

THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE KOREAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The Korean education system has been raising eyebrows around the globe for its high test scores and public education rankings. Many countries are eager to learn what has led to this quantitative success story and attempt to duplicate it in their own schools. However, in order to gain a better understanding of what make education in Korea so successful in terms of raw numbers, one must delve into the nations' Confucian history and examine its post-war economy. Only then can one truly see the Korean education system's strengths and weaknesses.



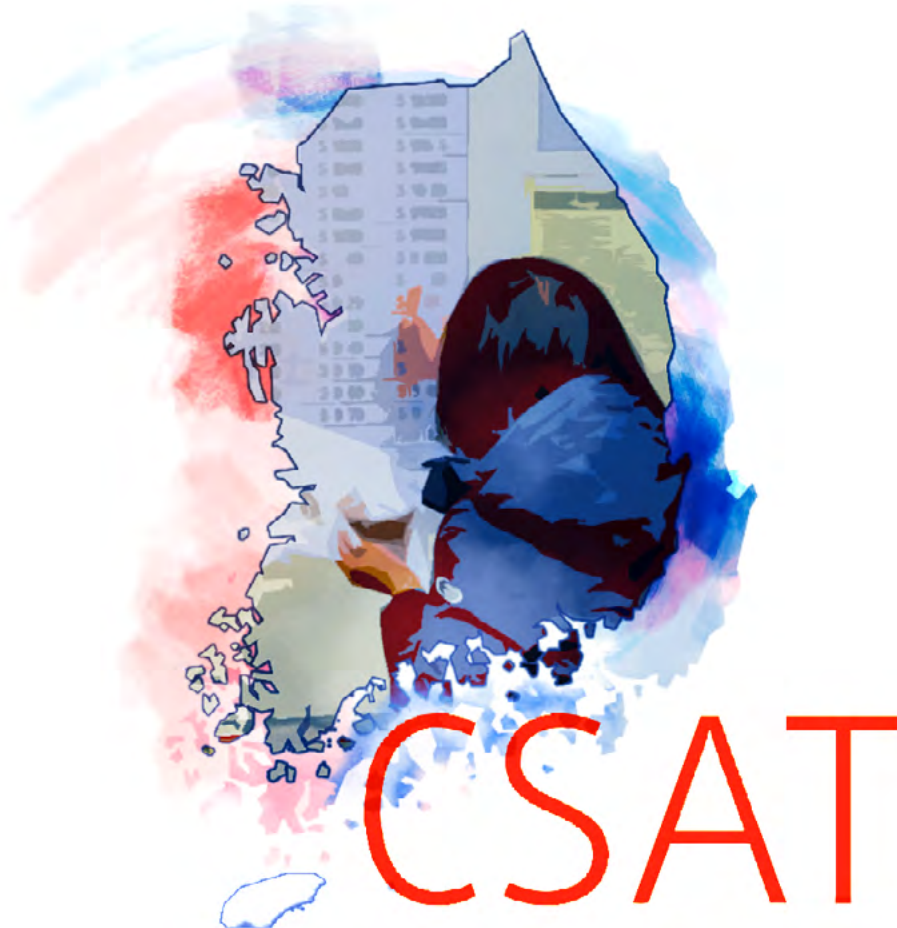
INTRODUCTION

This paper will utilize the author's 18 years of experience living and teaching in South Korea as well as academic research and news reports to attempt to shed some light onto how Korean students continue to lead international rankings and produce high scores on standardized tests. Through this, readers will also begin to understand the ripple effects that accompany a system that focuses on preparing third-year high school students for the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), known in Korea as the *Suneung*.

The first section will explore Korea's Confucian origins and how they have created a culture that values education and places teachers in a higher social position than in many other countries. We will then look at the role the Park Chunghee administration played in creating demand for education in post-war South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s.

The second section explains why the CSAT is such a high-stakes test and highlights some attempts that the government has made to reduce its overall importance. It also shows that public school classes have become test-prep lessons, creating a need for supplementary education. The third section discusses the role that private education plays in filling that need.

The last section examines what working for Korean companies is like and how Confucian culture is still at play, long after students graduate.



