

Illusion And Truth About Polarisation Of Education In Korea

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The goal of this paper is firstly to examine the deepening “educational gap” between disadvantaged and privileged pupils; secondly to view the impacts of government standardization policy on the extension of educational inequalities; thirdly to suggest problem-solving directions to reduce the education divide in a country where education levels show a strong correlation with income levels. **Methodology:** This study proposes the solution plans to reduce the education divide by using scholarly literature review, statistical data and politico-phenomenological methodology under the Korean context where there is deep-rooted antagonism between the two leftist and rightest camps. **Main Findings:** We can expect the possibility of building a solidaristic/cooperative leapfrogging strategy between two opposed camps to jointly cultivate future-oriented talented individuals (democratic citizens and enterprising persons), beyond untying the Gordian Knot of private education. **Practical Implications:** These results offer useful guidance for countries with similar educational environments with the increase in NEET (not in education, employment, or training). **Novelty/Originality of this study:** A tendency to criticize Korean education policy as neoliberal en bloc is sweeping over the current Korean education world, but Korean education cannot be conceived as entirely neoliberal. This study elucidates the said criticism itself is now operating as another ideology to bind teacher unions under the banner of anti-neoliberalism, through metaphysical discourse and policy analysis. **Research limitation:** This study is predominately focused on the Korean context. There is no truth, however, that one learns by comparing; so next, I plan to look for undertaking a comparative study in East Asia.

Keywords: education reform, neoliberalism, polarization, and standardization policy.

INTRODUCTION

Neoliberalism is the dominant ideology shaping our world today. Thus, there have been fierce arguments for and against its validity all over the world, and Korea is no exception. Since the late 1970s, the logic of neoliberalism has prompted unprecedented debates and discussions in education sector. In South Korea, an anti-neoliberal tendency has been sweeping over the education world by considering the keynotes of Korean education policy as “neoliberal” en bloc, especially after the IMF-Korea bailout due to the financial crisis in 1997-98.

These anti-neoliberal discourses on Korean education have been led by so-called “progressive” left-wing camps.¹ According to left-wing camps, neoliberal education reorganization not only harms the essence of education, but also deepens the “anti-popular and anti-democratic” propensity in education; that is, polarization of education. They insist that basic concept of neoliberal education is compared to a voucher system. It’s a system to select educational

1. These anti-neoliberal discourses have been led by progressive left-wing camps: Korean Education Research Institute, Center for Education Research, Analysis and Innovation (CERAI), and Korean Teachers & Educational Workers' Union (KTU), etc.; Han, M. J. (2001). [in Korean] First and most importantly, we have to check neoliberal education policy, *Our Secondary Education Publisher*.

commodities in education market, as we are shopping in the supermarket. If we assume that the term “market” represents neoliberalism the best, the problems of neoliberal education are as follows. First, logic of education is at the mercy of market. Second, the market principles such as “competition” (of education providers) and “option” (of education consumers) are applied through concrete education policies. In Korea, the debate on the polarization of education is very political and politicized serving as another ideology of conduct uniting those opposing neoliberalism and so-called neoliberal education.² However, Korean education policies are not wholly considered neoliberal.

The goal of this paper is firstly to examine the deepening “educational gap” between disadvantaged and privileged pupils; secondly to view the impacts of government standardization policy on the extension of educational inequalities; thirdly to suggest problem-solving directions to reduce the education divide by using scholarly literature review, statistical data and politico-phenomenological methodology under the Korean context.

The Deepening “Educational Gap” between Disadvantaged and Privileged Pupils

What are the problems with Korean education system in a global age? It is no longer true to say a Korean old proverb that “dragons rise from gutter (A great man may be born of humble parents).” Because it is very difficult for students to receive expensive private lessons or go to prestigious universities, without their parents’ economic support and/or mothers’ excessive parenting called “winds of the skirts” and information power. The education once served as a “social ladder” to personal and professional success in Korea has become a mechanism to reproduce/extend social inequalities and/or a vicious cycle of anxiety to link educational polarization to social polarization.

