Education in East Asia

The education systems of Asian nations such as South Korea, Japan and Singapore are the envy of the western world in terms of measured achievements against global standards.

But behind the successes, lurk growing problems of inequality, overemphasis on rote learning, academic corruption and graduates poorly prepared for the world of work. Much needs to change.
IS SOUTH KOREAN EDUCATION EXCELLENT OR OUT OF TOUCH?

By Young Yu Yang

International rankings show South Korea among the top global leaders in education, a fact that has been credited with driving the country’s success. But while foreign leaders talk about emulating Korea’s excellence, at home there is growing dissatisfaction with a stressful and ultra-competitive system that often does not prepare university graduates for the working world.

The answer, writes Young Yu Yang, is to make the system more responsive to teachers, students and the marketplace.

SOUTH KOREA’S education system has become something of a benchmark for many countries concerned about education reform. Given its rapid rise from the ashes of the Korean War to become one of the top 10 economies in the world, its education system is seen as a linchpin of this success.

At the World Education Forum in Incheon from May 19 to 21 this year, South Korea’s educational history was on display before more than 100 countries. In a special session entitled “Education Drives Development,” South Korea introduced its achievements in compulsory education through high school, expansion of public education spending and the world’s highest rate of higher education completion. The session provided firm evidence that South Korea’s “compressed success” of industrialization and democratization in just 60 years — far faster than Western countries — was largely due to education. The keys were found in government investment in expanding education opportunities, creating excellent teacher engagements and strong parental commitment to education as a shortcut to improving social standing.1 Keith Hansen, one of two vice presidents for Global Practices at the World Bank, said, “Korea’s achievement is a result of conscious effort, so it cannot be called a ‘miracle,’ and it is a model which other countries can imitate.”

INTERNATIONAL PRAISE

Actually, South Korea’s education started to attract greater attention in the early 2000s, with Korea’s high rankings in the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the International Mathematical Olympiad and the International Science Olympiads. US President Barack Obama also praised South Korea’s education in numerous remarks, sparking attention from the international community.

At a speech to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on March 10, 2009 in Washington DC, he stated, “Our children spend over a month less in school than children in South Korea every year.” In his annual State of Union Address in January 2011, he said, “After parents, the biggest impact on a child’s success comes from the man or woman at the front of the classroom. In South Korea, teachers are known as nation builders. I think it’s time we treated our teachers with the same level of respect right here in the United States of America.” At a town hall meeting in North Carolina last April, he continued the theme: “In places like Korea … teachers are paid at the level that doctors and engineers are paid, and it is respected as a profession.” (In reality, average annual income for Korean doctors exceeds 100 million won, whereas teachers average only 47 million won, but the point was well taken that Korean teachers are adequately compensated, including during vacation, while US teachers are not paid during vacations.)

President Obama’s praise for South Korea’s education is almost excessive. I like to narrow down his views into three areas: parents’ spirit of sacrifice for their children; teachers’ sense of duty and pride as nation builders; and students’ Confucian attitude to embrace parents and teachers’ educational demands.

MISGIVINGS AT HOME

But many South Korean people’s actual feelings about their own education system are to an extent opposite to President Obama and various other countries’ positive assessments. Resentment toward the government is high, educational satisfaction is low and the mismatch between the education supply system and labor market demand is becoming a big social challenge. These challenges can be summarized thus:

- From the perspective of Korean parents, a weak public education system increases private education expenses, and the education system is regarded as unable to foster creative talent.
- From the teachers’ point of view, the problem is mainly the excessive administrative burden and interference from the government.
- For the students, examination stress and youth unemployment are some of the many complaints.

The irony is that the very things the international community highly praises are challenging domestically. Why is there such a gap between the international community’s evaluation of the situation and that of Koreans themselves?

EXCELLENCE IN RANKINGS

At the World Education Forum 2015, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated, “When I was a child during the [Korean] war, we were constantly told to study hard. That was the only way to invest in our future — and it worked.” With a strong focus on education, South Korea was able to overcome the aftermath of war, and actually become a net donor country. The model shows that investment in education brings the most lasting results for a country. South Korea is where the past, present and future of global education exist.

At the center of South Korea’s education, there are the excellent teachers that President Obama praises. The entrance scores for the 11 national teacher’s colleges (including the Korea National University of Education) where elementary school teachers are trained, are some of the highest in the world. Also, the ratio of test takers to passing scores for the elementary teachers’ employment exam is 1.6:1. It is similar for the colleges that train middle and high school teachers. Every year 20,000 graduates obtain a teacher’s
Japan ranked 28 in the OECD assessment ranking of 76 countries. Analyzing the enrolment rate of South Korean students in elementary, middle and high school, are forced to face tough examinations, and parents’ backs are breaking from spending on private education. And there is a dark fact that about half of university graduates are unemployed after graduation.

