



THE PROBLEM OF ENTRANCE EXAM-ORIENTED EDUCATION AND ITS SOLUTION PLANS IN KOREA*

Kim Bok-Rae
Andong National University, South Korea
Email: brkim@anu.ac.kr

Abstract

There are two different views on the *raison d'être* of private education. Some consider it as a complement to public education for a proper investment in human capital, while others regard it as a competitive tool to enter prestigious universities. But, Korean-styled private education is closely related to the 'prerequisite learning' that cannot be explained by two above-mentioned views: human capital investment and/or ranking competition. The aim of this paper is to examine the problems of entrance exam-oriented education which instigate private education and their solutions in Korea.

Keywords: Private Education, Public Education, *hagwon* (private cram school), Prerequisite Learning

1. Introduction

Human Intelligence is mostly determined by innate talents and acquired environment. Under the Korean current education system, those who get high scores in college entrance exam get their cheese. This violates poor students' right to equality of education, because anyone with money has the opportunity to receive a high-quality education, for example by employing well-known private tutors for effective test preparation. Regardless of innate talents, education opportunity goes to the children of the rich. This means that the Korean education system depends on the parental economic power. Especially now as private education fever is becoming worse with the intense competition of college entrance exam. It causes serious problems in government & household finances. Too heavy burden of private education leads some female parents to work as a part-time housekeeper or a waitress for coping with private education costs.

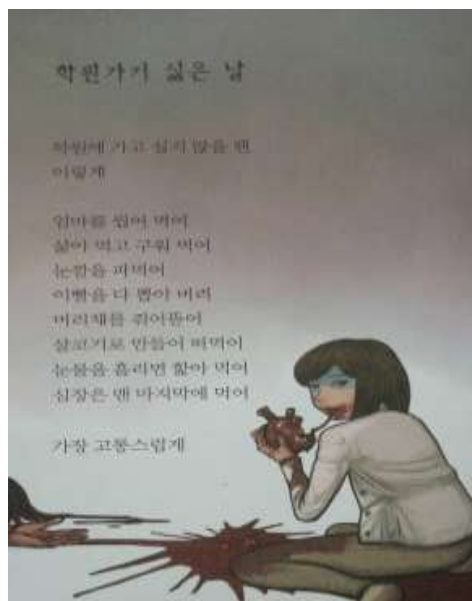


Figure 1: When I don't wanna go to private cram school

Education was a driving force in the country's sustainable development in the past, but, nowadays, it is considered to be one of the causes that can depress the future of the country. The expansion of private education expenses shakes the backbone of public education, hinders the normal relationship between teachers and students in public education, and deepens the gap of educational opportunity among social classes. Annually, Korean parents spend 33 trillion won (approx.

USD 28.34 billion) in the private education market, which is around 8.8% of the last year's budget of the Korean government.¹

There are two different views on the *raison d'être* of private education. Some consider it as a complement to public education for a proper investment in human capital, while others regard it as a competitive tool to enter prestigious universities. But, Korean-styled private education is closely related to the 'prerequisite learning' that cannot be explained by two above-mentioned views: human capital investment and/or ranking competition. The aim of this paper is to examine the problems of entrance exam-oriented education which instigate private education and their solutions in Korea.

2. Problems of private education

The 'overheating' of private education and the collapse of public education are the two major problems in Korea. The collapse of public education leads to the over-expansion of private education sector; therefore, these two problems are interlocked in many ways. The private education can be defined as any education provided by a private individual or organization, rather than by the state or a public body.² However, in Korea, the private education is abnormally referring to one provided by homeschooling teachers or private cram schools called *hagwon* in Korean:³

When I don't wanna go to *hagwons*/in this way/I munch my mom/and eat her boiled
or grilled/I dig her eyes out and eat them. - From *Solo dog*

It is a part of a poem of an elementary school girl student which appears on the children's poetry book entitled *Solo dog*. Its violent content startled school parents and teachers, but some children among her peer groups responded by saying "we can understand her feeling (disgust) at *hagwon*, no matter how terrible it is." The publisher kept making excuses that they published it without making any adjustments for reviving the original intention of their young author. However, public outrage forced them to discard all the books. This absurd occurrence reflects well on the current state of the Korean education system of which the framework originated in the 5·31 reform in 1995 under the Kim Young-sam government.⁴ The so-called 5·31 paradigm seems to have been adopted as the banner for autonomy, diversity and globalization and to have controlled Korean education for the past 20 years.⁵ Before 1995, it is no exaggeration to say that there was no systematical education policy. The main goal of university policy was to tighten the control over radical students participating in demonstration against the authoritarian government, not to enhance university competitiveness. In those days, the elementary and secondary education was at a mass-education or common basic education level. The education aim in 1950-60s consisted in the eradication of illiteracy. Since then, it has been focused on providing industrial manpower. Thus, the 5·13 was the first holistic reform to change education, as our world changed. However, its decision-making process was pressed for a time and based on 'top-down' approach. Among progressive/ leftist educational circles, the 5·13 was estimated as a (bad, if not worst) reform not only to adopt neo-liberal creeds in the market called 'education', but to cause decline in quality of public education & keen competition. However, it's not desirable to

