

Parental Involvement and Growing Education Inequality in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

South Korea has been lauded for its education system for the past several decades because its students tend to score well on international achievement tests such as the PISA. However, closer examination of Korea's education reveals that it is riddled with inequalities. This paper demonstrates how the education system perpetuates socioeconomic inequality instead of alleviating it, as education is intended. After providing relevant background information about the structure and standardization of the Korean education system, this paper reviews existing literature about socioeconomic status, parental involvement, and student achievement to understand how these factors continue to widen education inequalities in the country. Results show that the increasing prevalence of shadow education, or private tutoring, in the country has created gaps in student achievement such that students from high-income families score higher on standardized tests and have a far greater advantage in the job market than students from low-income families. Evaluation of current equalizing policies and suggestions for future improvement will also be discussed.

Introduction

Some of the most popular South Korean media, such as *Squid Game* and *Parasite*, shine a spotlight on worsening socioeconomic gaps in Korean society. After its remarkable recovery from the Korean War, South Korea was relatively egalitarian, with the government's main focus on creating one large middle class society. Indeed, as many as two-thirds of Koreans identified as middle class during this time (Koo, 2007). However, the financial crisis brought on by erroneous IMF policies in the late nineties resulted in a sharp increase in poverty and unemployment and a decrease in household expenditure. This is when socioeconomic gaps began to emerge in Korea; while economic trouble pummeled the middle class, the wealthy, especially those affiliated with large corporations, saw an increase in their wealth. Fewer available jobs made the job market increasingly competitive, and many had anxieties about an uncertain future. Korea has since recovered from the IMF financial crisis, but the socioeconomic divisions remain and continue to worsen over time. In 2021, overall household income increased by 7%, but only by 2.2% for the bottom 20% of households. For the wealthy (top 20%), household income increased by 5.4%, nearly twice as much (Park, 2022). Combined with skyrocketing real estate prices and increasing debt, the conditions have caused Korea's Gini coefficient to rise, meaning there is a measurable and significant increase in socioeconomic inequality.

While tensions can be felt in every sector, it is especially apparent in the Korean school system. Education has been important to Korean society for centuries. During Korea's Three Kingdom Period, the Goguryeo Kingdom (37 BC – 668 CE) saw the establishment of the National Confucian Academy, where students could study the Chinese language and Confucian classical texts. Completing these studies qualified students to take civil service examinations, and performing well meant joining or increasing one's rank at court. In other words, education was "an assured way of obtaining higher social mobility in class and economic status" (Roy & Giraldo-García, 2018). Thus for a long time, education was seen in Korea as an avenue for not only self-improvement, but for social mobility and future stability. Unfortunately, the financial crisis and resulting anxieties have changed the education system from an equalizing force to a divisive one. Students from lower income families have fewer educational opportunities available to them, and

the wealthy continue to invest their assets in education to get their children better test scores and therefore higher-paying jobs in the long run.

In the face of these changes to the education system, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the factors that are driving the widening educational gap in Korea. After giving relevant background information about the structure of the school system, I will discuss how the standardization of public education in an increasingly competitive job market undermined parent's perceptions of the school system's effectiveness. Then, I draw from existing literature to identify the major ways that families use their finances and agency to create more educational opportunities for their children. Finally, I discuss how shadow education (private tutoring), by far the family's greatest educational investment, has led to achievement gaps between social classes in Korea. In the discussion and conclusion section, I evaluate the effectiveness of government policies aimed at improving equality in the school system.

The Structure of Korea's Education System

Korea's K-12 education system follows a six-three-three pattern in which primary school consists of grades 1 through 6, lower secondary consists of grades 7 through 9, and upper secondary consists of grades 10 through 12. Upper secondary schools, or high schools, can be either academic or vocational. Most Korean students enroll in academic high schools to prepare for college. Within each academic high school, there is usually an option to pursue a liberal arts track or a math and science track.

