



## **Learning In and Out of School: Education across the Globe**

*Conference hosted by:*

Kellogg Institute for International Studies  
University of Notre Dame

May 22–23, 2012

**Proceedings published March 2013**  
**[kellogg.nd.edu/learning](http://kellogg.nd.edu/learning)**

### **Beyond Alternative Education: A Return to Caring in Creative Public Spaces**

**Haejoang Cho**

**Haejoang Cho** (PhD, University of California, Los Angeles), a practicing cultural anthropologist and feminist, is a professor of cultural anthropology at Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea. With early research on gender, her current work focuses on youth culture and modernity in the global/local and post-colonial context of modern-day Korea. Publishing in both Korean and English, she has written extensively on culture and gender issues in contemporary Korea. Cho teaches on gender and society, globalization, popular culture, family sociology, and methodology. She is the founding director of the Haja Center (Seoul Youth Factory for Alternative Culture), an alternative educational and cultural studio for teenagers. The Haja project was launched in 1999 as a part of an effort to solve the problems of youth and adults through research and practice grounded in East Asian perspectives of feminism and cultural studies.

## **Abstract**

Are school dropouts failures? Are inattentive students dumb? Are children not to be trusted? Are the poor not good enough for decent education? Education caught up with the new potential and challenges of our time. Students who have successfully entered prestigious universities are trying to take the “poison of competition” out of their bodies. Many of them say they do not want to get on the conveyor belt of the market-driven productivity machine. Creating a new social ecology where people of all generations learn and grow seems necessary. As an anthropologist doing “action research,” I have studied the students who are unable to learn because of the hyper competitive education system. I also founded the Haja Production School in Seoul in 1999, an alternative educational and cultural studio for teenagers. This paper discusses the evolution of the education system in Korea and the possibility of learning based on education experiments of the Haja Production School.

### **Where are the creative minds?**

For the past several decades or so, it is well known that talented individuals have been flocking from every corner of the globe to the United States, the world's remaining superpower. We have grown used to the idea of big multinational businesses searching the world for talented, creative individuals. Not too long ago, one of the leading Korean daily newspapers drew attention to a similar phenomenon with an article entitled, "Japan stealing away our young talents." The piece expressed worry about the increasing number of excellent Korean high school graduates who were directly entering top-notch Japanese universities.<sup>1</sup> The reporter wrote of "old-age Japan," with a declining birthrate leading to a lower number of college-age students, planning to inject some lifeblood into its economy through the recruitment of elite foreign students. The plan would involve bringing in some 300,000 foreign students who would be attracted through an active program of high school visits by individual Japanese universities. In fact, in this era of rapid change, it is not only the advanced nations but every society that is experiencing labor difficulties, and in order to solve these problems, strategies for attracting talented students are being adopted by many universities worldwide.

Lately, trying to assess recent changes in Korean society, I have been thinking carefully of why the so-called developed nations are not able to nurture these talented minds within their own borders and try instead to recruit these individuals from countries whose GNPs are considerably lower than their own. It is easy to understand how, as the world comes together into one immense market, there would come a need for many new highly talented people. It is also possible to understand this phenomenon as a rush by talented individuals from poorer nations to fill the jobs deemed undesirable by the host nations' workers. That being said, will this problem solve itself over time if we just leave it alone? Having gone out and visited students from my own university who are actively working abroad, I have come to think not. I have come to believe that while there is creativeness and speed in advanced nations, they are not able to produce talented individuals on a broad scale and that this is closely related to the nature of advanced capitalism. In fact, I arrive at the conclusion that it is difficult for creative talents to emerge in super-competitive environments where people are no longer able to form close bonds

---

<sup>1</sup> Park, Su-ch'an, Chosun Ilbo, May 15, 2009. "Japan Eager to Scout Excellent Korean Students with Scholarship and Extra Financial Support."

in particular groups or in relationships with others.

It appears that the talented individuals desired by the most advanced nations such as the United States, Japan, and the like are not just confined to scientific fields avoided by students in their own countries such as math, physics, and chemistry. I believe this to mean that the labor difficulties we are all facing are actually the result of a dearth of flexible, creative minds—a creativity shortage. When we look back on the past thirty years of nurturing creative minds in universities, there has been a high possibility that they have emerged somewhat surprisingly from developing countries or from social classes that have managed to escape various difficult situations rather than from advanced nations or the wealthy classes. There have always been a number of individuals with extraordinary ability who continue to succeed while following well-mapped roads, but there are none who did not—in the absence of difficult experiences to overcome or without a sense of community of which they were a part—end up combining their strong abilities with a flexible creative spirit that helped them find answers to new problems in a fast-changing environment.