According to news reports, the percentage of new students at Seoul National University (SNU) come from special-purpose high schools has increased from 22% in 2002 into 40.5% in 2012. It represents almost a two-fold increase compared to 2002. In 2015, 432 out of 3,261 (13.2%) newly admitted SNU students came from 3 districts of Gangnam in Seoul, but the Gangnam population is merely 3.1% of the overall population in South Korea (51,250,000 people in 2015).³ For reference, there are two kinds of high schools in Korea: (1) regular high schools which enroll most students (70%), and (2) elite high schools such as special-purpose private high schools (foreign language high schools & science high schools) and autonomous private high schools. In South Korea, getting diplomas from top-tier universities is seen as crucial to a successful life. Not surprisingly, all high schools are obsessed with college entrance exam. In current system, all students are classified by the scores of the College Scholastic Aptitude Test (CSAT) from level 1 to 9.⁴ To tell the truth, Korean students spend more than 12 years through primary, middle and high schools for CAST. CSAT is even described as “the chance to make or break one’s future!”

In the era of high economic growth called “the miracle of Han river,” the education positively functioned as an institutional “mechanism for equality,” as educational opportunities - only

² Nah, B. H. (2003). [in Korean] Neoliberalism in education reform. *Asian Journal of Education* 4(2), p. 301.

³ The Gangnam district is one of the 25 local government districts which make up the city of Seoul, South Korea. Gangnam literally means “South of the River”; See, Issue Brief, (2017). [in Korean] The Trend of Polarization of Private Education Expenses. *The Yeouido Institute*, December 4, p. 1.

⁴ College Scholastic Ability Test or CSAT is a type of “standardized” test accepted by South Korean universities. It was made official in 1994. CSAT is managed by the Korea Institute of Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE). The test is offered every November, but the exact dates may annually change. CSAT plays an important role in the education in South Korea. It is commonly believed that the CSAT will determine which university the student will enter.

very few had enjoyed till then - have been generalized from elementary schools to universities. This phenomenon of “upward” social mobility was mainly attributable to high education fever regardless of social class, extension of public education, large-scale job creation through high economic growth, and adoption of standardization policy and “oppressive” private education policies by government, etc.

In 2012, high school and university completion rates of 25-34 years olds respectively reached 98% and 66% in South Korea, while the two average rates in OECD countries recorded 82% and 39%.⁵ However, in spite of such mammoth “quantitative expansion of higher education” in South Korea, its role in social mobility is being called into question. Because academic success and/or failure of students largely depends on the economic power of their parents who can afford to pay high-priced private education expenses. It’s practically routine to pay millions of won (Korean monetary unit) per month for the kid’s tutoring in Gangnam area. According to a pupil’s mother in Gangnam, “at age 5, we send our children to English *hagwons* (cram school) for infants and toddlers.⁶ At the third year of elementary school, we send them to *hagwons* for prerequisite learning (studying in advance for higher levels) or make them take extra private lessons. This is our normal course of preparing for the entrance exam for elite high schools and colleges. So, if you don’t have money, it’s difficult for dragons (no matter how gifted) to rise from gutter.”⁷

Following are positive and negative factors of social mobility between generations in South Korea.

Table 1: Factors increasing social mobility between generations

Historical environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● dissolution of hereditary social status system under Japanese colonial rule (1910-45) ● agrarian reform in 1949 ● “merit-based” personnel management system under US army military government (1945-48) ● Korean war (1950-53)
Economic environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● industrialization, ● high economic growth ● large-scale secondary industry-based job creation ● double-tiered grain price system for price stabilization
Social environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● relatively favorable distribution of wealth ● extension of public education opportunities by “education-first” government policy ● education fever regardless of class ● egalitarian education policies (standardization of middle and high schools and prohibitive measures on private education)

⁵ Lim, J.Y. (2011). [in Korean] Korean youth’s university completion rate topped the list among OECD countries, *Yonhap News*, Retrieved from

<http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/society/2011/09/10/0701000000AKR20110910055400004.HTML?audio=Y>

⁶ Hagwon is the Korean-language word for a for-profit private institute, academy or cram school prevalent in South Korea.

⁷ Jung, J.Y. (2014). Earning entry to an elite college is a premier league for the wealthy, *The Hankook Ilbo*, p. 1

Table 2: Factors decreasing social mobility between generations

Historical environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Globalization ● financialization (decline of manufacturing industry) ● labor-saving technology development ● financial crisis in 1997-98.
Economic environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● lay off of manufacturing workers (Chinese effects) ● structural collapse of self-employed small and medium businesses ● slowdown in economic growth ● decreasing capability of job creation by economic growth
Social environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● deepening of income inequality on and after 2000s ● supply increase of university education ● decrease in the returns of college education investment (cf. 50 % graduates from two-year colleges and 20% graduates from four-year colleges receive less than the average wages of high school graduates) ● wage polarization between college graduates (premium of prestigious university graduates/increasing number of people on super-salaries) ● education gap between the rich and poor with competition surges in private education market (partly due to judgment of unconstitutionality on prohibition of private education in 2000)⁸ ● weakening of standardization policy with the advent of special-purpose high schools and autonomous private high schools ● complexification of college application system (highly dependent on the information power of parents and personal connections).

