

# Why the Korean School System Is Not Superior

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IN TRYING TO ASSEMBLE my thoughts on comparing Korean and American schools, I have to start with my personal experience. In fact, please keep the following in mind: I am not better than you in evaluating education systems; I am just a middle-aged man who lives next door and has 9- and 11-year-old kids. This article does not aim to define the Korean school system or rigidly evaluate its pros and cons. My own analysis of some of the ideology behind the Korean school system is entirely based on experience, rather than any formal knowledge.

Midway through my first year as an assistant professor at a Korean medical school, I happened to see a medical school applicant with a distinctive career in the room of the dean. Her CV revealed that she had graduated from a college with a very high score and had done medical research for a couple of years afterwards. I watched as the dean reviewed the CV and then told her that, although her medical education eligibility test (MEET) score was satisfactory, we needed "more time to consider." As we left the room, the dean shook her hand and said, "We'll see how you do in our school." However, when we filled out the meeting sheet outside of the room, I pointed out to the dean that he had not signed the sheet. "Don't bother," he said, pointing downward in an exaggerated manner. "She won't be coming back because she could not even pass the document review process." I realized that she, unfortunately, had not graduated from any of the top universities in Korea. I felt a peculiar mixture of shame and disappointment. I should have been glad that I was able to become a faculty member in the university hospital with a "bad" college diploma. But I was also troubled. I recalled the oppressive sense of futility I had felt as a college applicant when I got "not very high" scores in my high school days.

You can see it these days at nearly every home in the Asian countries, including Korea and China: young prodigal kids, sitting at a desk studying English or mathematics by themselves, accompanied by a dutiful parent or private tutor as they take mock tests. If you live next to a Korean or Chinese family, you may notice this duo every day, rain or shine, summer, winter, spring and fall. Thanks to God, Alex and Jane (they are my obedient 9- and 11-year-old kids) look as if they have a promising future. Every time they learn something new there are smiles all around, and after that, it's almost as if they charge to their next test because they are so excited that they can hardly wait to have the highest score again. Maybe a bright future awaits my kids, maybe not, but it certainly seems as if they are going to enjoy life one way or the other.

Unfortunately, there is another pair of kids and their parents. Of course they sit at the desk after school every day. They are always serious, business-like and quite frankly, gloomy and without any smiles. Seeing them studying something would remind one of military basic training, with the young kids playing the role of the recruits and the parent marching around yelling as if he were a rookie instructor. The kids are already very good students in school but I cannot imagine "learning" is ever anything that they would mistake as fun.

Everyone has already heard about the article by Amy Chua, a Yale law professor and self-described "Tiger Mother," explaining the Chinese Way of raising her children. I happened to finish reading her book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* during the writing of this article. Her stories of never accepting a grade lower than an A, of insisting on hours of mathematics and English study, of not allowing play dates, sleepovers, television, computer games, or even school plays, have left many readers outraged.

"To be perfectly honest, I know that a lot of Asian parents are secretly shocked and horrified by many aspects of Western parenting, including how much time Westerners allow their kids to waste — hours on Facebook and computer games — and in some ways, how poorly they prepare them for the future," she said. "It's a tough world out there."

I try not to forget that everyone's opinion is simply that: their opinion. It is filtered through experiences (or lack thereof) and breadth and depth of knowledge, but it is, and should be, just their own personal opinion. As a typical Korean parent who thinks and behaves in a totally oriental way, I do agree 99 percent with her opinion on Western parenting. Nevertheless, I always wonder if her kids would become happy with merely surviving in this tough world. In Korea, public schools are like the homes in which the "Tiger" teachers live. The traditional school system in Korea was influenced primarily, though not exclusively, by China. Over the centuries, Koreans have learned Confucianism at school in which such "Tiger" teaching and parenting are considered standard. After the Korean War, the Korean school system suffered dramatic changes reflecting those established under the United States occupation. Because of the huge amount of influences from the United States, the current Korean school seems to be a product finished with hardware from the United States and software made by Confucians.

As you may already know, President Barack Obama has praised the Korean education system more than a few times. "Our children spend over a month less in school than children in South Korea every year. That's no way to prepare them for a 21st century economy." This comes as a shock to many in Korea, land of the "goose father," international school controversies, constant bitching about private tutoring and never-ending talk of public education reform. According to one Korean news source, "Obama's remarks came as a surprise to many South Koreans, as the country's education system has been under constant public criticism due to its lack of creativity and heavy dependence on private tutoring."

As a result of spending more days in school and many more hours preparing for tests, the Korean system has produced results. Korea has higher high school graduation rates (for those aged 25-34) and university graduation rates than the United States, and while Korea places in the upper ranks of international academic evaluations, the United States finishes in the bottom ranks. Korean students do get high scores on standardized tests, and apparently that is all that counts.

Of course, the model of school systems varies from country to country because education is affected by the social culture, and because there can be no common solution. One might question whether it would make a difference if you sent American kids to school for the same number of days as Korean kids without first adopting Korea's cultural enthusiasm for education. In fact, and I know I'm stepping onto sensitive ground here, Asian-American kids seem to do just fine in the United States' educational system, despite its many flaws.