Yves Doz, professor of strategic management at INSEAD, one of Europe's premier graduate business schools, tells a similar story.<sup>2</sup> In a newspaper interview, he said, “[so far] in history, this is a perfect time to fail by concentrating only on core competencies” and that, in the short term, such a narrow focus leads to the possibility of falling prey to the “curse of success.” He emphasized that in this era of rapid change, there are three kinds of skills we must nurture. The first is sensitivity—the heightened alertness to see changing trends; the second is collective commitments—working together with passion towards a shared goal, and the third is resource fluidity—the flexibility to use capital and human resources, as the situation requires. However, it is not easy to find people who have the ability to remain aware of change and to work together toward shared goals with passion in a market-led economy in a society driven by intense competition. Of course, people with a passion for getting rich are a dime a dozen, but this alone is not sufficient. This, not as a means but an end, foretold the failure of ‘casino capitalism’ and the financial crisis that began in 2008 and continues to cause pain for many globally.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Lee, Sang-hun. Chosun Ilbo, May 16-17, 2009. “Just Focusing on Essential Competence!”

<sup>3</sup> Recently, in centers like New York and London, financial speculators were involved in bringing about the current worldwide financial crisis. Making money became itself an end rather than a means, and the result was an economic system that resembled a casino more than anything else. Already a few films that dramatize their form of casino capitalism have made their way to the screens. “Michael Clayton,” “Blood Diamonds,” and “Road of War” are just a few notable ones.

The call for gifted individuals does not come from liberal arts scholars alone but is also shared by those in the business world. How, then, can we nurture creative minds that are able to grasp the rapid changes of our time, to communicate their understanding of problems with others, to gather together communal knowledge, and muster the appropriate resources to solve our problems? Looking back only ten years, there were many such talented individuals on my university campus. They were young people who were creative and had a sense of experimentation, able to cooperate with one another while at the same time maintaining a sense of competition. However, of late, it has become harder and harder to find such people. In fact, my examination of the situation of gifted minds in developed countries began first with this observation. Why has it turned out this way? Students know more and work harder than ever before, but their personal breadth compared with that of past students is limited and their broadmindedness and abilities to communicate are restrained. Observing students who entered the university in the 1990s and those who entered in the past three to four years, I conclude that their thorough internalization of a certain type of competitive spirit from an early age has made it impossible for broadminded, talented individuals to emerge. It is hard to expect that such bright minds will emerge from a childrearing or an educational environment that emphasizes competition but discourages reciprocity and caring.

Lately, with the adoption of the neoliberal capitalist ethos throughout the world, the competition in every field is increasing and we have come to share the sense that we are facing a serious crisis in the form of a shortage of creative minds. In South Korea at its current stage, as a particular case of a high-speed high-competition society, an excellent example can be found in the field of education. In this regard, when one analyzes the field of education in Korean society, it has implications not only for Korea but also for the world at large. The sense worldwide that children are being put in a problematic situation is increasingly prevalent. Consequently, in connection with creativity, I will begin my discussion here with the sudden shift toward intense competition within Korean society and the educational field following the shock of the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

## **The Case of South Korea: ‘Pre-study’, ‘Spec’, and the Neoliberal Turn**

### **Education for College Entrance Before the Emergence of a Private Education Market and the University as Liberated Space**

Following its ‘economic miracle’ and quick emergence as one of the four ‘Asian tigers’ during the 1980s, Korea experienced in the 1990s a blossoming into a full-fledged civil society. The semi-feudal authoritarian school system was also changing. However, with the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the public sphere again began to atrophy, but this was because of the obsessive turn toward neoliberal policies as a way of reviving the economy. Korean society was hard hit by the foreign exchange crisis but received positive international assessments of its quick recovery. However, on the other hand, it has been pointed out that this process of recovery resulted in a weakened economic structure and brought with it increased social inequalities.<sup>4</sup> Following the shock of the economic crisis and resulting mass unemployment, there were certain changes in Korean society. So then—particularly in relation to the education of children—what kinds of things were tried? What kinds of effects did educational reforms and investments have to answer the calls for more investment in human capital? And to what extent were creative minds and thinking developed? While these questions deal with Korean matters, in fact, these questions are also frequently posed on the world stage. Because we are living in a highly competitive world, both domestically and globally, it seems certain that there are things that can be learned from ‘developed’ Korean society.

Below is an attempt to demonstrate concretely what the most serious problems are in the field of education by comparing the 1980s and 1990s when middle- and high-school students as well as university students were able to develop a sense of community and social relations with the shift to the very market-driven and competition-driven objectives of the 2000s. I hope to demonstrate how difficult it is to become a gifted individual fully capable of demonstrating one’s creativity through intergenerational comparison.

From the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Korea was drawn into Japan’s imperial project and was administered by the Japanese as a colony for 36 years. After liberation in 1945, South Korea was incorporated into the American capitalist system. In the 1980s, Korea became one of

---

<sup>4</sup> Lee, Geun, Chosun Ilbo, May 9-10, 2009. “Now, the time for Korean Style New Open Economy 이젠, 한국형 신 개방경제.”