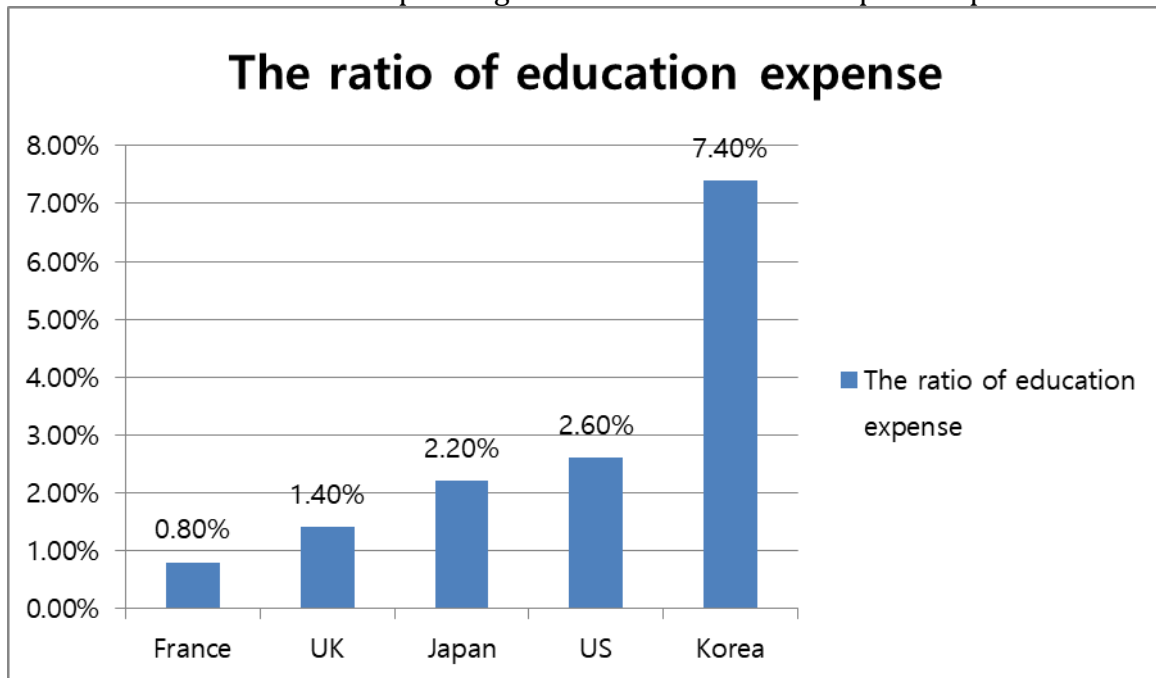
Until 1990s, Korea's Gini coefficient was not so high. Furthermore, the impact of father generation's wealth & income on son generation (around 40 years old in 2015) tended to be at a relatively low level, but Korea's income inequality has accelerated in 2000s. Due to the massive costs spent on private education, more and more young couples are avoiding having children. South Korea's birthrate remains one of the lowest in the world, with the average number of children expected to be born per woman standing at 1.26 in 2017.⁹ Children education in South Korea is like pouring water in a sieve or "money-eating hippo" (money pit). See the Chart 1 below.¹⁰ The Korean ratio of education spending in the household consumption expenditure is 3 to 9 times higher than that of other developed countries (7.4% in 2009). The ratio of "private education" is not only 81% in the whole education expenditure, but also the private education expenditure for elementary, middle, and high school students runs to 2% of GDP.

⁸ The private education expenses have rapidly increased since the verdict of the Constitutional court which officially allowed the private tutoring in 2000.

