

Philosophical Reflections on the School Equalization Policy

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Abstract

In order to evaluate the school equalization policy, we must first consider what constitutes an ideal educational standard. Education is the organ of self-realization, a statement that includes three implications. The first is that education leads to self-realization as a human being. Second, education leads to the self-realization as an individual. And finally, education leads to the self-realization as a citizen. Accordingly, public education must have: 1) universality and equality, 2) pluralism, and diversity, and 3) sociality as its fundamental values. The abolishment of the equalized school system cannot contribute to realizing any of these values.

Keywords: self-realization, universality, plurality, sociality, competitiveness, doctocracy

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Questions about School Equalization in Korea

The high school equalization policy was introduced in Korea in the 1980s. Today, there is a widespread call for its abolishment. In both civil society and the government, there is increasing discontent with the Korean educational system in general and the equalized school system in particular.¹

This paper will not concern itself with the specific criticisms of the equalization policy and their refutation. Most of the debates about the equalization policy are based on the false understanding that school equalization heightens or lowers academic ability. Those against the policy try to prove their argument by presenting records of academic tests as evidence of students' academic ability.² But the objective reliability of student examinations is doubtful. While students in France are often tested with essay questions such as "Is happiness, of which I am not conscious, possible?" or "Am I a synthesis of every past 'me'?", Korean students take multiple-choice tests,

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1. According to the newspaper monitoring of Son Ji-hui, there were 168 articles against the school equalization policy from 2001 January to 2003 December (Son 2003, 26ff.).
 2. What is worse is that many people condemn the equalization of school as "lowering equalization" without a shred of evidence (See Yun et al. 2002, 65; Kim J. C. 1989, 50). However, as Seong Gi-seon shows, most positive research findings prove that the academic ability of the students in the equalized high schools is higher than students in unequalized high schools (Seong 2003a). Lee Ju-ho accepts these findings as true, but interprets the same data in other way than Seong does: "Some studies have concluded that, with the exception of elite students, there is no evidence that students' levels of academic achievement in equalized districts has been lower than those in non-equalized ones. However, the shortcoming of these studies is that they did not fully take into consideration the fact that, while non-equalized areas are concentrated in small and mid-sized cities and rural districts, equalized districts are mostly concentrated in the large metropolitan cities, including Seoul. The levels of academic achievement of students from equalized districts may in fact be the result of the higher education level of their parents, their higher income levels, and their larger investments in private tutoring" (Lee 2004, 224). But we will not participate in this debate, because we do not believe that the records of the examination prove directly the academic ability of students (Seong 2003b, 192).

merely using the thinking skills required to choose the correct answer out of a possible five. If the means of educational evaluation is itself distorted, of what use is it to evaluate the academic ability of Korean students on the basis of mere test scores? Yet still many scholars argue for or against the equalization policy on the assumption that test scores reflect academic ability.

Many debates over the high school equalization policy base their opinions on disputable hypotheses. In order to avoid this pitfall, this paper puts the details of that debate aside, and instead directly examines the fundamental concept of education itself.

Education as the Organ of Self-Realization

Unfortunately, there is no social consensus about the concept of education in Korea.³ For many, education is only a means to social success. Those who argue against the equalization policy claim that, "the ultimate goal of education is to create the human resources that society requires in this globalized and information era" (Chun 2003, 203). According to this concept of education, human beings are resources or materials serving other goals. But this false premise can only result in a false conclusion.

But what is education? According to Kant, "man is the only being who needs education" (Kant 1960, 1). While animals require only food and protection, human beings cannot be human in a true sense without education, however healthy they may be in the biological one, since human beings are creatures of society and not only of nature.

Education, then, is the organ of human self-realization. Self-realization can be understood in three ways according to the meaning of the "self." First, education leads to self-realization as a human being.

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3. Officially, the ideal of the *hongik ingan* (well-being for humankind) is presented as that of Korean education. But this ideal is not based on the social consensus of the Korean people.

