

Articles

Education and Family in Korean Society

Yang Young-Kyun

Introduction

For different ways and purposes, education has been considered critically important in Korean society for a long time. In traditional Korea, most notably in Joseon, passing of the civil service examination was the most important and imperative goal for the *yangban* class. Education for male members of the family was therefore an important family concern—passing of the civil service examination would ensure not only the individual's future, but elevate the status of the family as well. Although the Korean society and culture went through drastic transformations afterwards, the children's education continued to be an important concern for the family. The so-called “education fever,” the heated competition for admission to prestigious universities and higher degrees, has long been an important topic in social discourses. Although the Korean competition for good grades, good schools, and good jobs is carried out on an individual basis, supporting such endeavors is considered a family affair. Individual education is therefore a family issue.

The relationship between education and family has long been a topic of academic research. Numerous research projects on the topic have been carried out. However, the majority of such works has focused on explaining the influence of family background upon the child's education. In other words, the focus of previous works of research has been limited to the effects of parents' educational backgrounds, their occupations, family income, family composition, and parents' interest and degree of intervention in children's education upon children's grades and other educational achievements. On the other hand, there is almost no previous work on the effects of children's education upon the lives of their families. Many families dedicate significant portions of their resources for their children's education. Some families even devote more resources than what they can afford. It is therefore obvious that children's education is exerting an enormous influence upon the lives of their families. To address this need, this article aims to examine how much the education of children, particularly children in their teens, affects their families' lives, and how their parents perceive that.

Another topic I want to discuss in this article is the question of interpretation in dealing with “education fever.” As already mentioned, there is a long history of “education fever” in Korean society, the specific

conditions of which have differed with the times. Recently, the most striking aspect of “education fever” has been the unprecedented expansion of the private education market. The expansion of this market is an important issue not only because it shows the heated competition in education, but because it causes a substantial financial burden for families. So, why are Korean families dedicating so much of their resources to the education of their children? Is it the continuation of tradition (Confucian culture) from the Joseon period? Is it the result of the more recent neoliberal transformation of Korean society? This article will attempt to deliver answers to the abovementioned questions.

After an examination of the historical context and significance of “education fever,” this article will discuss the earlier research on the relation of the family to children’s education. Following that, this article will offer multifaceted analyses and interpretations of the impact of children’s education on their families. For this last part, personal interviews with the children’s parents, particularly their mothers, will be the most important data. The interviewees can be considered “successful” in their children’s education—their children were attending special purpose high schools¹ or prestigious universities. The interviewed parents’ education backgrounds and family income levels were above the average. Although the interviewees cannot be considered representative of Korean parents, it was important to examine how “successful” families engaged in the competition, how much of their resources were dedicated to education, and what overall significance they placed upon their children’s education.

“Education Fever” in Korean Society

The notion of “education fever” in Korea has both positive and negative undertones. “Education fever” sometimes refers to the Korean people’s dedication to education in the face of adversity. To put it differently, Korea continued to develop rich human resources despite the traumatic experiences of the Japanese colonial rule and the Korean War, and this pool of human

1. There are several kinds of special purpose high schools in Korea. Among them, only science high schools and foreign language high schools are relevant to this paper.

resources became the driving force of Korean modernization. Such an interpretation certainly offers a positive view of Korean “education fever.” More generally, however, “education fever” has negative undertones—referring to the abnormal society-wide drive to acquire degrees from prestigious schools.

A discussion of the historical context of “education fever” will follow; however, let us first focus on two obvious measures of “education fever,” which are the increased participation in and the size of the private education market. While only some 15% of all students were in the private education market in 1980, the ratio increased to 22% in 1991, 54% in 1997, and 58% in 2000. In the year 2002, the ratio was a whopping 72.6%. After reaching an all-time peak of 77% in 2007, the rate slightly decreased to 75.1% in 2008 and 75% in 2009. Such numbers show that the participation ratio had already become saturated to the point that it could no longer generate further growth. The size of the private education market, however, continued to increase. The estimated market size reached 713 billion KRW (Korean won) in 2000, two trillion, 40 billion KRW in 2007, and two trillion, 160 billion KRW in 2009.² While the market size of private education was around 30% of the government budget for education in 2000, it reached 56% in 2009 (Tonggyecheong 2009).

To assess the degree of burden, I analyzed the ratio of the average family income and expenditures. In 2008, the cost of education came third after groceries and housing. In 2009 and 2010, however, education came second after groceries in terms of the financial burden for the families (Bak Jungyu 2011a). From 2008 to 2010, the rate of increase for household income was 13.5% for the three years. The increase in expenditures, however, was 14.6%. The increase in costs for education for the same time period increased 23.3%, significantly contributing to the increased expenditures. The average cost of education per family was 289,820 KRW in 2009 and 296,810 KRW in 2010—some 13% of total household expenditures (Bak Jungyu 2011b). However, the numbers are an average which includes households without children. It can thus be construed that actual costs of

2. In 2009, students in the private education market consisted of 47.2% of elementary school students, 29.2% of middle school students, and 23.6% of high school students.

education and tutoring per student most likely would be much higher.³

Education in Joseon

Joseon was a class society, and the passing of the civil service examination was the most desirable path to success. In theory, both commoners and *yangban* (excluding *cheonmin* (“lowest class people”) and sons of *yangban* born of concubines) were eligible to take the test. However, it was nearly impossible for commoners to pass the examination. First, commoners did not have the financial means necessary to prepare for the examination. As the test taker could not engage in any kind of economic activity while studying, he needed support from the other members of his family. In addition, there were costs for books, preparatory schools, and private teachers. Furthermore, it was difficult for sons of commoners to receive letters of guarantee and recommendation.