EXAMINATION HELL

It was during the Chosun Dynasty in 1392 that Confucianism was adopted as Korea's state ideology. At that time, education was limited to the ruling class, or yangban, that made up approximately 15% of the population (Sorensen, 1994). Following the Japanese Occupation from 1910 to 1945, Korea lacked trained teachers and an infrastructure to teach the masses. The Basic Education Law that was passed in 1949 provided for six years of free education that would begin at age 7, three years of noncompulsory middle school that could charge tuition, three years of noncompulsory high school that could charge tuition, and four years of tuitioned college. In the 1950s the increased demand for public education created crowded classrooms and led to the creation of comprehensive entrance exams for middle and high school to help control enrollment numbers. The middle school entrance exam was abolished in 1969 in an effort to make middle school compulsory but strong competition to enter the top high schools and universities continues to exist and the concept of "examination hell" still lingers today.

Since 1945 and especially after the Korean War from 1950 until 1953, "education fever" has gripped Korea with demand far outpacing supply for spots in the top-ranked high schools and universities. As Sorenson wrote in 2004, "Status today is mostly achieved rather than inherited, and amount of education is a determinant of status independent of its contribution to economic success. "This trend continues today. According to a November 2016 OECD report on Korean education, "Korean tertiary education has high participation and high attainment rates. The proportion of 25-34 year olds who have attained tertiary education is the highest in the OECD (69%, compared to the OECD average of 42%)".

Former U.S. President Barack Obama praised the Korean education system more than a few times saying, "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." Hearing this can be very frustrating for foreign teachers working in South Korea who see the stress and fatigue that rote learning and test preparation can have on young students (Koo, 2014).

Luckily, the government does recognize this problem and has taken steps to reduce the stress levels of children in a country where youth suicide rates are some of the highest in the world (Yoon, 2015). For example, beginning in 2016, middle schools in Korea are offering a "Free Semester System", during which students will not focus on test scores and engage in learning methods such as discussions, outdoor activities, and team projects (Park, 2013). Yoo Jung-sup, an official of the Ministry of Education told the Korea JoongAng Daily, "The way students are scored is not based on how they perform on multiple choice tests, but how much and in what way they engage in discussions and team projects." This shows a keen awareness of some of the perceived deficiencies in the Korean education system and it will be very interesting to see if the program is successful over the coming years. However, the key issue that needs to be addressed is the all-important CSAT and its effect on how subjects are taught.

THE CSAT AND IT'S RIPPLE EFFECTS

Korea and testing feel synonymous to anyone who lives here. According to Sorensen, it was during the Park Chunghee administration in the 1960s and 1970s that centralized state exams became commonplace. It is often thought that having a centralized exam is a positive thing as it creates a level playing field for applicants from around the country, however Sorensen writes that it can also be a means for the State to control what is to be taught.

In Korea, universities can be divided into the SKY universities (Seoul, Korea, and Yonsei) and science universities such as KAIST and POSTECH at the top, a secondary group of universities mainly based in Seoul, and lower-ranked universities around the rest of the country. If a student is not able to attend a top university, their chances of being successful and achieving social mobility decrease and it is CSAT scores that play a major role in what university a student is eligible to attend (Diamond, 2016; Lee & Shouse, 2011). A youth employment rate of 11.2% adds extra pressure to get into a top school and move into a large firm or a job in the government (Kim, 2017).

The format of the CSAT is multiple choice, like the SAT and ACT in the United States. However, unlike the United States, the test is only given once a year and public school teachers feel pressure to strictly teach to the test including teaching test-taking skills in the third year. One of the main reasons for this is pressure from parents to adequately prepare their children to get high scores on the test. In English classes, for example, lessons and activities that do not focus on vocabulary acquisition and grammatical knowledge are considered a waste of time as productive skills are not tested. Due to the format of the test, receptive skills are the focus and, thus, they have also become the focus of the curriculum. English classes play a lot of sample recordings and have students read texts and take practice tests. Interestingly, airplanes are not allowed to take off and land in Korea during the English listening portion of the CSAT.

Korea had planned to create a homegrown English test to rival TOEIC and TOEFL and lessen the demand for foreign-made tests. It could also serve as the English section of the CSAT, and provide a test that actually included productive English skills. That project was dubbed NEAT, the National English Ability Test. Millions of government dollars were poured into the project but it was delayed and eventually scrapped when officials found out how difficult it was to train a sufficient number of evaluators to score the speaking and writing samples consistently for such a large number of students across the nation.

Another issue with NEAT was that public school teachers' did not feel prepared to actually teach speaking and writing skills in the classroom (Jung & Jung, 2014). They had been trained to teach receptive skills and adding productive skills came with a number of challenges, namely class sizes of 30-40 students and a low number of contact hours per week.

A third issue for NEAT was political. The test was the brainchild of the Lee Myungbak administration, which was widely considered pro-English. When Lee was replaced by Park Geun-hye (the daughter of Park Chunghee) in 2013, her administration did not share the fervor for English education that her predecessor displayed and was not willing to fight to keep the test alive.