There are some differences in the available school choices as students advance in their education. For primary and lower secondary education, students are usually assigned to a neighborhood school. Students wishing to enroll in a vocational high school can choose their school, but students aiming for an academic high school have to undergo a more complicated process because of an educational policy called the High School Equalization Policy (HSEP). Implemented as a response to growing competition for entrance to elite schools in South Korea, HSEP "assigns academic high school-bound students to schools within their residential area on the basis of a random computerized lottery" (Byun et al., 2012). Under HSEP, students are first screened for academic performance based on their middle school grades and then they are allowed to apply to two or three high schools in their designated district. Final enrollments are assigned based on a randomized lottery system (Byun et al., 2012). While HSEP alleviates the burden of choosing a school, it also to some extent limits the agency of families in their educational pursuits. With the policy in place, it has become more common for students and their families to be unsatisfied with the school they were assigned based on the lottery system, and families are often powerless to change it.

A defining feature of the entire Korean K-12 school system is its "high degree of educational standardization with uniform standards adopted nationwide and centralization that facilitates standardization" (Park et al., 2011). From teacher training to the curriculum and textbooks, everything in the classroom is strictly regulated by the government. Thus, unlike parents in the U.S. who can rally to influence the education systems in their cities or neighborhoods, Korean families are at the mercy of what the government has decided for them. This creates a dynamic in which parental involvement at the child's school is discouraged, and parents cannot directly influence the kind of instruction that happens within school walls (Park et al., 2011).

On the surface, randomized lottery with HSEP and nationwide standardization of education seems like a recipe for equality, but Korea's social dynamics make it a recipe for disaster. As previously discussed, the job market in Korea has become increasingly competitive and many are uncertain about their ability to build a stable future. Thus, parents want to maximize their child's chance for success. Because the standardized curriculum at schools have not met their standards, parents started to use their resources to secure other educational opportunities for their children.

Parental Involvement in Korean Education

Korean parents' zeal for education and their involvement in their child's education is well documented. A 1994 study found that Korean parents have high expectations for their children regardless of the family's socioeconomic status. In the study, 80% of families expected their children to at least obtain a bachelor's degree, and it was common for parents to encourage children to set their sights on certain (usually elite) universities in Korea or abroad (Peng & Wright, 1994). After the IMF financial crisis, parents' worries about their children's futures and thus their involvement in their education have increased correspondingly.

In a more recent study about parental involvement and student achievement in Korean education, Park considers four major forms of parental involvement, including "talking with the child about her/his education, monitoring the child's activities, contacting the school, and using private tutoring" (Park et al., 2012). The researchers found a correlation between family background (socioeconomic status), parental involvement strategy, and student success. Specifically, students from wealthier, smaller families with only one or two children had higher math scores than lower income families or larger families. They attribute this achievement gap to the higher levels of parental involvement from wealthy families. Wealthier families more frequently discussed education with their children and closely monitored their educational progress. They also often had high expectations for the child's career path, perhaps because the parents were more likely to be high achievers themselves. The employment status of the mother was also an important factor because she is often the one in charge of the child's education. Researchers found that mothers who did not have to engage in full-time employment had had more time to monitor the child's educational progress compared to working mothers. Therefore, overall family background socioeconomic status has a positive correlation with student achievement in Korea because wealthier families more frequently engage in all four types of parental involvement. With this result, it is not surprising that many people in Korea say that they must come from a wealthy family in order to succeed.

The Gaps in Access to Shadow Education

Other than family background, parental expectations, and activities like monitoring and discussing education, the study showed that the parent's ability to afford shadow education or private tutoring for their children was the single greatest predictor of student achievement. This finding echoes the feelings of the Korean public, who believe that private education is at the heart of education inequality in Korea (*Education Inequality in Korea is a Problem that Needs to be Solved*, 2022).