Second, education leads to self-realization as an individual. This concerns the process of not only becoming a full human being, but also what kind of human being—an individual, which depends on education. In this sense, education enables the self-realization of individual personality. These two meanings of self-realization correspond to the two dimensions of human existence—universality and individuality. But there is one more dimension of being, namely that of sociality. Aristotle noted that man is a political animal (*zoon politicon*) (Aristotle 1966, 1253 a 7). But Aristotle does not mean that every person lives as a free citizen (*polites*) in a state (*polis*), but that an individual can realize him or herself in a true sense only as part of a state. In this third sense, education elevates individuals to citizens in a life in which knowledge and power are joined. Learning is thus a necessary requirement to be a good citizen.⁴ Thus, people can only fully realize themselves through education.

Self-Realization as a Human Being and Universal Public Education

Education is the organ of human self-realization. As the first ideal of education, this implies that education must be universal. In other words, it must be provided for all people, insofar as human beings can only be fully realized through education. Those excluded from education are in essence being excluded from humanity. The state, then, must offer equal quality education to all. The ideal of universal public education cannot be realized, however, if the equality of all people is not accepted as self-evident. Therefore, class-based or feudal societies cannot cultivate universal public education. Where the noble and the common people, the lord and the slave are not equal, an equal education for all is impossible. Only in a society in which

4. Therefore Kant, the philosopher of the enlightenment, demanded for the liberation of man nothing other than the courage to know: *Sapere aude!*—dare to know! (Kant 1968, 35).

everyone is recognized as equal does an equal education have any meaning.

Insofar as education is essential to a human being, equality in education is the indispensable condition for the equality of humanity. Conversely, if we do not accept the necessity of the same and equal education for all, we negate the sameness and equality of all people. If one assumes that all people are the same and equal, they must have the same and equal education. Therefore, universal public education must be offered. Since only a state can provide such equal education in the real world, the responsibility of providing it rests with the state. In this sense, the universality and the publicness of education, which insist on the inherent equality of all people in society, are part of the essence of education itself, but only if we take the equality of all people as a basic assumption.

If we negate this notion of the equality of all people, we have no reason to hold to the ideal of universal public education. Everyone could be educated differently, according to one's status in a society. Just as the noble and the common people actually had no equal opportunity of education in traditional society, so the rich and the poor in our time would have no more equal education. Of course, if we want to provide unequal education for the different groups of human beings, we would need an argument to divide or distinguish men into different groups; and we also know that in every age there are philosophers ready to justify the inequality of man. For example, Aristotle says:

For that which can foresee by the exercise of mind is by nature intended to be lord and master, and that which can with its body give effect to such foresight is a subject, and by nature a slave. (Aristotle 1966, 1252 a 31ff.)

Karl Marx noted that modern society liberates men from natural bondage only to replace it with social bondage, and by doing so, introduces a new form of inequality. In modern society, people are divided into two classes: those with capital and control over the

means of production and those without. But according to Pierre Bourdieu, since goods can be passed on, inherited as in feudal times, today's ruling class has come to use educational capital (*capital scolaire*) as a new means with which to legitimate their superior status in society (2000, 242). And there is no better means to justify inequality among people than through academic testing (Bourdieu 2000, 197). Those who excel on such academic tests are regarded as superior, possessing the merit required to enjoy access to power, property, and prestige. Those who do not do well on such tests are regarded as inferior, undeserving of such privileges. This is due to the Aristotelian belief that those who excelled in mental power were fit to be masters, while the inferior were doomed to slavery. In every age, there have been philosophers who subscribe to this kind of ideology; because of this, the ideology seems to have made no progress. In one sense, however, it is not important to concern ourselves with which argument is given as grounds to make unequal distinctions in public education. The rich who refuse to live together with the poor are always in need of a theory to justify why their children must attend different schools, separated from the children of the poor. And there are always scholars who are quite ready to formulate new arguments legitimizing an unequal educational system. In the Korean case, so-called "educational competitiveness," a subject over which many scholars have recently been debating in this society, can be defined as a new iteration of this old ideology.

Korea had no tradition of a republic but was ruled by a minority. The ruling class in traditional Korean society dominated the state not by the monopolization of economic capital, the threat of physical force, or the dictates of religion, but through education. Those who ruled in traditional Korea were neither generals as in Greece and Rome, nor the high priests of Medieval Europe, nor the capitalists of the modern age; they were scholars. This "doctracy" was the form of domination in traditional Korean society, with intellectuals holding the reins of societal control.⁵ Therefore, education in Korea did not

5. There are innumerable studies made by Western scholars about the relation

play the role of equalization but of discrimination.