As a Korean who recently moved to the United States, I see differences between Korean and American schools. In Korea, physical education is not considered important as it is not regarded to be education, and therefore many schools lack high-quality gymnasiums and varsity athletics. Entering top universities is considered by many a top priority. Diplomas from those top universities would promise us survival in the tough world out there. Most students enrolled in high school apply to colleges at the end of the year. Students will have to take the College Scholastic Ability Test (collectively termed the entrance examination). The curriculum of most schools is structured around the content of the entrance examination. Unlike the American SAT, this test can be taken only once a year and requires intensive studying, some starting preparation as early as kindergarten. No wonder the test lacks subjects like sports, arts, music, or even poetry.

For several decades, the university a South Korean high school graduate attended was perhaps

the single most important factor in determining his or her life chances. Thus, entrance into top universities was the focus of intense energy, dedication, and self-sacrifice. Those who failed to enter the prestigious institutions are eventually forced to enter average universities or colleges. Because college entrance depends upon ranking high in objectively graded examinations, high school students face an "examination hell," a harsh regimen of endless cramming and rote memorization of facts that is probably even more severe than the one faced by their counterparts in Japan. Unlike the requirements of most universities in the United States, their ultimate goal is a matter of importance not just for the elite, but for the substantial portion of the population with middle-class aspirations. The Koreans' rate of entrance to university or graduate school was 71 percent in 2010, greatly exceeding the OECD average of 56 percent; those who failed faced dramatically reduced prospects for social and economic advancement.

Most observers agree that South Korea's spectacular progress in modernization and economic growth since the Korean War is largely attributable to the willingness of individuals to invest a large amount of resources in education: the improvement of "human capital." The traditional esteem for the educated man, originally confined to the Confucian scholar as a cultured generalist, now extend to scientists, technicians, and others working with specialized knowledge. Furthermore, statistics demonstrate the success of South Korea's national education programs. In 1945 the adult literacy rate was estimated at 22 percent; by 1970 adult literacy was 87.6 percent, and by the late 1980s various sources estimated it at around 93 percent. South Korean students have performed exceedingly well in international competitions in mathematics and science.

It is problematic that entering top universities is the ultimate goal for many Korean students. Then they would be enjoying freedom after entering "heaven," as they are successful in escaping hell. One critic of the Korean educational system, Dr. Samuel Kim, a senior research scholar at the East Asian Institute of Columbia University, reported that 44 percent of Korean students who enter "top" American universities drop out before graduating. This is much higher than the dropout rate for students from China (25 percent), India (21 percent) and even the 34 percent dropout rate for American students at the same universities. Essentially, years of extra tutoring prepares Korean students for college entrance exams but not for acquiring a college education. That is, Koreans are so good on international test scores because they work overtime being taught to pass these tests. When they enter the real academic world in college, they do not have the skills necessary to succeed. According to Dr. Kim, such a high dropout rate is largely attributable to Korean parents forcing their children to study rather than participate in extracurricular activities, an essential part of overseas education for foreign students to acclimate themselves to American society and get a good job in the long run. According to the thesis, Korean students consume 75 percent of their time available for studying, while they allocate only 25 percent to extracurricular activities such as community service. In contrast, American students and those from other countries tend to equally share their time for both study and other activities.

Social emphasis on education was not, however, without its problems, as it tended to accentuate class differences. In the late 1980s, possession of a college degree was considered necessary for entering the middle class; there were no alternative pathways of social advancement outside of higher education, with the possible exception of a military career. People without a college education, including skilled workers with vocational school backgrounds, often were treated as second-class citizens by their white-collar, college-educated managers, despite the importance of their skills for economic development. Intense competition for places at the most prestigious universities, the sole gateway into elite circles, promoted, like the old Confucian system, a sterile emphasis on rote memorization in order to pass secondary school and college entrance examinations. Particularly after a dramatic expansion of college enrollments in the early 1980s, South Korea faced the problem of what to do about a large number of young people kept in school

for a long time, usually at great sacrifice to themselves and their families, and then faced with limited job opportunities because their skills were not marketable.

One argument that the leaders of the United States always seem to make in defense of their proposed "school reforms" is that they have to prepare the next generation for 21st Century jobs. Supposedly that is what Korea is doing. Korean children can become the world's greatest experts on test taking, and some can succeed in entering top universities as they always desired. However, then they finally realize that it is not the end of the tunnel or the gate to a better life. I wonder if President Obama really wants his kids to go to a Korean school. Is he really such a hardcore parent at his home, the White House? Does Mrs. Obama follow the tiger mother's way? All I can say is does that really matter? Sad. Give American schools a little more credit. As a Korean parent with kids attending American public schools, seeing their American friends at school, there is little to distinguish their desire to learn from that of Korean school students. Often, in fact, there is no distinction at all. Except for languages they speak, and needless to say for their skin colors, they have same potential for learning and achieving anything. Why most haven't is another matter. Regardless of where you fall in the debate, understanding the pros and cons of the Korean school system will help with your decision. With that said, Alex and Jane (my lovely kids, if you remember) are not looking forward to wandering back into the competition that is the Korean school system, especially in this bad economy. But the fact is, they couldn't avoid it even if they wanted to.

## **Footnotes**