* This work was supported by a grant from 2016 Research Funds of Andong National University

¹ Private education fever in Korea. 2015. *The Dong-A Ilbo*, August 5, 2015.

² *Collins English Dictionary*.

³ *Hagwon* is the Korean-language word for a for-profit private institute, academy or cram school prevalent in South Korea.

⁴ Kim Young-sam (1927-2015), was a South Korean Politician and Democratic Activist, who served as the seventh President of South Korea from 1993 to 1998.

⁵ "The Biggest Cause of Private Education is not in the Failure of Public Education, but in the Status Emulation," *The Huffington Post Korea*, August 13th 2015.

get into wasteful ideological disputes over the merits and demerits of education policies.

As mentioned above, Korean education fever was the prime mover for building up the miracle on the Han river,⁶ but in 2016, Korean education faced a serious challenge. There's an old Korean saying that goes "a dragon rises from a small stream."⁷ It means a great man may be born of humble parents. However, it is no longer current as the education as a "social ladder" degenerated into a means to inherit wealth and privilege among classes. Recently, children of high-educated parents are more likely to have higher level education than those of low-educated parents. The English phrase "born with a silver spoon in your mouth" is to have opportunities that you did not earn, but that you have from the influence of your family. Similar to the silver spoon saying, is the Korean neologism "dirt spoon," which refers to young people who grew up in a poor home, and have little financial support.⁸ So, children's lives are determined by their parents' socio-economic backgrounds. The polarization of academic background/profession/class/wealth is more conspicuous than in the previous period of industrialization. The private education expenses put even middle-class families into a dilemma of poverty. Some children driven by unbridled competition are choosing to commit suicide. A sense of crisis is spreading over the country as the current education system cultivates neither healthy future citizens, nor creative talents.

As the problems of private education continue, we can enumerate the hindrance to the whole-person education, the crippled operation of regular school curriculum due to the prevailed college entrance exam-oriented education, and a trend of mutual distrust for school education, from the educational point of view; the pressure of household economy and the waste of national economy by excessive expenditures of private education, from the economic point of view; the impediment to social mobility & differentiation, the disharmony between classes, and finally the collapse of community spirit by mutual distrust, from the social point of view.

1) Interruption of normal school education operation

Private tutoring for entrance exam is mainly composed of 'prerequisite learning' ahead of the new academic year. Therefore, the regular schooling is supposed to get done 6 months, one year or even 2-3 years earlier. Recently, the starting period for prior learning keeps coming earlier and earlier.

Table 1: Prerequisite learning at elementary and middle schools

Elementary school consists of grades one to six	Middle school consists of three grades
1 st grade→ studying 3 rd grade math and English	1 st grade→ studying 2 nd & 3 rd grade math and English
4 th grade→ finishing elementary school curricula	2 nd grade →finishing middle school curricula
5 th grade→ studying middle school curricula	3 rd grade →studying high school curricula

Those who have already learned from their prep study provided by homeschool teachers or private *hagwons* lose interest in their regular school curricula. Furthermore, they harm the study atmosphere of other students who learn from formal education at school. If teachers teach on the assumption that all students already learned from their prep study, the contents

⁶The miracle on the Han River refers to the Period of Rapid Economic Growth in South Korea following the Korean War (1950-1953), during which South Korea transformed from a developing country to a developed country.

⁷ Oriental myths talk about dragons rising up from the depths of the sea, so it would be unexpected and quite amazing if one were to rise up from a shallow stream.

⁸ According to this spoon theory, wealth and social status are ranked into gold, silver, bronze and soil/dirt.

of class will be very difficult for those who did not learn out of school, so they are looking for extracurricular studies. However, in the inverse case, those who did prep studies will get bored with school course contents.