Asia's stellar economic success stories, and one of the key factors mentioned by scholars as contributing to its rapid economic growth vis-à-vis other societies was its "passion for education."<sup>5</sup> In fact, after liberation, South Koreans believed in the principle of "equality of opportunity" as realized through the educational system, and one of the most important functions of the state was just that—the guarantee of this equality of opportunity. Indeed, making Koreans believe that their society guaranteed this equality of opportunity became a cornerstone of political life. On the basis of the belief that they were living in a "fair society," Koreans sacrificed their whole lives to earn money and invested it and their whole hearts in the education of their children.

From the 1980s, following the reports of suicides of students who had failed to get good marks on the college entrance examination, public sentiment formed around the feeling that the college entrance exam-based educational system had to be changed, but at the same time, given the exam's "sacred role" as guarantor of the equality of opportunity—that chance to exchange rags for riches, it was not possible to change the exam that defined in a sense the ultimate objective of the schools. The firm belief that if only a child were to work hard, he or she could get into a first-class university and through that, assure their future and that of their families was something that was a source of energy for many ordinary Koreans, and in that light, the report card of middle and high school students represented a report card for the parents themselves. However, in this generation's case, going to university meant the possibility to start creating a world of their own. Also, when you look at it in retrospect, these students were not living for competition alone. There was competition for the college entrance exam, but still, various cultural and artistic activities were possible in the school; student exhibitions, sports events, and festivals took place, and a great many human relationships were formed.

At the same time, this era was one where traditional extended family relationships had a tendency to predominate. There were some who found these relationships burdensome and who wanted to break away from them, but in sum, due to some less capitalist-minded teachers, the watchful eyes of neighbors, a sense of concern, and strong ties, a caring space managed to exist. The majority of students felt gratitude toward their parents and siblings who sacrificed

---

<sup>5</sup> Chung, Bom Mo Chung. *Development and Education: A Critical Appraisal of the Korean Case*, Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2010; Nancy Abelmann (Editor), Jung-ah Choi (Editor), So Jin Park (Editor) Introduction, *No Alternative? Experiments in South Korean Education*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

themselves for their well-being and toward their teachers. They were full of hope for the future and studied hard, and there were many who worked tirelessly to become talents for the development of the nation. They felt that, if only they studied hard, they would be able to get good jobs, marry, and have children. Particularly in the 1980s amidst the whirlpool of resistance to the military authoritarian government, the very individualist students nevertheless all developed a strong sense of the state and the community after entering university. One can say that until the 1980s, the tradition of various caring, concerned relationships had not yet broken down. Whether burdensome or respectful, strong ties existed between older and younger students and relationships of mutual trust and expectations were abundant. This is a key difference between those students and the ones who have grown up in the neoliberal climate of the 2000s.

Even up until four to five years ago, students thought of their university as a liberating space and would always gather together to drink and debate all night. In their second year, many would take backpacking trips or form bands or visit the countryside to help out farmers. It was a time to step out of their parents' shadows, to stand on their own as individuals, to find their own direction, to experiment. However, nowadays, university students have begun to "pre-study"—to study topics they will learn later in class in order to better follow their majors, and this is hardly surprising. In Korea in 1996 when the GNP surpassed \$10,000 for the first time, and it clearly entered a period of true consumer capitalism, university students also started to abandon their traditional family relationships and those with students younger and older than themselves to get "rooms of their own" and especially through the internet or cell phones, started to form different types of relationship networks with older schoolmates or to become more individualized. They each wanted to help build a civil society they could respect and at the same time, found ways to express their particular demands and forge bonds between members of their same generation. There were a number of public events that youth of this generation could actively participate in, such as the 2002 FIFA World Cup held in Korea or the candlelight protests associated with the deaths of two middle-school students killed by a US Army armored vehicle, as well as a number of one-off events that allowed this generation to cultivate its creativity, sense of experimentation, and sense of community.

This generation, sometimes nicknamed the Seot'aeji generation (after a popular rock musician) or the 'N' generation, etc., led a very creative life in Korean history and can perhaps best be called the "cultural generation." The youth of this generation, who probed all corners of



the earth and for whom travelling alone was very popular, are now in their 30s and are showing their abilities as creative minds with a great cultural curiosity. These changes were, however, interrupted by the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Seeing many of their relatives and some schoolmates losing their jobs was a great shock. Although most young people were not greatly affected by the crisis, a change in attitudes was taking place in a somewhat older generation. Many adults lost faith in the state and public organizations and caused some to come to the conclusion that there was nothing to believe in. This resulted in a drawing in around the nuclear family and saw the rise in conservative attitudes among adults. This renewed conservatism led to a stalling in the growth of alternative schools and an increased interest in the private education market.