⁹ Bak, S. H. (2017). S. Korea's fertility rate remains among lowest in world. *The Korea Herald*. Retrieved from <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20171203000199>

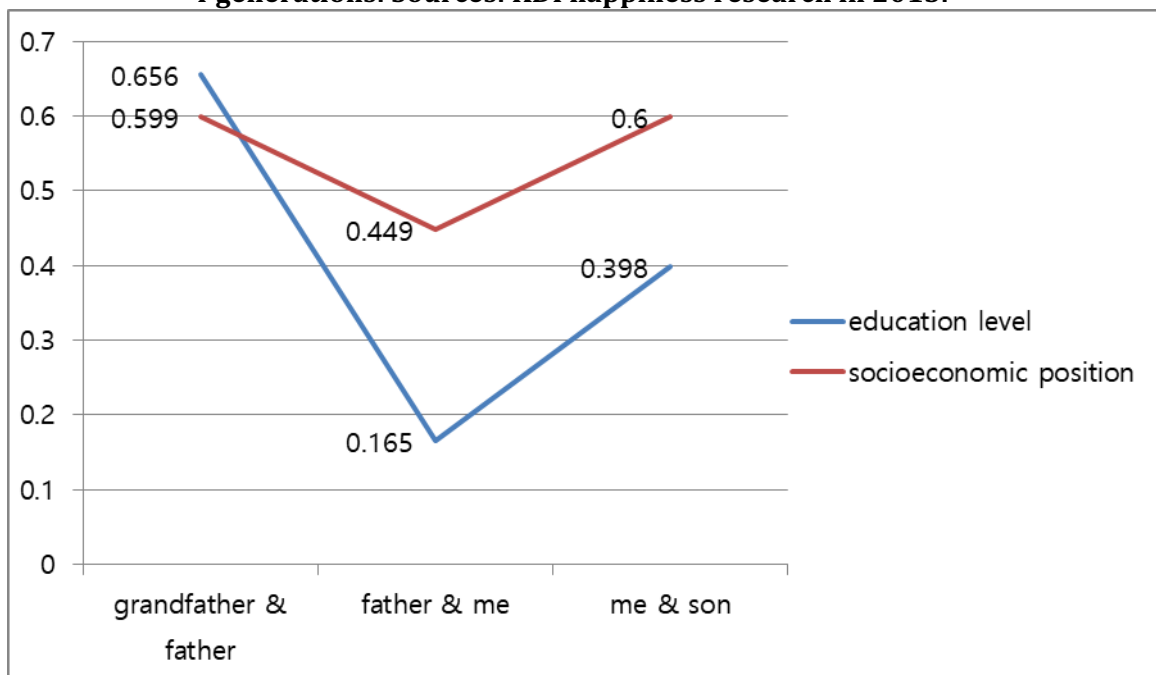
¹⁰ Kim, H.S. (2015). [in Korean] The direction of education policy for restoring social mobility, *Korea's Leading Think Tank KDI*. Retrieved from <http://hosting02.snu.ac.kr/~snucss/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/>

Chart 1: The ratio of educational spending in the household consumption expenditure



See the Chart 2 aimed at 1, 525 people (age 20-69) below. Due to the extension of general education opportunities, the correlation coefficient of educational levels decreased to 0.165 in generation between father and me, but it rises again to 0.398 in generation between me and son. What's more, socio-economic positions is far more highly estimated at 0.6 in same generation between me and son. The below line chart 2 shows U-form.

Chart 2: The correlation coefficient between educational levels and socioeconomic positions for 4 generations: Sources: KDI happiness research in 2013.

