaves to their parents' ambitions, whether or not some students actually internalize "education fever." Students are under so much pressure that a large percentage of students, somewhere between 20 to 48 percent, actively contemplate suicide each year, and a significant minority actually kill themselves because they cannot take the pressure to succeed or the burden of failure.

And what are South Korean children actually learning in this "pressure-cooker atmosphere"?<sup>103</sup> Public and private schools use a "teach-for-the-test" curriculum that focuses on the memorization of information, standardized multiple-choice tests, and test-taking techniques. Korean students rarely understand the information being taught to them, they are not taught to critically analyze information, and they cannot apply information to other contexts. Students simply become "expert memorizers" of "de-contextualized" facts that can only be used to take standardized tests.<sup>104</sup> This teach-for-the-test curriculum "stifle[s] creativity, hinder[s] the development of analytical reasoning, ma[kes] schooling a process of rote memorization of meaningless facts, and drain[s] all the job out of learning."<sup>105</sup>

And what are the ends of this education system? Students are ultimately competing for a limited number of high paying jobs with top corporations or government agencies. But economic and social inequality has intensified over the last several decades, and there is "a growing disparity" between rich and poor measured by consumption patterns, residential

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<sup>103</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 192.

<sup>104</sup> Rose Senior, "Korean Students Silenced by Exams," *The Guardian Weekly* (Jan 15 2009); Card, "Life and Death Exams in South Korea."

<sup>105</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 170; Darling-Hammond, *The Flat World and Education*, 70.

segregation, and access to quality education, especially quality higher education.<sup>106</sup> Not only are the numbers of impoverished and underemployed still a problem, there has also been increasing unemployment and growing job insecurity for white collar workers. Women still find it hard to compete in the labor market. Over the past decade, Koreans have suffered setbacks from less protective labor laws, increased competition in the skilled labor market for fewer full-time jobs, and the introduction of neoliberal business models, like increased use a flexible, contingent, and low-paid labor force that can be easily hired and fired in reaction to business cycles.<sup>107</sup> Plus, the educationally driven culture of South Korea turns out many more college graduates than can be adequately employed in the economy.<sup>108</sup>

But schooling in South Korea has traditionally been about social status and class, not employment in the labor market.<sup>109</sup> Koreans have had a "faith in education," seeing it as the only avenue to social advancement, if not economic opportunity.<sup>110</sup> A successful student not only raises his or her own status, but also brings social benefits to the entire family. Thus, Denise Potrzeba Lett has argued that economic goals are not "the primary motivation" behind Koreans' pursuit of education. Instead, Koreans' "pursuit of education was more than anything else a pursuit of status."<sup>111</sup> Lett calls the modern manifestation of the process the "yangbanization" of Korean society: "as South Korea's middle class has become more affluent, it has come to exhibit

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<sup>106</sup> Hagen Koo, "The Changing Faces of Inequality in South Korea in the Age of Globalization," *Korean Studies* 31 (2007): 1-18.

<sup>107</sup> Koo, "The Changing Faces of Inequality in South Korea in the Age of Globalization"; Andrew Eungi Kim and Innwon Park, "Changing Trends of Work in South Korea: The Rapid Growth of Underemployed and Job Insecurity," *Asian Survey* 46, no. 3 (May/June 2006): 437-56; Nelson, *Measured Excess*; Dennis Lett, *In Pursuit of Status: The Making of South Korea's "New" Urban Middle Class* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>108</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *South Korea*, revised version, *World Data on Education*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: UNESCO, Oct 2006), 30; Cho Jae-eun, "Too Many Grads Fight for Too Few Jobs," *Joong Ang Daily* (Oct 18 2010).

<sup>109</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 100;

<sup>110</sup> Seth, *Education Fever*, 102.

<sup>111</sup> Lett, *In Pursuit of Status*, 159, 164; Cho Jae-eun, "Too Many Grads Fight for Too Few Jobs," *Joong Ang Daily* (Oct 18 2010).

characteristics more typically associated with an upper rather than a middle class."<sup>112</sup> The pursuit of formal education, especially higher education, becomes the primary marker of class distinction, which helps position an individual within the highly regimented labor market.<sup>113</sup>

The ends of the South Korean education system seem perversely clear: a successful student spends 16 years of intense intellectual labor, earns a degree from a prestigious university, and gains entry to one of the top 50 corporations, only to raise a family and push his or her children onto the same path. But only a minority of South Korean students actually fulfill this career trajectory. In a society defined by social status and the attainment of success markers, what is the quality of life for the majority who fail to reach the cultural pinnacles of success? And is educational, social, and economic success truly just if it is not freely chosen? And even if one of the lucky few achieve all of these markers of success, what then? Are they happy, fulfilled, content, complete?

I am reminded by the words of the French philosopher Pascal: "The present is never our end. Past and present are our means, only the future is our end. And so we never actually live, though we hope to, and in constantly striving for happiness it is inevitable that we will never achieve it."<sup>114</sup> South Korean society is obsessed with status and education seems to be the primary vehicle to attain this future end. But if the process to obtain a desired end causes only misery than what happiness can come when the end is reached? As John Dewey noted, most people see education as simply "the control of means for achieving ends."<sup>115</sup> However, Dewey explained that education is connected to the development of human beings, and as such, it is a

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 212, 215.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 218-19.

<sup>114</sup> Pascal, *Pensees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 21. For similar conclusion by a modern academic who studies the "science of happiness" see Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Vintage, 2007).

<sup>115</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Feather Trail Press, 2009), 28.

process of discovery, and should have "no end beyond itself."<sup>116</sup> If education is treated simply as a means to an end then personal development and learning will not happen - education will be reduced to a perverse ritual that tortures the young to conform to competitive social pressures. Sadly, education in South Korea seems to be a demonstration of Dewey's point: "Education fever" is not about education at all. Schooling is but the means for the relentless pursuit of social status and prestige. Thus, the recently debated phenomenon of "tiger mothers" in the United States should give us pause to think about the means and ends of education.<sup>117</sup> The education system in South Korea should serve as a warning to the world. It helps us understand how education can be used and abused in the pursuit of social goals, and how children can suffer from their parents' pursuit of an ideal end. South Korea should not be seen as a global educational exemplar. In contrast, the South Korean educational model should serve as a warning. Beware the reduction of education to economic mobility and social status. Beware the grip of "education fever."

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>117</sup> Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (New York, 2011); Sandra Tsing Loh, "My Chinese American Problem - and Ours," *The Atlantic* (April 2011) 83-91.

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