Therefore, the opportunity for social advancement through the passing of the civil service examination was a privilege of the *yangban* class members. It is not an exaggeration that all *yangban* were obsessed with the test, and there are several obvious reasons. First, the passing of the civil service examination was necessary in obtaining a position with the government. Although obtaining a government post without passing the examination was possible, everyone nevertheless pursued the examination because that was the only way to receive legitimate recognition for an official post. Second, the passing of the civil service examination entailed receiving a generous gift of land and other goods such as food from the government, adding an economic incentive. Third, the passing of the civil service examination was necessary in maintaining the *yangban* status for the family in the long run as well as in receiving social recognition as such. For the abovementioned reasons, individual preparation for the civil service examination sometimes lasted decades after beginning around age six to seven. In the process, much of the family wealth was devoted to the preparation. In sum, Joseon *yangban*

3. For 2009, the average monthly spending on private education per student was 242,000 KRW. For those who actually received private education, the average monthly spending was 323,000 KRW. The time spent on receiving private education was 7.4 hours per week (Tonggyecheong 2009).

families often devoted much of their resources to educating their young. In many cases, young men continued preparing for the civil service examination regardless of their families' financial conditions, causing many hardships for all.

Education in the Japanese Colonial Period

Passion for education spread throughout the society during the Japanese colonial period. The Japanese colonial regime sought to legitimize its rule by destroying and replacing traditional Korean institutions and culture with the so-called new education—western-style school system as well as school curricula modeled after those of Japan. By providing avenues of social advancement to those schooled in the new education system, the Japanese colonial regime sought to raze the traditional structure of Korean society and convert Koreans into docile colonials obedient to the colonial system. Through education, the colonial regime also sought to solidify its control over the Korean society by turning Koreans into useful laborers and low-level technicians (O 2000:217). One's educational background began to coincide with the hierarchy of occupations during this period. Obtaining a certain level of education meant good job prospects and social benefits. Another reason for the skyrocketing rise of “education fever” in this period was the influx of landless peasants into the cities. While many landless peasants became tenant farmers, a substantial number of farmers without land headed to the cities for work opportunities. While such migrants often experienced hardships as urban laborers, they were able to provide greater educational opportunities for their children. Some of their children became successful through such routes. With the emergence of such cases of success, the faith in “success through education” became stronger in Korea.

Due to the prevailing economic conditions at the time, ordinary Korean families had difficulty sending their children even to the primary schools. Nevertheless, many Korean families made sacrifices to send their children to schools because of the removal of the status system that curtailed social advancement for many. With the oppressive status system limitations removed, a significant number of those who could not achieve social advancement before sought to do so through educating their children. The most obvious facets of “education fever” at the time were the high rates of school attendance and competition for admission (Gang 2003:258-

59). In conclusion, by watching the successful examples of others, Korean families began to recognize education as a shortcut to success and social advancement. Korean parents therefore became passionate about their children's education. As educational opportunities for Koreans were limited in the colonial society, the competition reached unprecedented heights. Such trends, particularly the positive faith in education, therefore continued unabated even after the Second World War.

Education from the 1950s to the 1980s

The Korean War caused significant changes to the existing class/social structure, creating unprecedented conditions for merit-based ascension in the social ladder. Most people also believed that such merit would be largely based on one's educational background. Therefore, passion for education was high. Despite the economic hardships that followed the Korean War, Korean families devoted significant portions of their resources to the education of their children. For example, during the 1950s, 20% to 25% of all money in circulation went to schools during the beginning days of school semesters as tuition payments. Employment rates for college graduates at the time were not so high, and therefore the value of education often was not readily realized. However, Korean parents still sent their children to colleges in record numbers—displaying an almost blind faith that education would one day pay off.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the era of so-called high economic growth, “education fever” became the driving force of national development. However, “education fever” also generated serious educational and social problems such as entrance examination hell, proliferation of private lessons, increasing numbers of admission repeaters, overcrowded classes, and unemployment even among the highly educated. While competition for advanced high schools was steep, even more serious competition existed for admission to top colleges. Some even warned that excessive studying was inhibiting the physical growth of children. Taking heed, the Korean government standardized all middle schools by eliminating the admission test for middle schools in 1969, and expanded the standardization policy to high schools in 1973.

Korean society's fast economic growth, despite the prevailing poverty,

found its main impetus from its high-quality human resources. Educational opportunities expanded with the improvements in economic conditions. Jobs were also created in record numbers, increasing the demand for jobs. However, the sought-after jobs that everyone wanted remained few, and prestigious college degrees were needed to gain access to those high-demand jobs. Competition for admission therefore remained stiff, and increasing numbers of repeaters increased the burden for the families involved. Along with the general societal drive for higher and more prestigious degrees, the Korean society quickly turned into an “overeducated society.”