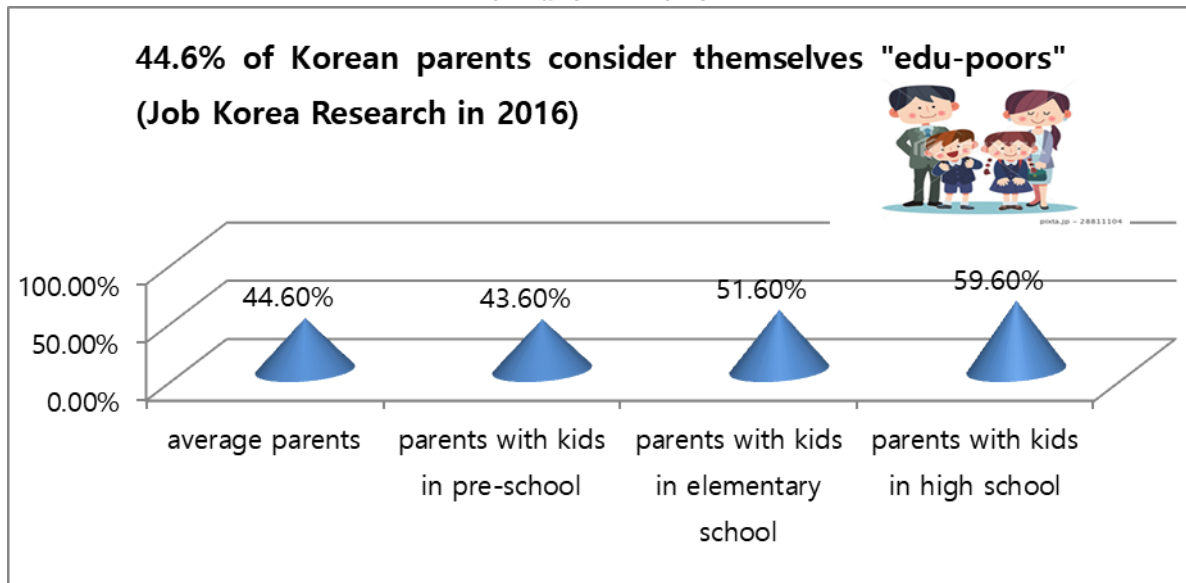


As mentioned above, high private education fees, “exclusive education zone” represented by Gangnam area, and increasing number of wealthy students going to elite universities in Seoul show well the current situation of Korea’s polarized education. Going to private academies after school becomes an exhausting routine for students taking various private lessons and

tutoring classes from early age. School parents' vague belief that education is the most efficient solution to rectify unequal opportunities and social polarization drive almost half of them to be edu-poors.¹¹

See the following results of a Job Korea survey asking office workers with children if they consider themselves "edu-poor." On the far left is the average (44.6%), then from left to right are the figures for parents with kids in pre-school (43.6%), elementary school (51.6%) and high school (59.6%). Thus, reducing the educational gap is being magnified as a new task of social integration and national sustainable development.

Chart 3: Survey on "edu-poors" taken by Job Korea based on a pole of 1, 202 office workers with children in 2016



The Impacts of Government Standardization Policy on the Extension of Educational Inequalities

The standardization policy may be the most controversial in Korean modern education history. Began in 1974 under the Chung-hee Park government (1963-1979), it has been the center of controversy. The current Jae-in Moon left-wing government has promised to revoke the "autonomous" private high schools, as part of fulfilling their election pledges. These non-standardized elite high schools were established under the Myong-bak Lee right-wing government (2008-2013) in 2010, with the aim of compensating the fundamental "defects" of standardization policy. And so the controversy over the issue of "standardization" goes on.

The standardization and/or equalization policy can be defined as the high school entrance system by arranging all middle school graduates in order of "home short-distance to schools" and/or by "lottery system." For this reason, the standardization policy earned its pejorative nickname, "spinning a wheel of fortune."

¹¹ Edu-poor" is a South Korean neologism deriving from the words "education" and "poor," It is a nod to the financial difficulties faced by families who spend a large portion of their income on their children's education; "Almost half of S. Korean parents consider themselves edu-poor," *Hankyoreh*, June 16, 2016. http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/748517.html

Table 3: Advantages and Disadvantages of Standardization Policy

<p>Advantages of high school standardization policy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● eliminating disharmony and discrimination among students ● preventing the potential ability of poor students from dying out ● carrying out “whole-person” education by reducing the burden of college entrance exam ● helping central government provide financial support, guide and control school curriculum ● reducing the burden of private education expenses ● no rational evidence on decline in the scholastic ability of students
<p>Disadvantages of high school standardization policy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● leveling standards down due to fall in educational effectiveness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● difficulty to design the curricula according to different abilities and aptitudes of students ● insufficiency to train talented individuals ● disappearance of a long tradition of leading private schools from a withdrawal of their autonomy. ● non-guaranteed educational option and efficiency ● collapse of public education with the prevalence of private tutoring ● continuous academic burden on students and school parents, despite the abolition of quality gaps among high schools

We can divide various arguments for and against the standardization policy into four controversial issues. First is a controversy over “downward-leveling” of students’ scholastic ability. The gist of this first argument is that the ideal of equality of educational opportunity is improved but educational excellence is progressively degraded. A massive increase in the number of high school students by the enforcement of standardization policy could not only cause decline in quality of education, but dumb down school education itself by giving undue value on college prep due to fiercer competition for college entrance exams, once known as “examination hell.” However, the left-wing proponents of standardization policy refute this thesis called “paradox of standardization,” on account of having no empirical evidence on functional relation between downward-leveling and standardization.

On the contrary, they insist that scholastic ability of students in standardized areas is better than that of students in non-standardized areas. According to various survey results, the academic achievement of first and third graders in standardized high school zone is higher than that of first and third graders in non-standardized zone. Nevertheless, it’s worthy of notice that the grades of top-ranked students are going down, while those of low and middle-ranked students are moving up, as compared with their entrance score. From all these data, the standardized schools are relatively unfavorable to top-ranked students, but very advantageous for low and middle-ranked students. Anyway, the agreement for the hot issue like standardization cannot be easily reached through several research papers, so more pluralistic and multi-dimensional researches are needed by many scholars, judging from the fact that the number of students with low marks or giving up their studies is increasing these days.