This essential character of education in Korea has not changed much. Though the opportunity for education is available to all, this is only superficial equality. Formal equality in opportunity does not guarantee equality in result. In fact, the more acute competition in education becomes, the more the winners are determined by factors external to the system itself. The present-day demand for competitive education is simply a demand for the institutionalization of an inequality of external factors in the educational system.

Self-Realization as an Individual and Professional Education

If the concept of the inequality of all people is rejected, then it is impossible to accept an unequal school system. But it is important to remember that although human beings are equal, they are not all the same. Human beings, as individuals, have their own particular personalities and talents. If education is to be the organ of human self-realization, it must cater to the needs of the individual, as well as those of humanity as a whole. But still, regardless of what we define as individual personality, there is no doubt that it rests on the notion of plurality. As human beings, all people are equal, but as individuals, they are different from one another. As human beings, everybody must have equal education, but as individuals, different types of education are necessary.

between power and education, although we have only mentioned Bourdieu here. But the doctocracy of Korean society is a unique phenomenon that also requires a unique theory. Long time ago Max Weber researched the relation between power and scholarship in traditional Chinese society in his well-known book, *Konfuzianismus und Taoismus* (Weber 1996). But there is no doubt that Korea and China were different in terms of relationship between power and scholarship, although they show similarities in many points. In China the government officials were scholars. But they were officials of the emperor, and not the highest rulers of the empire. In Korea, on the contrary, the scholars did not remain only government officials but they functioned also as co-ruling class of the state with the king. In this sense, doctocracy was a uniquely Korean phenomenon.

Public education cannot provide each individual student with completely different education, nor does it need to, because education does not end with school. However, it is necessary that public education be pluralistic according to students' various talents. Education must provide students with the possibility of choosing among various courses according to their own particular interests and special talents.

From this follows the ideal of specialized professional education. Since students' talents are varied, specialized professional education should be varied as well. Therefore, public education must be both pluralistic as well as equal. This is self-contradictory, and it is the task of public education to resolve this contradiction.⁶ Public education must, on the one hand, keep the school system equalized. On the other, it must pursue pluralism in professional education. There is not, however, one solution to this problem: every country must find a solution that meets its own social conditions.

We can suggest a negative maxim for the implementation of specialized professional education: the ideal of professional education cannot be fulfilled by having schools ranked according to a single standard, since setting up such a hierarchy among schools runs counter to the ideal of plurality in professional education itself. Plurality rests on the existence of variety itself, not on the different standings within the same kind of schools. So it follows that the most serious obstacle to specialized professional education in Korea is hierarchy among schools. There is no true plurality in education. Instead, schools are all essentially similar, and receive different rankings on a single scale. Even in areas where schools are officially equalized, in reality, the schools are ranked. Foreign language and science high schools are on top, humanities high schools follow next,

6. On the contrary, Yun Jeong-il and others found a fundamental contradiction between equalized public education and scholastic excellence (Yun et al. 2002, 63). And from this contradiction follows the contradiction between mass education and education for the elite. But we find no necessity as to why education is divided into the two categories of the "mass" and the "elite."

and professional high schools bring up the rear. In Korean society, education has been, and continues to be the apparatus for discrimination between people and cannot itself escape from the hierarchy.

Those who argue for abolishing the equalized school system do not want to introduce true plurality in education, but only wish to institutionalize a rigid hierarchy among schools. They are anxious about the competitiveness of Korean education in today's global and information era. However, excellence and competitiveness in education cannot be effectively improved so long as competition between schools over rankings dominates education. In the current state of fierce competition engendered by a uniform education system, students cannot develop their talents because uniformity resulting from severe competition is anathema to the goal of cultivating plurality of talent. The only way to increase the competitive potential of education of Korea is by working to establish a true plurality; this cannot be accomplished by abolishing the high school equalization policy, or by ranking schools.

Self-Realization As a Citizen

Education is the organ of human self-realization. People realize themselves in different ways and the meaning of education changes accordingly. One of these dimensions of self-realization is social, as people realize themselves fully as citizens within a state. It means that, by forming a state together with other citizens, human beings become their own masters.