To tackle the problems of private education and repeaters, the government launched the “July 30th educational reforms” in 1980. The main parts of the reform included a 30% increase in enrollment at colleges (covering an expected 30% pre-graduation drop-out rate) to solve the problem of repeaters; the repeal of the college entrance examination, which would force the universities to select their freshmen based on the school grades and preliminary examination and therefore reduce the need for private tutoring; and the actual outlawing of private tutoring. The number of repeaters took a temporary dive with a paralleled increase of total enrollment. However, by the late 1980s, the number of repeaters started to rise once again. Although now declared illegal, private tutoring also reappeared due to a loosening of the police crackdown. Family members in some 10% of all Korean households took on side jobs to pay for private tutoring. Some even spoke of a “national ruin by private tutoring.” Another characteristic of the 1980s was that, although the absolute value of education dropped, the competition for degrees increased further. As the structure of the social ladder hardened, there were progressively fewer opportunities for social advancement through education.

The trends and conditions of Korean education from the time of the Joseon dynasty to the 1980s indicate that education became increasingly valued—to a “fever” pitch—and worthy of great sacrifice, despite yielding a decreasing guarantee of success. The most important condition for success in Joseon was the passing of the civil service examination. Although exclusive to the *yangban* class, the competition was nevertheless fierce due to the fact that only a small number of aspirants would pass. “Education fever” also existed back then, as families would make great sacrifices to support their sons. Although the route to success through the passing of the civil service

examination was limited to the *yangban* class, the value of education was recognized throughout the Korean society. Through the Japanese colonial period, the period of high economic growth after liberation, and the period of economic stabilization by the 1980s, the societal faith in education as a promising method of social advancement remained firm. The pattern of some family members making sacrifices to support another family member's education continued unchanged. However, the results of such efforts and sacrifices differed with time. Conditions from the 1990s to the present exhibit unprecedented patterns, which will be discussed in the next section.

Korean Education since the 1990s

“Education fever” continued into the 1990s and beyond, with some aspects of this societal fever becoming even stronger than in the past. During the 1980s, those who received private tutoring were mostly high school students. During and after the 1990s, however, middle school students, elementary school students, and even kindergarteners began receiving private education. Along with the rising competition, parents sought broader and more diverse ways to educate their children to beat the competition, further expanding the private education market. Due to the economic growth in the country, more families are ready to make the investment in their children's education. Furthermore, the ongoing instrumentalization of prestigious degrees in social advancement is adding more pressure to the families to prioritize their children's education. Globalization is also a factor, as overseas resources now also can be mobilized for competition. Certain keywords that can conceptualize Korean education of this era are: “early study abroad,” “geese family,” “special purpose high school,” and “liberalization of education.”

One trend that can conceptualize and explain the new developments is neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism seeks to remove any and all constraints to activities of capital for its free movement. It seeks to establish grounds for unlimited freedom of capital accumulation (Kim 1996). As can be seen from the slogans such as “abolition of regulations,” “privatization,” “flexibilization,” and “globalization,” the effects of neo-liberalism extend beyond the realm of the economy. Neo-liberalism seeks to convert all social relations into that of capitalist market economy and subordinate all aspects of society under the logic of free-for-all competition in order to maximize free movement of

capital (Song 1999; Byeon 2000; Kim 2001). Neo-liberalism first emerged among the developed countries in the 1970s, and it spread to Korea at the time of the Kim Young-sam administration. This administration, under the slogan of “globalization,” pursued policies of “opening,” “liberalization,” and “flexibilization.” The Kim Young-sam administration pursued policies based on the tenets of neo-liberalism in the realms of economy, education, social welfare, and labor (Kim and Kim 1998). The succeeding Kim Dae-jung administration half-willingly and half-reluctantly continued the neo-liberalist policies under the International Monetary Fund regime.

As can be seen from the examples of the United States and the United Kingdom, although initially centered on the economic realm, the effects of neo-liberalism soon influence education in ways that generally include the introduction of market principles in education, changes in educational principles in line with the increasing flexibility of the labor market, and the bolstering of the capitalist ideology (Yi 2002:156-57). Korea was not an exception to this pattern. The most obvious example of the introduction of neo-liberalist education policy was the “May 31st educational reform” of 1995. The reform’s basic goal was to increase the competitiveness of education in order to strengthen “national competitiveness” in the international arena. It sought to qualitatively change Korean education (Kim 2006:130). Defining recent such international trends as “globalization,” “informationization,” and “knowledge-based society,” the government justified educational reforms claiming that Korea too needs to change in order to keep pace. The Korean education policy, previously based on the principles of “normalization” of middle and high school education and strengthening of the public education system, radically changed. Largely abandoning the more traditional principles of “uniformity” and “equality,” Korean education began emphasizing “creativity,” “excellence,” and “diversification.” Some of the new policies in education that reflect the new values are: the introduction of English teaching in elementary schools, the establishment of various kinds of elite “special purpose high schools,” and diversification of the college admission process.

English-speaking kindergartens appeared with the introduction of English in the elementary school curriculum. With the rising societal importance of English, the so-called “early study abroad” became a popular trend for Korean youngsters. “Early study abroad” created the so-called “geese

family” which refers to families whose members live separately because of the children’s study abroad. The great increase in successful college admissions demonstrated on the part of “special purpose high schools,” particularly those that specialize in science and foreign language, ignited the competition from an early age to enter such schools. Diversification of college admissions entailed the greater need for preparation in obtaining admission to desired programs. In addition to school grades and the college entrance examination score, students now needed experience in different tournaments, volunteering, and club activities. The private education market expanded to meet the new needs, and the concerned parents (particularly mothers) began managing their children’s “specifications” in addition to managing the financial burden of support. In other words, “education fever” began reheating in unprecedented ways.