Second is a controversy over the violation on the “autonomy” of private high schools and the hindrance to the development of private schools. According to right-wing opponents of standardization policy, it’s relatively difficult for private high schools to exercise their autonomy under the current standardization system. If so, is the abolition of standardization policy directly contributing to expanding the autonomy of private schools? It’s realistically almost impossible because of high rate of private schools (nearly half of high school students go to private schools), and because more than 95% of high schools receive government

subsidies, regardless of public and private schools in South Korea. Accordingly, it is more recommendable to establish an “institution device” where private schools can run professional/autonomous management on the premise of activating school-base management under deregulation,¹² instead of abolishing more than 40-year standardization policy in operation.

Third is a controversy over the deprivation of the “option” of students and school parents. Some gifted students are deprived of their rights to go to a prestigious school by interest and ability; therefore, special-purpose high schools (science and foreign language high schools) and autonomous private schools are introduced as an alternative to standardized schools, as mentioned above.¹³ However, progressive left-wing camps are solid against the extension of those elite high schools, because education (of excellence) is more likely to serve as a convenient means to inherit wealth and power of parents under the pretext of securing the diversity of educational options. Now, another renewed controversy over the abolition of special-purpose and autonomous private high schools is intensified with the entry of left-wing government preaching a gospel of equality.

Forth is a controversy over the weakening of national competitiveness by standardized education. According to right-wing camps, it's crucial to develop creative thinking and information utilization ability of students by abolishing the standardization policy, in order to cope well with the advent of knowledge-based society, However, under the current college entrance exam (hell) system, non-standardized education system is also risky to produce conflicting results by instigating students and parents' desire for top-ranked colleges through intensive cramming education, far from being creative specialty and aptitude-oriented education. The reason why *hagwons* (cram schools) in Gangnam were and still are capable of creating an invincible myth called “special Gangnam school district” consists in the “disruptions of classroom”: that is, collapse of public education.

Ironically, the polarization of Korean education is partially a byproduct of ambiguous educational egalitarianism. Teaching students all together regardless of their scholastic ability in one classroom is the current address of Korean education. As a matter of course, teachers give their lecture down to the level of middle and low class students. Thus, top-class students rely on *hagwon* more than regular school education. In other words, public education does not work well, so students are more and more dependent on private tutoring. The accessibility to private education market depends on the economic power of parents; therefore, socio-economic polarization is directly linked to educational polarization. The fever for non-standardized specialty-purpose and autonomous high schools being exclusively monopolized by wealthy middle school students in Gangnam shows well the realistic need of revising (not abolishing) the current standardization policy immersed in the logic of equality completely divorced from reality.¹⁴ I believe an old controversy over maintenance or abolition about a policy operating for 43 years is a time-consuming process. So, what does go in the right direction is to maintain its basic framework while discussing how to overcome its defects.

¹² The school-based management firstly begun as a countermeasure on decreased learning ability of students and failure of schools in US in 1980s. In Korea it was introduced in 1995 to increase the autonomy of unit-school, escaping from bureaucratic, regulation-driven administration of Ministry of Education and education offices; Kim, H. H. (2004). [in Korean] Improving school's responsibility through school-based management, *Journal of Educational Administration*, 22(1), pp. 47-48.

¹³ Autonomous private schools - in keeping with the name - can exert more autonomy in the selection of students and the curriculum operation, instead of receiving the government's financial support.

¹⁴ It's worth noting that the number of the cities adopting the high school standardization policy has increased. 16 cities adopted standardization policy up till 2000, but now 36 cities operate it.

Finally, let's deal with the abolition movement against special-purpose and autonomous private high schools, in relation to standardized schools in great majority. It's aimed to remove "top-to-down school ranking," in the name of equal education opportunities. Left-wing camps consider the enforcement of such elite private schools as a model case of "privatization of education," They insist strongly that the state shifts all responsibilities (consolidation of poor public education system, expansion of educational finances, increase of the number of teachers, and curriculum improvement, etc.) in the hands of private individuals. They further denounce that those noble private high schools only for high-class students - due to high costs of tuition - are degraded as a means to reproduce latter-day unequal class relationships (while sending their children to those schools).