The final nail in the coffin for NEAT was the backlash from private school owners. If NEAT became an official part of the CSAT, then it would become the duty of public school teachers to include speaking and writing skills in their classes, in theory reducing the need for students to practice these skills in after-school academies. Private school owners in Korea constitute a powerful lobbying force (Bae, 2008) and their objections to this new test and the changes it would create were another problem the Korean government did not want to deal with.

Even though the CSAT remains a critical stepping stone for many high school students attempting to enter the top Korean universities, the government is keenly aware of the issue and has been taking steps to attempt to reduce its monopolizing importance. According to a November 2016 OECD report:

With the introduction of the University Entrance Liberalisation Policy in 2008, universities were able to accept students in accordance with their own admissions criteria, such as students' school records, College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) grades, practical skills tests and essays. This reduced the intense focus on CSAT grades, but it also increased the complexity of university admissions, which prompted demand for further improvement.

Also in 2008, an Admissions Officer System was initiated for tertiary institutions, to tackle the problem of universities considering only CSAT rank when granting admission and to reduce high household expenditure on private education to prepare students for university entrance exams. Admissions Officers are professionally trained specialists who examine applications for university entry based on a more well-rounded view of students' talents and abilities and previous extracurricular activities, in addition to their academic achievement. This allows greater autonomy for universities to admit students with talents in particular fields who may otherwise not have qualified for entry through the CSAT. However, critics claimed that including students' performance on out-of-school activities as major criteria for admissions prompted an increase in household expenditure on private education in these activities.

To resolve these issues, in October 2013, the Korean government established the University Entrance Simplification Policy. It prompts universities to adopt more streamlined screening systems focusing on admission pathways based most closely on their own requirements, such as systems centred on school records, essays, the CSAT or practical skills. In 2015, the government also revised the Admissions Officer system so that out-of-school activities are not considered in university applications. Instead, the focus is on students' records, a self-introduction letter and a recommendation letter.

As of 2016, 160 universities have adopted the Admissions Officer System, and students' school records have now become the most influential factor in the university admissions process. In 2016, 57.4% of students were admitted through the pathway based on their school records, and 28.8% were admitted based on their CSAT results.

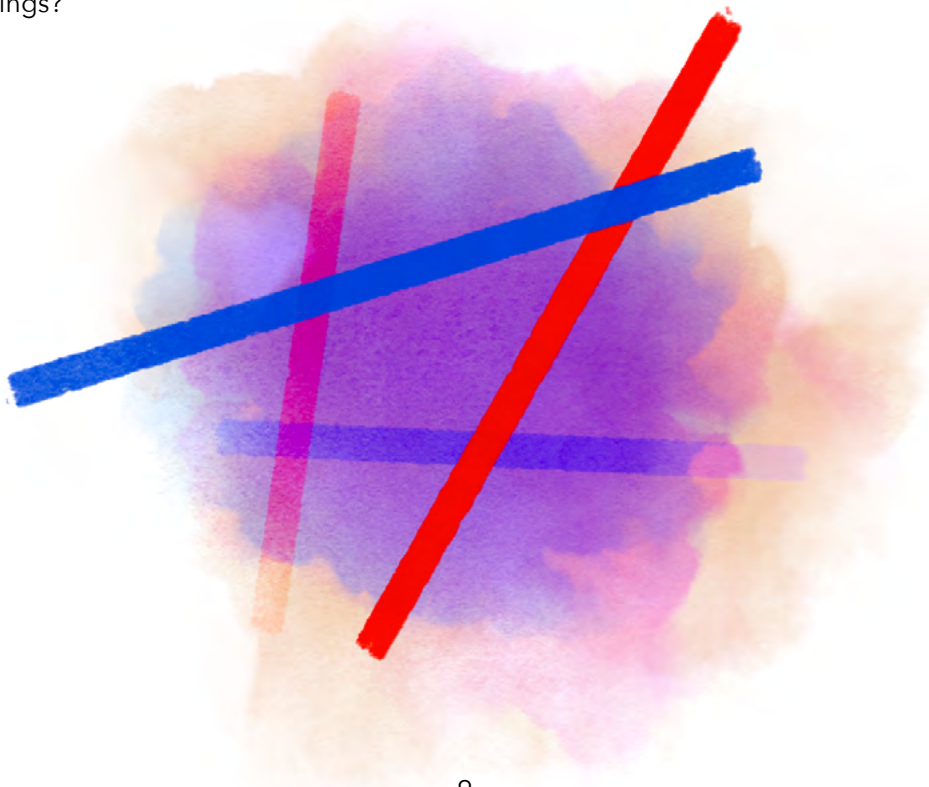
Additionally, the Ministry of Education announced that from 2017 it would change the form of scoring for the English portion of the test from a relative scale to an absolute scale (Kim, 2014). This has two main advantages. More students can achieve perfect scores if they do well, which should reduce competition slightly and hopefully shift the emphasis from doing better than one's classmates to simply doing well on the test. This is a small step but an important beginning.