If so, what about the “education fever” of today? Is it rooted in Korea’s traditional culture? Is it something that has been generated by the new trends of neo-liberalism? Many research studies on the topic (for example, Gang 1996; Bak 1994; Son 2006; Choe 1998) claim that elements of traditional culture such as Joseon Confucianism, the institution of the civil service examination, and Korean family structure form the root of today’s “education fever” and are continuing to influence education to this day. On the other hand, there are also studies that argue against the emphasis on tradition or the cultural legacies of Confucianism. These are arguments that emphasize the historical transformations and contexts in discussing “education fever” (for example, Park 2007).

Instead of being contrary to each other, the two positions should be seen as having different focuses and perspectives. While Confucianism and the civil service examination-based “education fever” existed during Joseon, it should be seen as limited exclusively to the *yangban* class (Jeong 1998). However, the passion for education existed in latent form for other classes as well. It brought about the sudden spike of “education fever” across the social strata during the Japanese colonial period once the traditional status system collapsed. “Education fever” became stronger not only as education emerged as the most important tool for success but also as many Korean families accumulated enough wealth to invest in their children’s education. As mentioned above, however, the strength and conditions of the actualization of “education fever” differed with the times and circumstances. In other

words, while today's "education fever" is an extension of the past's "education fever," the specific conditions of its realization today should be analyzed along with the influences of neo-liberalism. The next section examines the effects "education fever" has on today's Korean families.

Education and Family

Previous Research

It is a Korean tradition to fully support the children's education with not only the parents' resources but also that of the larger family and even that of a lineage group. While support of the extended families has become rare today, the passion for children's education remains unabated. In other words, unsparing support for children's education continues to this day. Therefore, the relationship between education and the family has received substantial attention from researchers. As mentioned above, a great number of studies focus on how family background influences the extent of children's schooling and grades. A summary of these findings follows.

There are a substantial number of research studies on how the parents' socioeconomic and educational backgrounds influence the children's schooling and school grades. Most of them suggest a positive correlation, that is, the higher the parents' socioeconomic and educational background is, the higher the children's schooling and school grades are (for example, Bak and Kim 2003; Bak et al. 2004; Bak and Do 2005; Bang and Kim 2003; Jang 2000; Jang and Son 2005; Jo 2005). In addition, there are research studies that focus on the influence of family structure, number of siblings, and the parents' expectations and interests on the children's school grades (for example, Kim 2000; O and Kim 2001; Yi 1998; Ju 1998).

Some research focused on individual variables while testing the relations between family backgrounds and the children's schooling/grades. For example, research studies that used family expenditures as the variable are Kim and Yi (2006), Kim (2007), and Yi (2002). Ones that used the student's utilization of time as the variable in proving relations between the children's school grades and parents' educational backgrounds and occupations are Na et al. (2005), Bak and Son (2007), and O (2010). The general conclusions

of such studies suggest that the higher the parents' educational background and economic status are (especially for parents working in professional occupations or managerial positions), the longer the time children spent studying is. The longer time children spent studying obviously meant the less time they spent using a computer, watching television or playing with friends, which generally results in higher grades. Jang (2002) observed how the parents' socioeconomic status impacts their children's grades, focusing on the children's artistic taste and recognition. Kim and Byeon (2007) looked at how the parents' socioeconomic status influences their children's grades using the children's artistic taste and reading habits as the variables. However, Jang (2008) argued that while the parents' socioeconomic status and cultural capital significantly influence the formation of their children's cultural capital, the extent to which their cultural capital factors in between the parents' socioeconomic status and their children's grades is not significant. In addition, Jang argues that while the parents' cultural capital has a positive influence upon the children's grades, the children's high-class appreciation and consumption of the arts could affect their grades in a negative way.

Some research studies focus on the impact of education upon the family members. These mostly deal with college admissions. Yi et al. (1996) observed the impact the children's college admission processes have on their families. They observed the enormous pressure the student goes through, the unsparing devotion demonstrated by the mother, and the distance of the father who remains in a peripheral place. The fundamental position this study takes is that, along with the instrumentalization of education, the family appears to have lost a number of its basic functions as a place for socialization, warm bonding between family members, and resting due to the rigors of supporting the processes of college admission. The student, of course, is under enormous pressure and stress. The mother reduces not only sleep but all other expenses in order to invest in private education. While making so much sacrifice, the mother is still in agony over the fact that she cannot do more. The mother restrains herself from doing anything distracting in order to support her children to the best of her abilities. The father, while not assuming a direct role, supports the enterprise by making money for the family. The significance of this research lies in its careful observation of each family member's thoughts and roles. It is, however, limited in the sense that it exclusively relies on written surveys. Furthermore,

as it is already a bit dated, it does not reflect the changed conditions of the past fifteen years. Yi (2004) makes a phenomenological observation and analysis through a mother's figure during her child's preparations for college admissions. The mother of a high school senior grows to physically and psychologically identify herself with the child and does all she can to support her child. While she sometimes despairs when her child's grades are below her expectations, she goes back to the self-identification phase by readjusting her expectations and hopes. She feels worthy and recognized when her child acknowledges her efforts, and finds strength to overcome physical and psychological difficulties in supporting the child. Through in-depth personal interviews, this research skillfully depicts the process of how the mother of a high school senior "finds" herself through maternal experience.⁴