The story that elementary, middle and high school students are going abroad at an early age to avoid the stress of examinations is another shadowy facet of South Korea’s education system. It was only a few years ago that foreign and local news media began reporting about “goose fathers” who sent their families abroad while they flew home to work and remit payments to them, sometimes choosing even death over loneliness. However, recently there has been a decrease in the number of students going abroad at an early age, falling from 30,000 to 12,000. This is partially a reflection of the establishment of a few international educational institutions in Jeju Province and Songdo, Incheon. It is also a partial reflection of stronger English education in schools at every level and the public’s increased preference for Korean universities. On the whole, however, we cannot deny that this phenomenon has been a reaction against the reality of competition-centered education in South Korea. Another reality is the problem of college graduates’ entrance into society. University completion rates in South Korea are the highest in the world, with 6,000 students per 10,000 in 2014. This is also an example of Korean parents’ enthusiasm to spend 1.1866 trillion won in 1995 to 18.2297 trillion won in 2014 (see Figure 3). When unreported private education is included, the education world estimates actual private education expenditures to be over 40 trillion won, or $36 billion.

**SEEKING COMFORT ABROAD**

The educational environment in South Korea is also now among the ranks of advanced countries. Twenty years ago, in 1995, the student-teacher ratio was 33:1, placing Korea 120th among 194 countries surveyed by UNESCO. In 2014, that ratio declined to 15:1. Furthermore, in 1980, average class size in elementary school was 51.5 students; it was cut more than half to 22.8 in 2014. In the 2012 PISA rankings, South Korea was first in math, first-to-second in reading, and second-to-fourth in science out of 34 OECD member countries. Also, South Korea ranked 10th in the world in the number of Science Citation Index publications and was identified as one of the Intellectual Property Five (IP5), the five countries with the largest intellectual property offices aimed at securing patents.

Meanwhile, on May 13, 2015, the BBC reported that South Korea was still rising in world education rankings. Unlike PISA, which is conducted every three years targeting OECD countries, this OECD assessment ranked 76 countries. Analyzing math and science exam scores, South Korea ranked third after Singapore and Hong Kong. Japan and Taiwan ranked fourth and fifth, respectively, making the top five countries all from Asia (see Table 1). The United States ranked 28th, Germany 13th, United Kingdom 20th and France 23rd.

It is worth noting that South Korean students are also scoring at the top levels of the International Science Olympiads every year, displaying strong potential as future scientists. National support and teachers’ devoted guidance are also at the bottom of this.

**TABLE 1 THE WORLD’S TOP 10 EDUCATION RANKINGS BY COUNTRY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Rank</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>10</td>
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**FIGURE 1 ENROLLMENT RATE OF SOUTH KOREAN HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES**

Source: Korean Ministry of Education, Statistical Yearbook of Education

**FIGURE 2 NUMBER OF DOCTORATES RECEIVED FROM SOUTH KOREAN UNIVERSITIES**

Source: Korean Educational Development Institute, 2014 Kangpyrup Tgangye Jumwol Jangpok (2014 Educational Statistics Analysis Data Collection)

Korea’s university entrance rate is also among the highest in the world. In the 1990s, three out of ten high school graduates entered university, but recently it has increased to almost eight out of 10 (see Figure 2). Furthermore, in 1995, doctorates received from South Korean universities numbered 5.8 out of 100,000 students, in 2014, the figure was 25.3 out of 100,000 (see Figure 1). While higher educational institutions have improved, this is also an example of Korean parents’ enthusiasm for education, spirit of sacrifice and students’ traditional Confucian attitudes that make it virtually impossible to disobey their parents’ will.

**THE OTHER REALITY OF SOUTH KOREAN EDUCATION**

From appearances alone, South Korea’s education is indeed glamorous, yet inside it is experiencing growing pains. Children, starting from elementary school, are forced to face tough examinations, and parents’ backs are breaking from spending on private education. And there is the dark fact that about half of university graduates are unemployed after graduation. According to the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, the academic stress index for Korean children aged 11, 13 and 15 is at 50.5 percent. This means that one out of two students is suffering from severe stress. This is the world’s highest level, and is three times higher than that of the Netherlands at 16.3 percent. Also, only 18.5 percent of students said they were “highly satisfied” with their school life, ranking 26th among 30 countries. The Institute said such situations “started with parent’s high expectations which demand high endurance for distress, alongside an academic-ability centered competitive school environment.”