2) Hindrance to holistic human development

The excessive competition by the private education can deeply hurt adolescent students who are at risk for going astray in the wrong direction or committing suicide in extreme cases. Students should learn sociality and sociability by mixing together with their peer groups. However, it's not so difficult to see them carrying their big private *hagwon* bags to receive several private lessons after school. This proves how Korean education system drives them into a fiercely competition. Students taking private tutoring till late at night to compete hard with their friends cannot be expected to get a balanced education. For reference, a survey was carried out with 1 000 of the nation's elementary/middle/high school students on what is more important: honesty or money? 56% of high school students replied as follows: "whatever I go to jail for one year it doesn't matter, if I can earn 1 billion won."⁹ This moral insensitivity of young people to corruption and graft shows well the "disgraceful self-portrait" of Korean adult generation by and through whom competition, dehumanization and environmental pollution are handed over to them.

3) Decline in the self-learning ability

The purpose of school education is to develop students' ability to study "by themselves," serving as a foundation of their lifetime study. If students rely too much on private tutoring from early childhood, they are apt to follow what others do, instead of developing their own study plans. The private tutoring is aimed at preparing college entrance exams, so most students are more likely to study past test questions and expected questions for the coming test in priority, than to develop their creativity or critical power. This (anti-educational) rote learning gives them a false idea on education itself. Nowadays, all kinds of information and knowledge circulate more freely through mass-medias. In such a flood of information, their ability to acquire & assimilate information for themselves is more important, so it's necessary for them to cultivate autonomous learning ability.

4) Education waste created by overlapping investments

Most private education expenses are spent for review and preparation of the regular school curricula, so it is a waste created by overlapping educational investments. Of course, there used to be preliminary practices for preparing the third-year course in second-year in high school. However, nowadays, keeping learning ahead of school curriculum from early childhood till the college entrance exam is the norm. Students will continue to do so, until they finally enter university. Prior learning is aimed at passing the college entrance exam with flying colors, so their "condensed," if not distorted, learning effects will vanish like a bubble, as soon as they start university. As a result, it's just waste of time and money.

5) Devastation of household economy

As the ratio of private lesson fees for children is growing, family budget is becoming devastated. 70.7% of Korean students receive private tutoring. The excessive private education not only pinches the pocketbooks of each family, but also raises house prices in good areas to get private education. Some female school parents want to get a job to pay private tutoring fees, but the job markets available for them are limited to daily labors, service industry jobs dealing with

⁹ 17% of elementary school students and 39% of middle school students said the same thing; "If I could get 1 billion won, I would commit a crime." *Dong-A daily News*, December 29, 2015.

unspecified masses (visiting housekeepers, restaurant employees, etc.). “My husband and I are spending about half of our income on education,” said Ahn, 34, who pays more than 1.7 million won (\$1,500) a month on private tuition fees. “I’ve been cutting down on grocery shopping to make sure my kids socialize in good places and learn stuff they’re supposed to learn.” Private education expenses have helped push the nation’s household debt toward record levels, sapping households’ ability to spend money on other goods.¹⁰

6) **Deeping educational inequality**

The higher private education expenses are, the more difficult equal opportunities for education are. The principle of equal education opportunity is to provide equal access to education for all. In public education sector, equal opportunity is available for all children, but in private one it’s inevitably ‘discriminatory.’ According to school parents’ attention and economic power, the private education can differ between regions and classes. “Unless we resolve the issue of educational inequality that stems from the parental financial status, regular high schools will continue to go through a crisis, which will be a serious problem for the entire country,” Rep. Park said.¹¹

7) **Hindrance to social mobility**

In the private education sector, education opportunity is heavily weighted in favor of people of relatively high socio-economic rank. Thus, private education hampers equal educational opportunity in a democratic society, in which everyone is created equal. Educational opportunity, especially to pursue university education, seems to play a crucial role in (upward) social mobility. What is the problem with extracurricular activities after school is to ossify social mobility & differentiation. Regular education obviously contributes to social mobility & differentiation on the premise of equal education opportunity, but private tutoring turns educational opportunity to the advantage of upper class.

8) **Distortion of educational values and disharmony between classes**

A tendency to gain competitive advantage in college admissions through private education prevails throughout Korean society. So, many consider education itself as a tool for their social advancement. One of the bad influences of private education is to foster the disharmony between classes by distorting educational opportunity according to parents’ financial abilities.

3. Solution plans for private education problems

It is natural that parents spend a lot of money for their children's education, but is it socially desirable to invest too much in “profit-seeking” private education market? The consumers’ choice is said to depend on their individual preference, but it’s mainly due to “social values” in the process of their decision-making. Unconditional household expenditure and investment for private education are putting too heavy a burden on families. Thus, the family role on the education of children - including choosing a school for children - needs to be changed from a personal viewpoint into more societal one. And the next step is to improve upon the entrance exam system and the public education by raising the quality of educational performance at school. For this, government, school teachers and parents should cooperate in harmony for the best future of children.