In addition, Kim (1995) discusses middle-class families in Seoul while paying particular attention to the role of mothers. She argues that mothers play an important role in making the family competitive vis-à-vis other families. She defines one of the roles of housewife as someone who allows her husband to focus exclusively on his career so that her family could rise in status. Another important role is in children's education. Kim argues that the housewife molds her children to be competitive vis-à-vis other children from an early age by encouraging them and managing their grades. The author therefore depicts a family in a way similar to a sports team—a team that constantly competes against other teams. The mother could be seen as a "manager" of the team, and this aspect of the mother's role is most obvious in the realm of her children's education. The description given by Park (2007) of the mother as an "educational manager" fits well into Kim's depiction. Although Park's research differs from Kim's in the sense that it is limited to children's education, both Park and Kim are in accord in how they view the mother's role in education.

The Influence of Children's Education on Family Members' Lives

I want to examine the extent of influence the children's education has on

4. Go and Kim (2001), Kim (1995), and Sim (1996) are examples of the research that focuses on the experience of mothers whose children at the time were in the process of college admissions.

the lives of members of their respective families. There are a number of neologisms that describe mothers in relation to their children's education. Perhaps the oldest of such neologisms is "Gangnam mother." Starting from the 1970s, the Gangnam area of Seoul began developing, and a significant number of middle-class and high-class families moved to Gangnam. Starting with the Gyeonggi High School in 1976, a number of prestigious high schools also relocated to Gangnam. In sum, the so-called "Gangnam School District 8" emerged. A number of well-known private academies also emerged there, with Daechi-dong turning into the center of private education. Thereafter, the neologism "Daechi-dong mother" was coined. Descriptions of a "Daechi-dong mother" are not limited to simply supporting her child's education. "Daechi-dong mother" refers to someone who, in addition to having a passion for her children's education, designs her children's future with specialized knowledge. Related names such as "Mok-dong mother" and "Dongbuichon-dong mother," names referring to other districts of Seoul with particularly strong "education fever," also emerged. More recently, the neologisms "Alpha mom" and "Beta mom" have appeared. Both terms refer to highly educated mothers who relentlessly collect information for their children's education and consider their support of their children's academic success to be their careers. While the former term "Alpha mom" more specifically refers to those who develop their children's talents based on solid "intelligence," the latter term, "Beta mom," refers to those who advise their children to live the lives they themselves want to live. Another neologism is "helicopter mother." "Helicopter mother" refers to those mothers who encircle their children like a helicopter while constantly providing support to them. The word "chimat baram,"⁵ for example, has long been used to describe mothers who actively support their children's education. The new neologisms reflect the more recent developments and conditions in education that require specialization and even more time than before. In other words, the recent neologisms for mothers who actively engage in their children's education can be seen as a reflection of the influence the neo-liberalist transformation exerted on education.

5. The Korean word "chimat baram" could be translated into English as "swish of the skirt" or "apron of strings" (Park 2007:189).

I wanted to examine the effects of children’s education upon Korean family life through interviews, focusing primarily on economic costs to families. I do not claim to make arguments applicable to the entire Korean society. Instead, I concentrate on relatively successful cases, the families who devoted significant efforts to their children’s education, to examine the extent of influence the children’s education has on their families and to measure how much the rumors and stories generated by the media are applicable to the general population. The interviewees were mid-aged mothers (in their 40s and 50s) whose children either entered a prestigious university or attend special purpose high schools.

Economic Investment

The stories of farmers who supported their children’s education by selling their rice fields, dry fields, and cattle were common during the era of modernization. As Korea managed to achieve fast economic growth, its people’s standards of living also substantially increased. Such conditions allowed greater dedication to the children’s education. As the competition for prestigious schools continued to heat up, the need for greater investment also emerged. Thus, children’s education continued to make an impact on family economies.

Through the 2009 Tonggyecheong report on private education, we can have an idea of expenditures and participatory rates for private education according to family income levels.

<Distribution of Monthly Expenses for Private Education per Student>

(Rate: %)

None	Less than 100,000 won	Between 100,000 and 200,000 won	Between 200,000 and 300,000 won	Between 300,000 and 400,000 won	Between 400,000 and 500,000 won	Greater than 500,000 won	Net
25.0	9.7	15.0	18.1	12.9	7.5	11.8	100

<Distribution of Expenses and Participatory Rates for Private Education per Student>

Distribution	Annual Expenditures on Private Education per Student (10,000 won)	Participatory Rate (%)
All	24.2	75.0
Less than 1,000,000 won	6.1	35.3
Between 1,000,000 and 2,000,000 won	11.0	55.1
Between 2,000,000 and 3,000,000 won	18.0	72.9
Between 3,000,000 and 4,000,000 won	24.6	82.6
Between 4,000,000 and 5,000,000 won	31.0	86.5
Between 5,000,000 and 6,000,000 won	37.2	88.9
Between 6,000,000 and 7,000,000 won	42.0	90.1
More than 7,000,000 won	51.4	91.1