When one examines this in connection with changes in educational policy, the Kim Daejung administration, which took power in 1998, emphasized the nurturing of human capital, raised investment in education, and began to put forward radical policies for educational reform. Emphasizing a “humanist education” and “open education,” they attempted to make all kinds of changes to the college entrance exam-based educational system, but these attempts, aimed at gaining the trust of anxious parents just following the economic crisis, failed. On the contrary, these reform edicts instead brought with them confusion and mistrust. Particularly, due to educational policies that changed the college entrance examination process, the situation became hard to grasp, forcing parents to give up on the schools and the state and pushing them to look instead to outside tutors or other education specialists.<sup>6</sup>

To give just one example from 2002, the Ministry of Education, in the name of a policy change, pushed the idea that “if you do it well once, you can go on to a university,”<sup>7</sup> prohibited holding evening after-hour study sessions in the schools following the end of regular daytime lessons. In fact, this series of measures, rather than increasing the free time available to students, led to the unintended result of mothers turning their children over even more to the private educational market such as cram schools. As college entrance conditions became more complex and special selection procedures were introduced, conditions improved for more well-off parents. Mothers who were becoming specialists in the university entrance process received help from

---

<sup>6</sup> The year 2000, when the law prohibiting outside tutoring management was ruled unconstitutional, marks the clear beginning of the honeymoon between parents and the private school industry.

<sup>7</sup> Lee Ju-ho, “Pluralism Beyond The Equalization 평준화를 넘어 다양화로, Seoul: Hajisa, 2006; Cho Han Haejoang, “The Classroom is Back: Reading Texts and Reading Everyday lives of University Students under Neo-liberalism, p 10, Seoul: Ttohanau Munhwa.

cram school specialists and developed systematic strategies that succeeded in getting their children admitted to the best schools. A rapid increase in the number of students from the rich area of Gangnam in Seoul to first-rate schools also bolstered the edge that the private education market had. As high schools for special subjects were introduced (e.g., foreign languages), special cram school programs also came into vogue and separate counseling departments in certain cram schools were formed to advise parents. Expenditures around the country for tutoring education suddenly increased and according to a 2009 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) survey, Korea ranked number one among member nations in the portion paid privately to educational organizations.<sup>8</sup>

The Roh Muhyeon government, again placing emphasis on economy first, quantitative results, and the performance of megaprojects, formed the basis for policy, and the neoliberal order emphasizing performance effectiveness has taken an even firmer hold. As the basis for educational reform, the Educational Broadcasting System (EBS) network began to offer free lessons to enable students from households not able to afford outside cram schools to prepare for entrance to liberal arts colleges, but in fact, this significant plan was totally unable to disturb the strong control of education by the private market. As a result, high school grades, the private education market's scholastic aptitude test, and the college entrance examination continue to coexist in a strange manner. After 2000 when much of public education was given over to the market, young people have grown more attached to their cram schools than to their public schools and are, in fact, being raised by a service industry. We may call these children the "children of the neoliberal generation," but their educational experience is focused on "pre-study" and "managing mothers."

### **Middle- and High-School Students in the College Entrance Exam War: Prep Schools and the Managing Mom**

As alluded to previously, the current private-education-centered reorganization began after the first economic crisis in 1997 after exceedingly distressed adults, particularly mothers, pushed for

---

<sup>8</sup> Private schools, due to the previous illegal nature of outside tutoring, cast off their negative image and, in a sign of the times, received endorsements from big brokerage firms such as Lehman Brothers. Currently, due to their rapid expansion and the current economic crisis, the cram school industry is suffering greatly.

the commodification of education and a kind of joint public-private system.<sup>9</sup> It was felt that children could no longer be left in charge of the public schools, especially in a world where the “law of the jungle” and the “survival of the fittest” were the watchwords. It was also at this time that certain practically minded mothers felt it was their responsibility to get involved and started to look toward self-directed education in alternative schools. With the thinking that they could only trust themselves, these mothers threw themselves into the project with enthusiasm. On all sides, families began to actively ‘invest’ in their children’s education. Even though some wives in two-income households wanted to quit their jobs, they needed to keep working in order to pay for their children’s outside education fees, and, on the other side of the coin, some housewives tried to find jobs in order to lessen the family financial burden. Because of this, the competition for the best college entrance exam scores was by no means a simple effort and became a money game where mothers felt they had no choice but to send their children into the private education market, which itself was burgeoning. The Lee Myung-bak government announced in early May 2009 that cram school lessons would be restricted after 10 p.m. and that they planned to work to decrease private education expenses, but whether this will be possible remains to be seen.<sup>10</sup>

The reflection of school grades in the college entrance exam system has stopped the school system from entirely becoming one existing in name only, but in fact, parents have lost their trust in the state and the Ministry of Education. For already quite a long time now, parents have chosen to rely on the private education market, have formed alternative schools, or have chosen to have their children study outside Korea as a kind of “self-rescue plan.” The phenomenon of “manager moms” who take their children abroad, sometimes at a very young age, to be educated as “successful gifted students” has made Korean education known throughout the world. On the one hand, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the OECD has ranked Korea as number one or two out of the 57 countries it measured, but in reality, the results rank far below the average for interest in and motivation for learning, and the 2009 UNESCO survey that showed Korean youth to be among the lowest in terms of their happiness

---

<sup>9</sup> In the 1990s, the cram school teachers who tried to attract students to save them from the burdens of “exam hell” were activists in the pro-democracy movement. Ironically, those running cram schools from the mid-2000s on were people who had made money through stock investments in the private school market.