¹⁰ Kim, C., 2013. “Korean Tiger Moms Scrimp for Tutors in Blow to Spending Economy.” *Bloomberg Business*. Available at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-06-14/korean-tiger-moms-scrimp-for-tutors-in-blow-to-consumer-spending>

¹¹ Yoon Min-sik. 2014. “Gap Widens between Elite and Regular Schools.” *Korean Herald*. Available at: minsikyoon@heraldcorp.com

1) Enrichment of regular school education for a decrease in private education

Recently, Korean government attempts to raise the quality of public education by encouraging competition among schools through the diversification of education management. Government chases two hares at once, through the normalization of public education by overcoming (dis)honor in which Korea ranks no. 1 in private education expenses among OECD countries and cutting down on the private education expenditure.

As policy measures to enhance the quality of public education, we can enumerate (1) enlargement of students' opportunities for choosing colleges, (2) guarantee for the autonomy of unit school management,¹² (3) curriculum reorganization, (4) careful selection of educational contents, (5) improvement of teaching & learning methods, (6) reduction in the number of students per one teacher and securement of teaching preparation time by the reduction in miscellaneous works,¹³ (7) improvement on external environment of schools.

2) Competition minimization in school

The current relative grading system should be changed into absolute grading one that checks whether examinees attain a passing criterion or not. Thus, education's aim is not to defeat friends, but to evaluate what they pass the minimum of the standards. The current instructor-led classes and multiple-choice exams are more favorable for lectures at *hagwons* which don't care deeply about the humanistic education. If we change the unilateral lecturing and its result-based evaluation system into self-directed learning and process-based evaluation, many students will not take private *hagwon* courses which will not help any longer them to get good scores at school.

3) Improvement of college entrance exam system

Education opportunity - once limited to a handful of privileged people - became more common, thanks to the propagation of public education. Accordingly, the education providing decent jobs has played a role of 'social ladder' in upward mobility. A high level of social mobility can not only increase social equity & efficiency of distribution of resources, but also prevent social exclusion. Nonetheless, it's very difficult for today's youth to make upward social mobility by their own efforts. As the educational gap widens, social rank in modern version is passed down from one generation to the next. In turn, skepticism on the education role as a social ladder has proliferated over the last several years.

For the normalization of elementary, middle and high school and/or the private education market, we should improve college entrance exam system. If we improve and supplement the current entrance system in medium and long-term, we will not only lower the reliance on private education, but decrease the burden of school parents' private education fees. We need to reject to select students with good (multiple-choice) test scores achieved through private education, and to adopt various ways of selecting students, according to the classification of colleges (research-centered college, education-centered college and vocational training-centered college, etc.). It is necessary to increase the ratio of high school records, and to utilize non-curricular domains (voluntary service), with the enhancement of open admission policy (from selective one) and lifelong education opportunity.

4) Extension of education budget

¹² Since the enforcement of "unit school" accounting system in 2001, each school has adopted the school-based management (SBM), of which the principal takes the responsibility. In the SBM, teaching staffs-parents-students are the ones who participate in decision-making and school management.

¹³ Teachers have a lot of busywork besides teaching in Korea.

The government should increase education budget, in order to improve aging school facilities, to raise the quality of school education by better treatment of teachers, and to attract high-performing teachers into public schools. One of reasons why both parents and students prefer private education is that *hagwon* tutors are much better and more zealous to teach than school teachers (among whom some are stuck in habitual routines in teaching). To raise the quality of school teachers is also a good way to put them into fair competition against one another, while to hire new competent teachers.

5) Change of school parents' awareness

Parents and students consider the regular school as a place to acquire 'graduation certificate' for going to college. Both have more confidence in private tutors than in school teachers. Private *hagwons* know what parents and students really want, and endeavor to best meet their needs, while regular schools are trying to stay above students in monolithic and authoritarian manner. Thus, parents compete to hire competent private tutors, or to send their children to famous private *hagwons*. They are more interested in equipping their children with good education background, than in nurturing their children's moral development and character formation. It is due to the irrational structure of Korean society where academic achievements are overestimated. Accordingly, it is important to modify school parents' mindset. Anyway, their mistrust in school education is one of the reasons that lead to the collapse of public education.