Private education has many forms. One form of it would be an individual tutoring service, where an instructor works with a student one-on-one or a small group of students at a family home. Other forms of tutoring are more remote, such as students receiving self-study sheets from private companies and receiving feedback, or online tutoring with videos or other types of multimedia. By far the most common and robust form of private tutoring comes in the form of hagwons or cram schools, where instructors teach students in classroom-like settings.

No matter socioeconomic status, all families value education and seek to give their children the best chance at success, so almost everyone engages in some type of private tutoring. In 2007, Korean parents with children attending K-12 schools spent more than 20 trillion won (approximately \$17 billion USD) for private education (KNSO, 2008). In 2008, the average family in Seoul spent about \$550 per month on private tutoring, which was about 16% of monthly household income (Yim, 2010). Upon closer examination, it is clear that the family's financial situation directly affects how much they spend on tutoring. Recent figures show that families in the top 20% of the income bracket spent about "1.14 million won (\$869) monthly on tutoring their children aged between 13 and 18," which accounted for almost 18% of the monthly income of 6.53 million won (Lee, 2023). While lower income households also spent nearly the same percentage of monthly household income on tutoring, the amount spent was less overall. Families in the bottom 20% of household income spent about 482,000 won on tutoring per month for children in the

same age group (Lee, 2023). These figures show that despite spending the same percentage of monthly income on tutoring, lower income households simply cannot acquire the same amount and quality of private education as the wealthy.

A second point regarding the differences between higher and lower income families is the amount of energy and time spent monitoring private tutoring. Because there are so many hagwons and individual tutors to consider, identifying and gathering information about various private tutoring services is a serious time investment. As previously stated, working mothers have less time to scout out and evaluate the different options for their children, so they may be unable to find the most effective and cost-efficient choice that would improve their child's educational outcomes. Furthermore, once the student is enrolled in private tutoring, Korean mothers tend to "continuously collect information on their children's progress from private tutors and hakwon instructors," as a form of monitoring (Park, 2012). This allows them to understand whether the tutoring service suits the child's needs and move them to a different service provider if necessary. However, working mothers and especially those from lower income households are unable to invest the same time and energy into monitoring as non-working mothers from high income households. Thus, low-income students' access to quality private education is limited by both financial cost and parental investment. The effects of this difference are profound as "children that don't get private education in addition to public education can be as much as three years behind once they finish high school" (*Education Inequality in Korea is a Problem that Needs to be Solved*, 2022). This effectively eliminates them from the intense competition for high-earning job opportunities. In turn they will be at a disadvantage when seeking private education opportunities for their children if they choose to have any. In this way, Korea's current education system is perpetuating inequality instead of alleviating it.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has sought to show how Korea's supposedly standardized and egalitarian education system keeps the poor at a disadvantage while the wealthy maintain or increase their wealth. Several studies discussed throughout this review paper indicate that the more human resources parents can afford to pour into their children, the higher the student's achievement. Wealthy families can usually afford the best tutors, and non-working mothers can invest the time and effort to monitor their children's education to ensure the best outcomes. In contrast, students from low-income families have fewer opportunities to achieve their potential and secure a well-paying job that would change their family's financial situation. The Korean government's actions to remedy the issue thus far have not been effective. For example, HSEP was a policy intended to alleviate the inequalities in education by limiting school choice, but it ultimately backfired because parents were dissatisfied with the options and demanded more from private education to fill the gaps. The government has also tried to limit the operating hours of hagwons or provide tutors for underprivileged students, but neither of these is effective as there is still a major difference in test scores of students from low income and high-income households, "suggesting that education inequality in Korea is now at an all-time high" (*Education Inequality in Korea is a Problem that Needs to be Solved*, 2022). It appears that manipulating the private education sector with policies is ineffective. Given that private education is driven by anxieties about the economy, one of the best solutions would be to prioritize stabilizing the job market and housing prices. Moreover, bringing about social change to decrease the test score-based competitiveness of universities would also reign in the demand for private education.

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