Nonetheless, the Korean case of autonomous private schools cannot be considered a model case of privatization, because the purpose of setting up them - after the implementation of standardization policy in 1974 - is to put some private schools suffering an "identity crisis" back on normal track. So, they are fundamentally different from the cases of privatization in the Anglo-American education regimes. That is to say, the privatization of public education is not a problem of private schools, but a problem of public schools run by public finances.

The reason why left-wing camps publicly criticize the autonomous private schools in question by deliberately tying them altogether under the banner of neoliberalism is firstly that neoliberalism permits autonomy of schools and options of students & parents. Secondly, they are worrying about a worst-case scenario that autonomy and/or options harm the equality of educational opportunities. So, they make any system allowing autonomy and/or option their main target of criticism.

For reference, 5.31 Education reform proposal of 1995¹⁵ and the following attempted reforms enabled a critical shift from a conventional "supplier-centered" perspective to a "customer-centered" approach in education. Since South Korea's financial crisis in 1997-98, Korean education reforms have been established at three levels: (1) wage and personnel systems based on a meritocracy, (2) flexibility of employment and (3) enhancement of competitiveness by appraisal system. Most of all, the introduction of performance-related pay system of teachers met strongest resistance being singled out as the most neoliberal among others. According to left-wing camps' claim, such winner-take-all system does not only promote serious social disharmony among teachers, but the criterion on work performance appraisal is also arbitrary. Considering it as an oppressive tactic of controlling teachers they attack neoliberalism as helping to strengthen, not curb the role of the state to control labor sector.

Let us take a concrete example to serve as an illustration. For instance, the reduction in educational finances was a target of criticism, but it was made as an emergency measure under the circumstances beyond our control (the IMF bailout package imposed upon South Korea), not as part of marketisation of education.¹⁶ However, left-wing camps continue to criticize that our conservative education authorities are watching for an opportunity to reduce educational finances or to privatize the education, a long-range project of the state, because the latter support neoliberal policies. But it's difficult to say that Korean education policies, such as

¹⁵ The 5.31 Education reform was established on May 31, 1995 by the "presidential advisory council" former South Korean president Kim young-sam (1927-2015) set up with great zeal posing himself as an "educational president." It was a large "package" program which included primary and secondary schools and colleges for achieving three goals: autonomy, diversity and globalization.

¹⁶ The extension of educational budget was originally scheduled in the education reform plans, but it was not implemented for want of financial backing.

legalization of the Korean Teachers & Educational Workers' Union (KTU), overall compulsory and free of charge system of middle school education, extension of standardized education areas, preparation for free pre-school education, and law revision of private schools, etc. are neoliberal en bloc. Many of them are even against the tide of neoliberalism, but left-wing camps use their anti-neoliberal objection as a counter-ideology to organize warrior-like teachers.¹⁷

CONCLUSION: Problem-solving Directions to reduce the education divide

From the National liberation Day in 1945 to the present, Korean education system is characterized by two phenomena leading to educational polarization: rapid expansion of high education and excessive growth of private education.

The college entrance rate increased from 11.1% in 1980 into 71.1% in 2005 (+ 60% in 25 years). This means 8 out of 10 high school graduates go to college, but it has declined from its peak in 2005 into 70.8% in 2015 and 69.5% in 2016. On the other hand, the per capita private education expenses have continuously increased by 256,000 wons: an increase of 12,000 wons compared with the previous year. The wealthier tends to spend more money in private education.¹⁸ This craze for private education is the product of overheated fever for elite college admission. According to Uk-whan O, the rapid growth of high education and the craze for elite universities originated in “too romantic and optimistic” view of education.¹⁹

Have you heard about the “*Sampo* (give-up) generation,” a neologism in Korea referring to a generation that gives up courtship, marriage, and having kids?²⁰ There is also more extreme *N-po* generation that gives up all the things that are of value in life. The barriers young people are facing are reflected in their self-deprecating language. Internet communities made up of young people are creating new slang at a fast pace. Words alluding to current slang such as “dirt spoon” in comparison to “golden spoon” (someone who was born in a wealthy household).²¹ In keeping alarms on the increase in the number of young people “not in education, employment, or training (NEET),” For lack of space, I’d like to propose the directions to reduce educational divide and to restore social mobility as follows.

First is the “normalization of public education” on the brink of collapse to re-establish a “educational ladder of hope” by making ① more focused and concerted response to the main school subjects (English and mathematics) in high demand for private tutoring, ② “customized-service” education in accordance with elementary, middle and high schools, ③ establishment of infrastructure of laws & institutions, ④ improvement in the quality of school education, ⑤ improvement of curriculum and CAST, ⑥ pan-social and nation-wide efforts of reducing private education.