<sup>10</sup> Im Hui-gyun, Dong-a Ilbo, 2009 May 1. “Government Takes Kwak’s Proposal to Cut Down Private Education Market 정부 사교육비 절감안 광승준 제안 그대로 반영.”

shows quite starkly the difficult state of the Korean educational system.<sup>11</sup>

So, what kinds of students receive outside tutoring? Until recently, the students attending cram schools were those who, failing the college entrance exam, attended a cram school for “repeaters” or went for additional classes in subjects they were weak in. However, these days, the reason for attending a cram school is to “pre-study.” Here, pre-study means that before even covering the material in school, you prepare to study the material by learning the material in advance. This system not only renders in-school education ineffective, but also is in itself an unfair game. This is breaking down the last remaining framework of the schools. Because students who do not attend such cram schools cannot follow the rate of progress of those who have, this results in their systematic isolation and failure. This story of studying under the covers is exactly the story of such students. The exclusion from the private educational market leads to exclusion from public education as well, and systematic inequality in parents’ educational investment power begins to be reproduced in the schools. If this situation continues, in truth, the public education system has no reason to exist. If the public education system and the concern for equity of chances crumbles, the state and the public domain themselves will likewise crumble. Pre-study is shattering the myth of equality of opportunity and the problems of the reproduction of inequality are beginning, but more than that, it is putting additional stress on the parents who already are at a breaking point.

I think that a serious problem brought on by pre-study equal to that of the problems of the inequality it reproduces is that the competition resulting from pre-study brings about the degeneration of creative, self-directed learning abilities. Through pre-study, what has to be studied always has to be one step ahead of what is actually being studied and so learning is always limited by the rate of learning itself. This supposes that there will always be someone organizing and doing the teaching. And this teacher must be an amazing teacher who can feed the students all the right answers. While the cram school teacher or private tutor leads this pre-study, the student who is studying just to get good grades will find skipping material difficult, will have difficulty concentrating, and may feel the learning is a waste. Because the student will get used to solving any problem that is presented quickly, it will be difficult to grasp problems on his/her own and skills for solving unfamiliar problems will completely be left unnurtured. These

---

<sup>11</sup> Lee Ch’un-jae, Hangyoreh, 2008 May 9. “Interest and Motivation for Learning of Korean Students is Below Average of The OECD Countries 한국 학생 학습흥미·동기 OECD 평균 밑돌아.”

students, as mid-level workers spending a long time preparing for the college entrance exam and in-school grade management, may learn excellent answer-finding skills but, if they are thrown into an uncertain situation, will end up at their wit's end. To refer back to Professor Doz cited earlier, by concentrating on “core competencies” they may do well on the college entrance exam, but the rate of failure for challenges later in life will be high.

### **University Students' Competition for Jobs: “Spec” and “Eom-ch'in-a”**

Under neoliberalism, however, the universities that these students have finally entered are turning into places to study for getting a job, involving much of the same kind of pre-study that they have spent the last ten years doing. In this age of high unemployment and unstable employment and as anxiety deepens, the university is becoming a site of competition over the most profitable major for finding a job, and students nurtured on preparatory education having received support for this employment preparation in the field from their managing mothers and cram schools are plunging in with a proactive attitude. These days, the university is not a place of liberation but has rather become a site of hot competition for what amounts to 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> graders. These students, in this uneasy age of high unemployment, begin to systematically prepare in advance to acquire the necessary qualifications to fill out their resumes for jobs—they call this long competitive process “spec management.” “Spec” is a shortened form of the word “specification,” used to describe the technical features of products such as electronic equipment. Today, university students raised on preparatory schooling for the college entrance exam turn their energies to beginning to manage their tight schedules, juggling grades with English exam scores, internship experience, external competency exams, and the like. They devour books on self-development. When they stand in line in their competitive society, they have a good idea where they rank. They know each individual step that their competitive society requires of them. Once in a university, when they are forced to participate in activities that their exam-based education has not prepared them for, they expect to be compensated for it. In short, their attitudes toward new experiences and their perspective on life differ greatly from previous generations.

One of the words that best express the lives of these young people is “eom-ch'in-a,” a shortened form of the Korean words for “mother's friend's son.” This word refers to how mothers when managing their children incessantly bring up the example of the success of one of her friend's children in order to push her own child to do better, but in fact, has the effect of

dampening the child's spirit. In reality, having invested all her being in her children's education, a mother's expectations are very high and so hopes that her child will be among that 0.1% of global leaders. In fact, many ads for cram schools push the idea of raising children to "burst forth with talent on the world stage" or to become that "0.1% global leader."<sup>12</sup> In that 0.1% of mom's friend's sons is at least one who, after graduating from high school, goes on to university at an Ivy League school, is recognized as a math genius, and works on Wall Street as a trader with an astronomical salary. There are mother's friend's daughters as well, ambitious alpha girls on the world stage.