As expected, both the participatory rate and the amount spent on private education are higher for those with higher incomes. At a glance, the financial burden does not appear to be much. For example, a family with a monthly income of 2,500,000 KRW and two children spends 14.4% of their income on private education. A family with a monthly income of 3,500,000 KRW and two children spends 14.3%, and a family with a monthly income of 4,500,000 KRW and two children spends around 13.5% of their income. In other words, the ratio between income and rate of spending on private education for middle-class households appear to be almost identical. However, significant differences can exist in specific cases. In other words, the number of children, the school year, and school grades can all make a difference in amount/rate of spending on private education. According to my interviews with the mothers, most of them experienced a spiked increase in education-related expenses when the children entered middle school. More precisely, spending on private education went up with the preparations for special purpose high schools, which typically begins when students enter middle school. By the time children reached the third year in middle school, many families I interviewed were spending at least 1,000,000 KRW a month on private education. In the case of high school students, students of regular high schools often received more private education, as students of special purpose high schools had less time for private education because they spent relatively more time in mandatory late night self-study sessions. Families typically spent the greatest amount on children from their second semester of

the second year in high school to the end of the third year in high school. For some of the interviewed cases, although they were not receiving particularly expensive private tutoring, they were spending almost 2,000,000 KRW per month for private education.⁶ Some example cases are discussed below.

While her family lived in the Samsung Tower Palace and was relatively affluent, Mrs. Yi spent two-thirds of the family's living expenses on education when her three children attended high school and college, and she therefore had difficulties in managing a budget.⁷ In the case of Mrs. Jo, her family lived in Gwacheon, and her husband was an employee at a leading company. She had two children, and the older child was a second year student at a special purpose high school while the younger child was in elementary school. While they were a middle-class family, education-related spending on the older child alone—including private tutoring in math, classes at an English private academy, and attendance at different studying camps—consumed half of her family's living expenses. Mrs. Bak had one son attending high school. While educational expenses for him did not amount to much, she nevertheless spent significant sums of money when she sent him on an “early study abroad” for two years.

The case of Mrs. Jeong, on the other hand, exemplifies the complex effects children's education has on a family. Mrs. Jeong stated that although her son went to a foreign language high school and was admitted to a prestigious university, she did not spend much on private education. While in middle school, her child went to private academies for English and math in order to get into a special purpose high school. During high school, however, her child only went to a private academy for math while using internet lectures for other subjects. She therefore did not spend much money on education per se. However, when her child reached the second year in high school, she did move to a home closer to the high school. She rented

6. In addition to private academies and tutoring, expenses for private education also include the fees necessary in building acceptable “specs” (specifications) for a particular university's program. Such fees include those for standard tests (such as TOEFL, TEPS and various AP tests), competitive contests, debate contests, and various types of student camps.

7. Expenses on education here include the fees paid to the school such as school tuition, book fees, and school bus fees as well as expenses on private education. The fees paid to the school can be substantial. For special purpose high schools, they amount to at least 500,000 KRW per month.

out her old house while renting another one. Although she lost some money on moving, it did not amount to very much. However, her husband had to spend more time on the road, as his place of work became farther away.

Another complex case is that of Mrs. Kim. She and her husband had a dual income, so the expenses for education were not too much of a burden for them. However, when her child became a second year student in middle school, she moved to Daechi-dong. Financial burdens as well as greater distances in commuting to their places of work were concerns. While she also did not like the significance Daechi-dong had in the Korean society, she made the decision to move there for the sake of her child's education.⁸ Mrs. Jeong was a different case. While Mrs. Jeong could have purchased a house had she moved to the city's edges, she continued renting for the sake of her child's education. The housing prices significantly went up, which ended up causing financial losses for her.

As can be seen from the cases discussed above, the degree of financial burden differed from case to case. Of course, the number of children, their years in school, and the financial conditions of parents were all significant factors. While all the interviewees were financially middle-class and above, the financial burdens created by the expenses related to education were not light for them.

Save for a small number of exceptionally wealthy families, most families' lives are unavoidably affected by a substantial spike in education-related expenses. In response to my question on how they dealt with the rising expenditures, they answered that they reduced costs on dispensable items such as regular savings, dining out, travels, and clothes. Although stories about mothers taking on side jobs are well-known, I have not yet encountered such cases. I have, however, heard of stories of mothers working

8. Research studies on the phenomenon of house-moving for the sake of education so far have been conducted on examples in the United States and the United Kingdom among other countries. These studies report that the place of residence influences achievements in education in important ways. In Korea, research has been carried out on the issue of class segregation in selecting places of residence. Research that focused on educational reasons include Son (2004), O (2004), and Choe (2004) who studied families who changed places of residence for the sake of education. They argue that those who make such moves tend to be high-income earners with a passion for their children's education. They also showed that the fathers of those families tend to engage in mental work. The conclusions from my own research conform to such findings.

as part-time housekeepers and part-time workers in supermarkets in order to support their children.

Everyday Life Patterns

Mrs. Bak, who had a child attending a special purpose high school in the Gyeonggi Province, quit her side job as a piano teacher when her child entered the sixth grade. She managed a piano academy before marriage, and tutored piano at home after getting married. Her decision to quit her side job came when she realized that not only did her child want to spend more time with her, but she felt the need to teach the child herself after realizing that her child's Korean, due to an early study abroad experience, was behind compared to other children. Mrs. Jeong, who also had a child attending a special purpose high school, quit her side job of teaching handicrafts at school and at the local cultural center to support her child. When Mrs. Jeong's child entered the second year in middle school, she felt the need to devote a greater portion of her time to support and manage the tight schedule necessary to enter special purpose high schools. An extreme case of a mother abandoning her job to spend time supporting her children can be found in the case of a mother who left a nine-figure salary (around a hundred million KRW) job at a stock brokerage firm to support her child. As can be seen from the examples discussed, children's education has already become an all-day job for many mothers in Korea.