The flip side of enthusiasm for education and traditional Confucian values is torment for students. This originates from systemic problems of excessive competition in entrance exams. Rules of college entrance exams change with every administration, and when the public education system cannot keep up with such institutional changes, there is a vicious cycle in which the private education market expands and correspondingly weakens the public education system. The amount of money Korean parents spend on private education, on top of public education expenses, increased more than 10 times from 1.1866 trillion won in 1995 to 18.2297 trillion won in 2014 (see Figure 3). When unreported private education is included, the education world estimates actual private education expenditures to be over 40 trillion won, or $36 billion.

**TABLE 2 ENTRANCE RANKING IN SOUTH KOREAN UNIVERSITIES**

Source: Korean Ministry of Education, Statistical Yearbook of Education

**FIGURE 3 NUMBER OF DOCTORATES RECEIVED FROM SOUTH KOREAN UNIVERSITIES**

Source: Korean Educational Development Institute, 2014 Kangpyrup Tgangye Jumwol Jangpok (2014 Educational Statistics Analysis Data Collection)
but the fact remains that university education largely neglects practical preparation for adult life in society. In other words, they do not produce marketable employees. Indeed, about half of university graduates are out of work. University graduates’ employment rate increased to 73.4 percent in 2006, but by 2010 it fell and remained around 50 percent (see Figure 4).

INCOMPLETE HIGHER EDUCATION
This problem of entry into the “real” world is connected to poor education in universities. Korea’s Ministry of Education, with the objective of satisfying the need for higher education, introduced “Regulations on Establishing a University” in 1995, making it easier to establish higher education institutions. As a result, the number of four-year colleges increased from 130 at that time to 200 now. But the quality of education in these institutions did not keep up with the expansion in quantity, causing deterioration of educational values. Besides, in the aftermath of South Korea’s low birth rate, the number of high school graduates drastically decreased. It is imperative that universities are restructured to adjust to the reduction in enrollment.

In comparison, 96.7 percent of university graduates in Japan were employed in spring 2015, close to the 2008 record of 96.9 percent immediately before the Global Financial Crisis became serious. Quoting Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, the Nihon Geizai Shimbun newspaper reported that “in accordance with economic recovery, companies’ employment expansion is spreading nationwide.”

REMAINING TASKS FOR SOUTH KOREA’S EDUCATION
South Korea’s strength in education contributed to the country’s shift from being a developing to an advanced country, but challenges and problems remain. In particular, there are conflicting assessments of Korea’s education. From abroad, it is lauded as an educational model with excellent academic achievements. On the domestic front, there is dissatisfaction with public education, the fierce competition in entrance exams, the burden of private education expenses and the practical results of higher education.

The fundamental reason for this contradiction between reputation and reality lies in the central government-led design and implementation of the educational system. During South Korea’s period of development and growth, the strong leadership of the central government allowed for expansion and improvement in education. However, in a borderless, diversified and rapidly changing technological society, it is difficult for such a system to be effective.

Consequently, a change in the educational paradigm is needed. It is necessary to restructure the roles and responsibilities of the central government, local government and the regional Education Office, as well as the schools.

First of all, the central government should strengthen its planning function. Specifically, the government needs to change the system that lines up all students in single file for college admission. Various paths to higher education should be available to students; institutionalize them, a good quality control system should be established in order to prevent deterioration of education.

Second, the regional Education Office should focus on supporting rather than regulating schools. It should aid administrative work, so that teachers can dedicate themselves to educating students. For example, the regional Education Office, which exerts authority over the personnel affairs of principals and teachers, should only retain authority over principals, and delegate authority over teaching personnel to schools.

Third, teachers themselves are the main agents of public education normalization. It is difficult to derive sincerity, loyalty and a sense of belonging toward the school under the current system whereby teachers are centrally selected through the teacher employment exam conducted by the Education Office, which then assigns them to public schools and implements a job rotation system. Public education can be improved by shifting to a system where each school employs teachers independently.

Fourth, universities need greater autonomy. Entrance examinations, academic affairs and entrance quotas should be left to the discretion of the universities, and their accountability should be reinforced. By doing so, both autonomy and responsibility can be simultaneously pursued. In particular, rather than structural reform such as an artificial reduction in quotas in response to the decline in student numbers, it is advisable that fragile universities exit the market according to economic principles.

Fifth, the central government, through cooperation and co-ordination with local government and the regional Education Office, should secure stable educational funding. Owing to past economic growth, educational funding has increased, but falls short of the initial target of 5 percent of GNP. Enlarging educational financing is still necessary and is a way to reduce private education spending.

To train citizens with creativity, harmonious personalities and a global civic consciousness, the restructuring of roles and responsibilities is needed. Through such changes, the gap between the views of the international community and how South Koreans see their education system can be narrowed. In doing so, Korea’s education system really can lead world education and contribute to the development of human civilization.

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