From a certain point of view, these students from a young age have no leisure time to develop cooperative relationships or a sense of community. They have spent all their time in a schoolwork competition under the eyes of their mothers, their outside tutors, and their cram school instructors. Instead of building ties with their mothers and intimate friends, they seem to have difficulty sustaining relationships with friends and schoolmates. A resurgence of familism among well-to-do families (e.g., "There is nothing worth believing in outside the family") and the emphasis on filial piety are examples of changes associated with this phenomenon. On the other hand, families who cannot support tuition fees are forced to take out loans and students from such families take part-time jobs for spending money, but such students are obviously engaged in unfair competition from the start with their better off friends in terms of spec management as well as chances for the future.

For these students who grew up in a neoliberal competitive situation, competition is almost entirely internalized as part of their natures, so they adapt readily to this environment, so in a familiar situation, such as the college entrance exam, their performance may be excellent, but in unfamiliar situations, their performance will be noticeably weaker. For them, they must always be ready for some kind of backbreaking labor<sup>13</sup> (the unfamiliar) and must get used to the kinds of work that continually leaves them flustered. There are no times they pose creative

---

<sup>12</sup> Jeongsang Foreign Language Institute, Chosun Ilbo, 2009 May 6 [full-page ad]. "Educate 0.1% Global Leader. 1% 글로벌 리더로 키워라".

<sup>13</sup> Park Hyeon-hui, a high school teacher, wrote this about "prior education" in a column entitled: "Let's do tomorrow what we can do tomorrow내일 할 일은 내일 하자" (Hankyoreh 21, 2009 May 18): "The biggest problem about studying a topic in advance is that it makes children too busy. When you try to move up the process, it always makes the road ahead for children too long. Children who have to spend 4 hours a day studying at a cram school have an enormously busy schedule... In the same way as we say "don't put off until tomorrow what you should do today," I want to teach students not to study in advance today what they can do tomorrow. Today, just ahead of Children's Day, it would be a wonderful present to give children to say to them: 'you have the right to do today only what you are supposed to do today.'"

questions, and they have no desire to do so. When we examine this socio-politically, competition through pre-study is an unfair game. In the end, being one of the “excellent sons”—that is, having grandfather’s wealth and mom’s information power and god’s strength—is winning, and depending on what the other person can offer to us, we stand in line. And life is entirely different from a university entrance exam or Civil Service exam where we have already done our pre-study and know what we will be tested on. After all the preplanned progress is done, the chances that such students will have no idea what to do in the situations they are faced with in real life is quite high. After pre-study and building up a myopic spec is all over, they won’t know how to deal with failure and risk ending up as the spoilsports in a game they never learned how to play. To this generation, phrases like “be creative!” or “do a project!” are just drudgery and burdens.

Parents who are not able to see this pattern are not able to give up on their children in whom they have invested so completely. Consequently, in the event the children take a job the parents are not fully happy with, they may order their children to take the Civil Service exam. As the power of parents who support their children is quite strong over them, it is difficult for the children to downplay this expectation. On the other hand, children without parents supporting them feel a sense of relative deprivation, and the parents who aren’t able to support their children suffer from guilty consciences. As this is all a relative phenomenon, in reality, the majority of South Korean university students feel that their spec is lacking and so are constantly studying ahead. Young people who are living the “Shillim-dong” lifestyle studying for the Civil Service exam or students who stay in their rooms studying for some other exam are a population of youth being mass-produced by this structure. Depending upon how well off their parents are, some of them may be able to stay in a luxurious apartment, but most of them end up staying (lonely) in a tiny (8m<sup>2</sup>) room somewhere. These students, who have been preparing for the college entrance exam from their early childhood are crazily busy or, even though it doesn’t have any concrete utility, make themselves busy studying English just as a way of confirming to themselves that they are alive.<sup>14</sup> Clever mothers and daughters, rather than preparing to get a job, polish their spec in order to make a successful match in marriage. Instead of cram schools, they rely on marriage information centers and devote themselves to strategic marrying activities.

---

<sup>14</sup> Eom Giho, studying these young people, reports one student told him the following about studying hard to get good scores on the TOEIC (English) test he never plans to take: “If I do well at something this world recognizes [as important], I can feel that I’m a person that belongs in it.” (“위기의 시대, 실종된 청년성의 새로운 모색”, 2009, p. 39) UNESCO 6<sup>th</sup> Forum “청년의 지속가능한 삶을 위한 사회적 대화 자료집”.

There are those who endure the tough competition of the college entrance exam and finding a job and go on to succeed, but the majority gives up on the game at some point or fall ill from lethargy. In South Korea, they are the “exam addicts” and “hikikomori”. Some internet users have coined the word “ddeok-shil-shin” for these people—people completely “knocked out” by society. Some male students, after having one or two girlfriends, declare that returning love is too difficult and makes them “emotional laborers” and so instead decide they would rather just have sex partners than a love relationship. There are others who, after getting married, decide that the stress of pleasing their in-laws is too great and even go on marriage strikes. As a result, according to recent OECD data, Korea has the lowest recorded birthrate (with an average of 1.23 births per woman in 2010) among OECD member nations.