In reality, children's education is a time-consuming business that demands meticulous attention. In elementary school, children are often taught English and math along with a specialty, such as a musical instrument, painting, sports, go, and calligraphy. The schedule becomes even more stringent in preparation for special purpose high schools.⁹ Time spent going to private academies to study English, sciences, and mathematics becomes longer and longer. Some children stay at private academies until late at night. Time spent at private academies becomes particularly long during

9. Sending a child to famous private academies far away from home, even for the children in kindergarten and elementary school, would demand additional time on the mother's part in giving rides. In my interviews, however, there was only a single case of this.

the winter break of the second year and the summer break of the third year in middle school in order to prepare for the special purpose high schools' admissions test. In such cases, mothers often wait for their child to come home to provide snacks, and in case the child studies even more at home, she stays up until the child goes to bed.

Schedules of high school students appear to be different for each school. While an increasing number of local education offices are forbidding late night self-study sessions, many schools in the Gyeonggi province are continuing to enforce late night study sessions. Students who attend special purpose high schools in the Gyeonggi province—the children of Mrs. Bak, D, and E in my research—had to participate in after-school self-study sessions until 10:30pm or 11pm on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. On Wednesdays, they either ate dinner at home or ate outside before going to private academies. Therefore, the mothers of these children were able to use their time more freely during the weekdays (except Wednesdays). They waited until their children come home and provided snacks. They also waited until their children went to sleep, killing time with a book or the television. The mothers often suffered from chronic fatigue, as they have to wake up early to send their children to school and wait until late night to provide snacks when the children come home. Mothers of children who do not do late night study sessions had even more restrictions in utilizing their time because they had to provide dinner for their kids.

In the case of Mrs. Kim, she divided education-related responsibilities with her husband while her two children were in high school and elementary school. The father would wake up and send off the first child who had to go to school by 7am, and the mother would then take care of the second child who had to be at school by 9am. Taking care of both kids would have been exhausting for the mother, as she would spend three hours in the morning at work. With a day job of her own, she could not have managed. When the older child came back home around 10:30pm, she would provide snacks and wait until midnight for the child to go to sleep. In the meantime, the father would go to sleep earlier in order to wake up earlier. In sum, the whole family's schedules were geared toward supporting the child in high school. In the cases of housewives, they typically spent their entire day sending off and receiving kids from school and preparing meals and snacks for them. In the case of Mrs. Yi, who had three children, she had to abandon most of her

hobbies until the time her second child went to college.

While their children are in school or academies, parents, particularly mothers, must spend time on education-related activities. With the entrance of their child into elementary school, to the maximum extent possible, mothers often begin exchanging information with other mothers in the same boat. While their children are in the lower grades, mothers often help out in cleaning and tidying up school classrooms. They also volunteer for school-related activities such as providing lunch for schoolchildren and doing library duties. In so doing, they develop relationships with other parents. Through such relationships, they gather useful information on private tutors, after-school academies, piano teachers, and even dispositions of school teachers. Such relationships sometimes continue into middle school and high school, and of course, new relationships are also created with other parents in middle school and high school. As information on admissions to special purpose high schools and universities are often collected through conversations with other parents, it is important to meet with them regularly. Information sessions held by private academies and schools are also important for gathering information. Information sessions on TOEFL, TEPS, school grades, college entrance examination scores, and college admissions frequently convene, and parents go to such sessions to gather information and develop a blueprint for their children's education. Such experiences were shared by all interviewed parents. In the case of Mrs. Kim, who had a day job of her own, she had little time for such activities. Instead, she occasionally treated other mothers to lunches or dinners to collect relevant information. Mrs. Yi, the mother of a child attending a regular high school, had a slightly different experience. With the help of a few other mothers, she asked the school principle to open three classrooms for self-study during the summer break, and got the school to concede. The mothers took turns supervising these sessions which, since it was summer break, lasted from morning to night. As can be seen from the abovementioned examples, mothers with children in schools often carry out diverse school-related activities.

Family Relationships

Commonly speaking, the three important elements for the success of children's education are: the mother's ability to gather information, the

father's indifference, and the grandparents' financial means. Such a statement fits well with the conditions of Korean education today. First, admission processes are often extremely complicated. Even for special purpose high schools that many middle school students aspire to go to, not only do the schools have their own methods for selecting students, but each school has several types of admissions. Such complications result in forcing students to prepare early for desired schools or select a school that best fits one's conditions and abilities. Such a task requires accurate and up-to-date information on different schools. College admissions are even more diverse and complicated, requiring even greater preparation. First, a broad understanding and information on the private education market are needed in order to obtain good school grades and college entrance examination score. In addition, one needs to acquire different desirable "specs" (specifications). Students need to decide what grades and "specs" are necessary in order to be admitted into a specific program of a university. Before applying, one must decide again the best program one can get into with his or her set of grades and "specs." Of course, expert help is needed to make the most advantageous decisions. One should also know which expert to consult. It is almost exclusively the mother's job to collect and analyze this broad range of information.