Second is the reform of college entrance-oriented education system. Korean education tends to encourage academic sectarianism and diplomaism by placing undue emphasis on the outcomes over the process. For reference, “a degree (from elite university) is equal to a good job, (regardless of whether the outcome of the process was fair or unfair).” Such a simple deterministic equation of success was also an endemic problem in Hong Kong. Hong Kong’s education system was similar to Korea’s (high education fever, Confucian cultural zone, and importance of human resources, etc.), and was locked in the traps of cramming method of

¹⁷ Nah, B. H. (2003), *op.cit.*, pp. 303-304.

¹⁸ “Social Indicator in 2016,” *Korea Joongang Daily*, March 23, 2017.

¹⁹ O, U. K. (1990). [in Korean] *Korean Education and Inequality*, Seoul: Kyoyookboo, pp. 95-123.

²⁰ This group is similar to the *Satori* generation in Japan, and generally overlaps in age with Western millennials.

²¹ “Dirt spoon” refers to young people who grew up in a poor home, and have little financial support.

teaching, private education fever, and monolithic competition to enter La Porte Étroite (elite universities). However, Hong Kong has pursued successful education reforms since early 2000s, through the changes of elementary and secondary school education and college entrance exam. The question is a “change of education ladder.” When we talk about “dragons from gutter,” we earnestly hope the rise of social status through education. Nevertheless, the ladder on which dragons ascend is very limited in reality. Only few can succeed. The key here is a “diversification of success paths” through a “diversification of education process”!

Third is to alleviate the “gaps” among schools in urban/rural societies by improving the quality of school education and drawing up measures to institutionally support low-income student groups and poorly performing schools where lots of students remain in the lower ranks or drop out. What’s more, the ghettoization of some standardized high schools began to emerge as a serious community problem, by so-called “rankization of high schools” in order of priority: autonomous private high schools, special-purpose (science and foreign language) high schools, science-centered high schools, and finally standardized high schools in majority. As mentioned above, the current left-wing government is trying to abolish non-standardized elite high schools to fulfill their election campaign. However, is it really reasonable to revoke all of them, in spite of the objections of students and school parents? Of course, we should reject vertical diversification (rankization), but support horizontal diversifications (diversification of schools and individual education).

Fourth is to raise national competitiveness in education in the global age of fierce competition for creativity and cooperative problem-solving ability. In my opinion, educational equality and excellence are two sides of the same coin, because both 95 % of regular education and 5% of excellent education form the backbone of education. It is neither necessary to scarify the few for the many, nor the many for the few. To survive in competitive global society, gifted and talented education (GATE) is not only essential, but the rational settlement of education divide called ‘a social time bomb’ is also very important for social integration/solidarity and democratic development. Nevertheless, till now, anyone could not cure the ruinous disease of the whole nation named “private education fever,” including students sleeping during the class! In South Korea, social divide is prevalent, so its solution plans are different according to right-wing and left-wing camps. For example, conservative right-wing camps criticize poor management and low responsibility of standardized public education. However, the problems of standardized education are not in the indiscriminative distribution of students by lottery system, but in the (still-unsolved) monolithic, standardized education programs. On the other hand, progressive left-wing camps blame too excessive academic elitism and competitiveness in education swayed under the control of global market principle. Meanwhile, our education faces crisis of identity and appropriateness.

Korean education policy tends to be changed in less than five years (presidential five-year term)! Learning a lesson from the failures of previous government is valuable, but it is not necessary to go against the stream. Some radicals with a background in political activism even do not hesitate to instigate the so-called educational divide/polarization as a way of gaining public sympathy. Education is often cited to be a far-sighted national policy in Chinese character cultural sphere, but its policies are so frequently changed that Korean people don’t trust anymore. Moreover, it’s an interesting fact that previous two left-wing governments adopted more neoliberal policies in the name of ‘reforms.’ They were in more advantageous position to placate or suppress social resistance positioning themselves as “democratic forces.” On the contrary, the policies of previous two right-wing governments were rather pro-leftist, because there are too many outer variables to follow ideological lines in global society. Therefore, hopefully, we can expect the possibility of building a solidaristic/cooperative

leapfrogging strategy between two opposed camps to jointly cultivate future-oriented talented individuals (democratic citizens and enterprising persons), beyond untying the Gordian Knot of private education.

Reference

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