Here is a point I’ll mention just briefly. Young people, who have grown up in this kind of environment, sometimes become anxious after graduating from a university and face unsure job prospects. Some lose their self-confidence and become more and more dependent on their parents. One 26-year-old girl who has been abroad to study still calls her mother every day and shares everything with her. Saying “my mom has a lot more experience than I do in life so I can live a safe life by following her advice,” she maintains a close relationship with her mother, but this kind of situation is becoming more and more a serious social problem.<sup>15</sup>

### **An Environment for Raising Children Ready for Creative, Caring and Self-Motivated Learning**

In the previous discussion on pre-study and spec, I have tried to show that today’s young people are involved in an extremely competitive game. To show how to remedy the current problems in education law and within the education system would be difficult. In South Korea’s case, the state has failed in its strategies and “clever” parents have through individual efforts turned to the market, but the educational field has become a site of endless, fight-to-the-death competition. Parents who have seen through the changes in the times have made great investments both in terms of money and devotion for the lives and success of these children, but this institution that they have made attempts to cobble together has failed and driven away their children. In a risk

---

<sup>15</sup> CH’OI Seung-shik, Jungang Ilbo, 2009 April 13. ”마마걸은 슬프다.”



society that itself embraces risk, the only way to eliminate the risk itself is through collective efforts. The alternative is to follow the pied piper over the cliff and into the deep.<sup>16</sup>

In the previous generation as well, there was competition in the irrational college entrance examination system, but in the 1980s, students grew up in extended families, and, after entering university and while participating in the struggle against authoritarian rule, they developed a sense of society and community. The students in the 1990s as well also faced competition but through the internet were able to open up new cultural spaces and through their cultural citizenship organized around figures they respected, participated in various activities. Their competition was not an endless struggle, and, above all, at that time there was a system that enabled mutual caring. There was a possibility for a self-stimulating exchange of ideas and a space for alternative debates. They entered university having experienced competition; there were students there who had arrived before them who cared for them, and, through cooperative learning, encouraged them to lead social lives. And now, whenever they go abroad, they have talented peers who share with them. In this educational session, there is Bijaya Cheterina from Nepal who will be making a presentation and who is an example of a student who grew intellectually and socially during that generation. Professor Olga Fagradayn of the Moscow International Film School is herself raising a child in that way.

However, the generation I want to shed light on in this paper is the generation after that. It has come time to think about this neoliberal generation who from an early age through pre-study internalize an unceasing sense of competition and for whom, as workaholics, the fear of failure is much too much to bear. Fundamentally, these youth, against the backdrop of pre-study where there are no winners or losers and no chance to come back to life from after loss on the battlefield, enter university and begin the tedious war involved in building a spec.

Fundamentally, the problem now is that quantity of care available is insufficient. Amidst feelings of terror about possible failure, mothers now no longer serve as the focus of care but rather become instrumental “managing managers” of their children. Grandmothers who live close by as well in this busy world no longer have time to take care of their grandchildren; it has become an individual’s world. In past days, neighborhood women would look out for children in

---

<sup>16</sup> Other advanced countries have developed ‘brand-name’ education for gifted children. If there is a difference with Korea it is that, in other developed nations, this kind of program—this game—usually appeals to one given social class. In the case of Korea, most parents, the middle class included, don’t feel free not to play the game.

trouble, but nowadays, because of the fear of sexual molestation by neighborhood adult males, children can no longer play freely in their neighborhoods. In this generation, the first concern of those who care about education is not the intellectual stimulation of the children but rather is creating a safe and pleasant environment for them to stay in.

When one speaks concretely of alternative education, it is important to point out that teachers in the field of alternative education try to raise the children that the traditional school system has cast aside and protect them and see that they develop just as manager moms do. In the alternative school, we return to directions and methods of education that have shown themselves to be effective in the past: self-directed learning, cooperation learning, internships, digital literacy for the information society, and the like. However, here before that, I am thinking that we must take great efforts to prepare spaces where children can feel free to give and receive love. A place where teachers can clasp the children in their arms, a place where the thought isn't to build a good spec but rather to build up a store of kindness. We must concentrate on developing an environment where children are free to create a mutually caring society. Here, we must think consciously and systematically about the kind of place that allows them to develop a character that values social relationships. Children need a constant relationship founded on the basis of absolute trust. They need a set of values; they need a big society. And children must be able to find their own place in this new environment. This kind of space is an individualist one that goes beyond the state-market one we are faced with. In this sense, it is easier to find to find an appropriate model if one were to think of a pre-capitalist village, church, or extended family group and the like.