Significant financial resources are necessary for quality private education. Many parents with children in middle school and high school often do not yet possess the means for that, and in many cases the children's grandparents give support. In the case of Mrs. Jeong, while the grandfather did not support the entirety of his granddaughter's private tutoring expenses, his occasional help significantly relieved the financial burden on the family.

"Indifference of the father" has deep connotations. Fathers often tend to express their opinions without knowledge of the details, and mothers appear to think that the fathers' opinions are often unrealistic. In the case of Mrs. Yi, she expressed her regret in failing to send her second child (then in the fifth grade) abroad for English education for one to two years because of the father's opposition to the idea. Mrs. Yi stated that a study abroad would have greatly helped the child's progress in studying English. Mrs. Jo said during the interview, "The father (her husband) does have an interest in the child's education. When our first child was about to enter into a specialized foreign language high school, we thought hard between two schools. While

I made a decision based on the child's characteristics and grades, the father made his choice based on the environment around the schools. Fortunately, our opinions matched. Had they not..... When we were selecting colleges to go to, the child and I decided to try the rolling admission first. When the child got rejected, the father became displeased. We were eventually admitted to the same university through the regular admission. Had we not, the father would've been furious." Mrs. Hwang told me that when her child began going to three after-school academies in middle school, her husband became seriously displeased about the situation. He believed that three was too many. Although the interviewed mothers did not want the fathers to be indifferent to their children's education, they also did not want too much involvement from the fathers. One needs to have a lot of information in order to micromanage, and fathers often did not have much information about the education of their children.

As the children get ready for college admissions, their schedules become more and more crammed. As it is usually the mother who directly looks after them, the bonding relationship between the child and mother becomes stronger. On the other hand, however, the fathers tend to stay uninvolved with the children's education due to their own burdens from work. With the time spent with the children decreasing, the fathers often become distant from their children. With the bond/relationship between the child and mother growing, I believe, there is progressively greater room for conflict between the two. Children often complain of the "surveillance" or protest that the mother is intervening too much. On the other hand, mothers appear to be displeased by their children's disobedience and lack of recognition of their time and effort. To quote Mrs. Jeong, "If he knows how much time and energy I am sacrificing for his studies, he should study harder and get better grades. Not only is he not doing that, he unreasonably gets irritated." More generally, however, the families often work together to fulfill their own roles. The mother-child team, in particular, seems to have become partners in the race for college admissions.

Conclusion

"Education fever" has existed in Korea from the Joseon times to the present.

However, the context in which “education fever” was manifested has differed with the different political, economic, and social conditions of the respective eras. In this sense, Korean society during and after the 1990s experienced a transformation due to the influence of neo-liberalism, and the recent expansion of the private education market can be seen as an aspect of this neo-liberalist transformation of Korea. The effects of neo-liberalism could easily be detected, of course within the historical context of sustained “education fever,” from the personal interviews on the influence of children’s education on their respective families.

Responding to the changing circumstances of education, concerned families are continuing to develop methods of support for their children’s education. Such methods are influencing families in profound ways. Not only is the children’s education exacting heavy financial burdens, the family members’ time schedules are also being molded to support their children. Sometimes even the relationships within the family are transformed because of the children’s education. This research, based on interviews with mothers whose children are studying either in the special purpose high schools and/or prestigious universities, is significant in that it shows the relatively successful cases of adaptation to the new circumstances in education. The fact that all of the interviewees have college degrees and are middle-class or above reconfirms the conclusions of previous research that focused on the connection between families’ socioeconomic background and their children’s success in education. However, this research also confirmed that many of the sensationalist stories related to education generated by media and gossip are sometimes extreme. Interviewees calmly stated that although the burden of children’s education can generate changes within the family, it generally was not significant enough to alter the fundamental aspects of family life. For my last question, I asked, “Why are the parents so enduringly supportive of their children’s education despite the hardships and sacrifices?” They answered, “I have no interest in receiving support from them when I become old. I just want them to be become good and respected members of the society.”

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Yang Young-Kyun (ykyang@aks.ac.kr) is an associate professor of Anthropology at the Academy of Korean Studies. His publications include "Well-being Discourse and Chinese Food in Korean Society," "Jajangmyeon and Junggukjip: The Changing Position and Meaning of Chinese Food and Chinese Restaurants in Korean Society," and "Nationalism, Transnationalism and Sport: A Case Study on Michelle Wie."

Abstract

From the traditional times to the present, education has long been considered paramount in Korean society. During the Joseon era, competition to pass the civil service examination was fierce among the members of *yangban* class. With the downfall of the traditional status system, the Korean society during the Japanese colonial period displayed a society-wide drive for elevation of status through education. “Education fever,” a neologism referring to the fierce competition for prestigious degrees, has continued to be an important topic for public discourse ever since. Korea began to experience the effects of neo-liberalism in the 1990s, and educational institutions and policies were not exception. While “education fever” has long existed in Korea, today’s realization of it is heavily influenced by neo-liberalism. In the relationship between education and family, not only does the family background influence children’s achievements in education, the rigors and demands of the children’s education also significantly influence their families’ economic lives and patterns of livelihood. Despite the hardships, many Korean families continue supporting their children’s education so that their children can have the chance to prosper in the ultra-competitive Korean society.

Keywords: Education, Family, Education fever, Neo-liberalism, Economic life, Everyday schedule, Family relationships