Human self-realization means that one forms oneself in concreto. In this sense, the self-realization of an individual is none other than the realization of original human freedom itself. Since freedom and self-determination are always expressed socially, and since an individual is still a social being, it is impossible for an individual to fully self-realize without relation to others. One's existence is always determined by the society in which one lives. Only if one forms a society can one form oneself at will. The most important unit of all

societies is the state, and it is the citizen as a free agent—or better, as subject—who actively constitutes it. But a citizen can form a state only in cooperation with other citizens. Therefore, the self-realization as a citizen is possible only through a formation of a state by cooperation of all citizens.

The final goal of public education is to encourage the utmost cooperation between all citizens. This cooperation, however, would be impossible without mutual sympathy and understanding among all citizens. Equalized public education brings together young citizens living under different conditions. If they do not meet in school, they will not easily have the opportunity to befriend each other. When friendship lacks among citizens, sympathy and understanding lacks as well. Under such conditions, we can anticipate a society in which antipathy, misunderstanding, and mistrust prevail.

Equalized public education is a necessary apparatus for the maintenance of social unification in a nation-state. If we abolish the equalized school system, there would be a hierarchal ranking of schools. In Korean society, where education already functions as a mechanism to classify people into unequal social standings, the walls between schools of different ranks come to define the walls between unequal social classes. This prevents young citizens of various social classes from meeting and understanding one another, which inevitably makes class conflict more acute and antagonistic.

Competitiveness

In spite of the above-mentioned problems, many still argue against the high school equalization policy, believing that its abolishment would contribute to increased educational competitiveness. Their belief stems from the premise that competition leads to higher competitiveness, something they are seeking to introduce into the education system.

Competitiveness in education is promoted in principle only through excellence in all educational activities. If education in Korea

were to pursue purely educational goals, and if excellence in education were evaluated by an educational standard, then competition in education would promote excellence in education.

This is not the case, however, in Korea, aptly described as a *hak-beol* society, in which social standing is directly derived from university ranking. In Korea, each university occupies a rung on the ladder of social standing, and Seoul National University is at the very top of the list. Those who enter this university become members of Korea's ruling class, while those who attend universities of lower rank join Korea's lower classes. Indeed, since the choice of educational institution determines the course of people's entire lives in Korea, many people set their goal as only that top school. As a result, Korean education, from kindergarten to high school, is completely dominated by competition over entrance to Seoul National University. And educational competitiveness and excellence are also evaluated according to success in entering such prestigious universities.

The kind of competition may appear to be valid because it is determined by academic tests. Indeed, tests and examinations are necessary for education. But since they are not, in theory, the final goal of education itself, they must be utilized only as tools. However, in the reality of Korea education, tests are the ultimate goal of education for all students, and performance on them determines the course of people's lives.

If tests become the final goal, they will inevitably destroy the institution of education. Space limits this paper from describing all the problems in Korean education that examination competition creates. But the paper will briefly address the lowering of competitiveness in relation with the examination competition. Above all, the competitiveness of a country is based on the excellence of its individuals' diverse and plural activities. Competitiveness rests not on the excellence of one and the same talent, but on cooperation between the different talents of citizens. In order to develop students' different talents, education must be pluralistic. But uniform examinations remove pluralism from education. Students are forced to run a one-track race, and do not have the opportunity to find and develop their

talents. Indeed, the only challenge placed upon students in Korea is performing well on the high school examination.

Unfortunately, many Koreans today believe that excellence in examinations leads to excellence in all other activities as well. They do not understand that education for performance on tests does not promote talent in general, but rather hinders its free development. This is true not only for talents in skills and fine arts but even for academic talents. However, the advocates for an unequalized school system argue for the examinations, try to abolish the equalized school system, and introduce competition into schools. In Korea, competition between schools has only resulted in blind competition over status and ranking.

Epilogue

In order to be effective, competition in education should take place according to academic standards, while working toward academic goals. In Korea, however, competition in education is bitter enough to have pushed a fifth-grader to commit suicide in order to escape school examinations (*JoongAng Ilbo*, 11 November 2002). If the advocates of competition seek to promote excellence in Korean education, they need not fret, for there are more than enough experts in the field of shadow education, driving an industry of private tutoring and pricey cram schools. Private tutoring has also increased terribly because of competition over examinations. Unfortunately, the “shadow education” industry is alive and well, but is available only to those with the financial means.

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