These kinds of children are not the objects of caring. They are instead the nucleus of giving, receiving, sharing the warmth that is caring. Even when they are middle-school students, they can go to the nursery school in the neighborhood and play with their younger brothers and sisters, they can become the friends of the elderly in the community. Right now, the thing that children need is exactly this ability to communicate and to recognize that they are precious beings with something to give to others. In this age when every bit of learning is a task, another competition, another burden—no, it is an experience that revitalizes the self and that allows us to start anew. And so, let's raise flowers and gardens. And to help others let's learn to communicate with our hearts and make this the new starting point for education.

In a world without caring, this is about creating a space where we nurture care and concern for others in an environment of teaching and learning. Becoming an educator in a society where mutual caring is lacking takes a great deal of imagination. One place to start is with an examination of ourselves—as people who have interiorized this sense of competition, as people who have fallen into this trap of “success-ism.”

In the world today, it seems that every problem we try to solve through short-term efforts comes back again later in a more extreme form as crisis. In human society, the tensions between competition and cooperation, the individual and the group have remained until our day. In this current day and age, where everything gets reduced to competition and efficiency, success and logic, we can overcome our present crisis by resurrecting our sense of “us,” in life for one another in solidarity. A society where competition is emphasized on the basis of short-term personal economic gain cannot continue to endure for a long time.

On the one hand, we’ve created a kind of “winner-takes-all” talented individual and created elite schools for them, but on the other hand, we have also created spaces to care for and ensure the welfare of children who are escaping such a system. To that extent, in the past ten years, alternative schools have been formed and a fresher breeze than that may not exist. Nevertheless, this is an era where the distinctions between the traditional school system and alternative schools are falling away, just as the boundary between high school and university is fading. All of these have been torn apart by competition and the logic of the market, and so safe havens to which to escape have all disappeared.

These days, education has to find a way to free itself from the “terror of politics.” The first step in this process is to bring back caring, communicative relationships. Almost 200 years ago, Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations* predicted the arrival of capitalist societies with the phrase, “the invisible hand,” but Nancy Folbre in her book *The Invisible Heart: An Economic Romance* criticizes the visible world, particularly the insularity of one where the circulation of money is the only thing in view. Things that are indispensable in society, such as reciprocal relations and bonds of caring, are also the key to the recovery of the educational field. The error of thinking that the world of money is everything to society has made us forget about the important cycle of care when considering solutions to our current crisis. A school is a type of place where a variety of sustained relationships can exist, and so at this stage where caring

environments are clearly lacking, it is vitally important that schools become a place where the skills for mutual caring are nurtured.

The exhaustion of creativity of course starts from the inequalities that exist in a world where the object of caring is only limited to money. Creative thought cannot emerge in an environment dominated by terror. Creativity is the wisdom that bursts forth out of relationships founded on mutual trust and exchange and is the skill required to rapidly solve problems together. Creativity cannot emerge in a society that fears mutual interaction. In order for young people to live creative lives and for a city where youth can succeed in building creative social enterprises, first an environment where caring can properly circulate must exist. We must come together in a common ground where we find this sense of a communal “us” through relationships built on mutual friendship and respect.

Humans are selfish and clever beings but, at the same time, we are altruistic and know the deep wisdom of communities. For the longest time, we have coexisted on this Earth, using our skills to grope our way along the path. Now it is time again to begin a new cycle by renewing our abilities. Each of us must find our creative space, must search out and make an environment where we can learn. The environment evolves through variation and cleverness. In Korea, we have been focused too long on competition and suppressing difference. Today, the state is the only organization with the power to face the markets head on. In terms of building a sense of community, it is the state’s responsibility not only to get the economic system working again but it is equally important that we find a way to get the system of caring working again. Talking about emphasizing the strategies for success and efficiency in terms of market logic and then managing the field of education through statistical indices, in the end, results in the state losing one of its reasons for existing. Michel Foucault (1998), examining the direction that recent competitive capitalism has taken, warned of killing off the majority to save a minority. The work educators must do in the years ahead is to save the exceptional and put an end to the majority.

### Reference Works

Folbre, Nancy. 2007. The Invisible Heart: An Economic Romance. YOON Jayeong, translator. Ddo hana-ui Munhwa.

Foucault, Michel. 1998. Society Must be Defended. Dongmunseon.

Harvey, David. 2007. A Brief History of Neoliberalism. Hanul.

Kang, Sudol and Holger Heide. 2009. Beyond Capital, Beyond Labor. Seoul: Ihu.

Smith, Adam. 1776. Wealth of Nations. London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell,



The 2012 “Learning In and Out of School: Education across the Globe” conference was hosted by the University of Notre Dame’s [Kellogg Institute for International Studies](#) and cosponsored by the [Department of Anthropology](#) and the [Institute for Educational Initiatives](#), with generous support from [The Henkels Lecture Fund: Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts](#), the [College of Arts and Letters](#), and the [Office of Research at the University of Notre Dame](#).

The conference, organized by Kellogg Faculty Fellow and Professor of Anthropology Susan Blum, witnessed inspiring discussion and collaboration between leading scholars of education from several disciplines and nations.

For more information: [kellogg.nd.edu/learning](http://kellogg.nd.edu/learning)