PRIVATE EDUCATION IS BOOMING

According to Bray and Lykins, over the past forty years, the growth in demand for private education in Korea can be attributed to the importance of the CSAT and other high-stakes examinations, perceived deficiencies in public education (especially in poor or rural areas), and a combination of smaller family sizes and more disposable income. In 2012, 80.9% of Korean primary school students were receiving some type of supplementary education according to a report from the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology cited in an OECD report from 2014.

In 2015, 68.8% of Korean students received some kind of private tutoring and the average monthly spending was 355,000 Korean won or approximately 275 Euros (Ock, 2016). It is interesting to discuss the need for private education with both Korean parents and Korean teachers. They often smile and chuckle to themselves when it is pointed out that there is a level of distrust and low perceived quality of public education in Korea and yet it is the public education system that must prepare their children for the CSAT. It seems that many parents understand and agree that public schools must sacrifice creativity and skills-based education in order to focus on test-taking skills and the rote learning that produces better test scores.

Another thing that Korean students must sacrifice to be the best is sleep. For many high school students regular classes end at 4pm but the long lines of buses outside are ready to take them to private academies where they might study until 11pm or later. This leads to the highest level of stress in children in the OECD (Hu, 2015). Is it worth sacrificing children's health and happiness to achieve top rankings?



MORE ISN'T BETTER

Surely things get easier after graduation, when Koreans enter the workforce. Actually, no. Korea workers have some of the longest workdays in the OECD. They worked an average of 2069 hours per year in 2016, compared to 1783 in the U.S., 1713 in Japan, and an overall OECD average of 1764 (OECD, 2017). Yet, when productivity is measured by GDP per hours worked, Korea is well below the OECD average (OECD, 2017).

The lack of productivity can be attributed in many ways back to the Confucian culture. Age is important and elders are to be respected. This leads to ideas and possible innovations, which could have been suggested by younger workers, being ignored or not even shared with management. It also explains why Korean students rarely raise their hands to ask questions in classes.

Another issue is attendance at department work dinners or *hoisiks*. Attendance and heavy drinking are strongly encouraged in order to increase a spirit of teambuilding. Some joke that working for a large company in Korea is like the obligatory 26-month military service requirement for Korean men, bonds are built over suffering. Suffering is also common the morning after a long night of drinking and productivity the next morning is often stifled. Change here, however, is also taking place. Companies are reducing the number of work dinners and employees feel more comfortable citing family obligations and not attending them. Also, Samsung was in the news last year for changing the way employees address one another, moving from using job titles (and indicating status) to *-nim*, which could loosely be translated to "mister/missus" which is more equal (Cho, 2016).

Korean companies such as Samsung and Hyundai are lauded around the world for their success and pointed to when attempting to prove that the Korean education system can't be so bad. They make popular products after all. However, Korea's export-based manufacturing economy of the 1980s that dragged the country out of poverty was built on the premise of taking existing products and making them more cheaply, something China is leading the world in today. In an interview with the Korea Times, the creative director of Interbrand said, "People around the globe are already satisfied with the quality of (Korean) products and services. But they (Korean companies) need to take an emotional journey to reach the next step. Already, the world believes that (Korean) products are good, design is good. So the next stage should be telling customers why they need to choose it and why they should want to have it. That's the power of storytelling and creative thinking." (Park, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Korea's love affair with education can and should be a good thing. However, taking a hard look at Korean classrooms and workplaces shows that there is still a lot of room for improvement in the area of education, international testing rankings notwithstanding. The biggest companies prefer to hire graduates from the top universities. This creates intense competition for students to get the highest scores on the CSAT in order to gain admission to these schools. This competition leads to parents spending large parts of the incomes on private education and teachers feeling restricted in what and how they can teach. As one parent of a high school student put it, "Korea has few natural resources, we don't even have much land, the only resource we have is people. So anyone who wants to be successful really has to stand out. As a mother I don't feel comfortable about this kind of situation, but it's the only thing she can do to achieve her dream." (Chakrabarti, 2013).



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