6) Improvement of academic background-oriented society

Which university you graduated from and the ties you have with other alumni is still matters in Korean society. Wage differentials between children of different academic backgrounds are big in business and work. For those reasons, parents are liable to overinvest in private education to send their children to a prestigious university. Consequently, we should do urgent tasks to mitigate the hierarchical structures among universities, to adopt regional human resource management policy, and to settle ability-oriented personal management system.

7) Improvement of ultra-competitive education system

We should introduce various evaluation systems which reflect well the development of aptitude, instead of the fierce competition in order of precedence. To alleviate the gap of benefit levels of private education, it's necessary to reform educational competition structure through the measures to support educationally disadvantaged groups.

8) Change of erroneous social consciousness structure.

Koreans have a strong "group consciousness" at both the family and community levels. Many parents highly value providing their children with a high quality of education, because they believe this guarantees a better way of life for their kids. Even they think "I'm not a good parent!" if they do not send their children to at least one *hagwon*. This group consciousness is combined with their excessive education zeal that targets the social success of their children. The aggressive marketing strategy of big business-type *hagwons* and home school companies also incites them to blindly adopt private education, regardless of its efficiency.

Therefore, it's necessary to establish the merit-oriented evaluation of human beings by the extension of educational opportunity for lifelong vocational ability development, by various man-power developments through the characterization of university education, by reorganization for operational system of national university, by improvement for hierarchal rankization of universities, by quota system observance for the professor appointment and finally by change of citizens' mindset for overcoming the evils of an academic clique or

academic elitism in Korea.

Conclusion

Korea is an academic elitism-oriented society which can be compared to the ancient bone-rank system during the period of Silla (57 BC-935 AD).¹⁴ In the centralization of power, all sorts of important policy-making, enforcement & licensing are monopolized by graduates of the so-called 'SKY' universities.¹⁵ Additional to this, the leading companies preferentially select and hire SKY graduates who are in a more advantageous position to establish schooling ties with men of political power.¹⁶ Social success or failure (even human rating) is determined by where they graduated from, regardless of their ability. In these circumstances, it is natural that every student does not only want to enter the SKY, but almost all parents also wish to send their children to those renowned universities. People believe that private education is more likely to be admitted to good colleges. This belief and its real results are one of the causes which prompt more private tutoring. In a society where college entrance exam acquires greater importance, school education itself is fundamentally entrance exam-oriented. Of course, regular schools provide entrance exam-focused learning, but private *hagwon* are more efficient and more convenient to prepare for entrance exams. Thus, some *hagwons* have long waiting lists for student applications. Furthermore, the frequent changes of university entrance exam system led to too many *hagwons*.

In fact, an 'epistemological change' in the mindset of Korean people is more needed to reduce private education market, than an improvement of college entrance exam itself. Is private education really helpful? Not the less, however, some students have been admitted into to prestigious schools, without receiving any private tutoring. The only realistic alternative seems to become middle class without any advanced degree. The term of middle class Koreans see is different from economic standpoint. When asked what 'middle class' means, they answered as follows: middle-class people are those living in middle-sized apartment (30 *pyongs* = 99.1736m²) keeping out of debt, whose monthly wage is more than 5 million *won* (Korean monetary unit), who have not only a two-thousand cubic centimeter displacement car and a hundred million won in bank account, but also trip abroad more than once per year. Such a society does not necessarily need a lot of well-educated people. As flexible labor market and minimum wage system which guarantees a livelihood are well settled, almost all entrance exam-oriented education problems will disappear sooner or later. Achieving high-rank position through education is possible in national growth stage, but in drive to maturity stage or high mass-consumption stage, there seems no longer to have big relation between high rank and education. The ratio of people benefited from private education is still high in Korean elite society, but in next generation it will be different. While the social demand for standardized university graduates are remarkably decreasing, creative-minded people having great money-making jobs (artist, entertainer, sports player, etc.) will be integrated into dominant class. Korea is still in the transitional period, with a fever of private education.

* This work was supported by a grant from 2016 Research Funds of Andong National University

¹⁴ The bone rank system was the system of aristocratic rank used in the ancient Korean kingdom of Silla. It was used to segregate society, and particularly the layers of the aristocracy, on the basis of their hereditary proximity to the throne and the level of authority they were permitted to wield. The idea of royal blood in other societies is a close analogue to the idea of "sacred bone" in Silla thought. Bone rank was strictly hereditary, and thus acted as a caste system.

¹⁵ SKY is an acronym used to refer to the three most prestigious universities in South Korea: Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University

¹⁶ Many of South Korea's most influential politicians, lawyers, physicians, engineers, professors, and policy makers have graduated from one of the SKY universities.