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Let's Take a Break

by

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"Step on your enemies or you will be stepped on," my middle school math teacher said. The hostile word *enemies* that should be used in a battlefield actually meant classmates, and *you* meant us, the middle school kids. Sadly, this quote is the epitome of the current Korean education system. I lived in South Korea for fifteen years and was educated in Korean schools for eight years. Although I love and miss my country, I do not miss the school system I was taught in because it robotizes and dehumanizes the growing students. The Korean education system negatively affects students due to the extreme pressure from overheated competition, the ineffective study methods, and heavy reliance on private academies. Additionally, the selling of empty goals of entering top colleges and limited free time inhibit students from developing their own passions.

President Obama lauded the Korean education system in several speeches, saying that "South Korean children are outpacing [American] kids in math and science," to urge American educators to put in more effort (Hwang). However, most South Korean students would not necessarily be euphoric about his remarks because there are too many blind spots concerning their education system. In Korea, students are assigned to one class with forty to fifty other students for a school year. The students in the same class become friends and share memories, but at the same time they become intense competitors with each other. Since all classes are graded on a curve, studying harder than one's friends is the most important key to survival and disturbing other friends not to study is another good method to keep the grade (Yoon). During midterms or finals week, it is not uncommon to see a few smart friends in the class sitting with frowned faces or even bursting into tears when they find out that their precious notebooks, which contained all their note-takings, have been stolen. Students steal other classmates' studying resources because they want to have better grades than their classmates (or prevent other students from earning better grades than them). I used to avoid telling helpful information to my friends, afraid that they might get better grades than me, even though I loved them as friends. It is a fierce competition with no mercy. From the first day of school, the students in Korea have to admit that studying is their duty and having straight A's is their goal in the merciless battlefield of competition. This overheated atmosphere of studying harder makes the students into intelligent but inhuman creatures left with a callous instinct to survive in the jungle of school society.

In Korean middle schools and high schools, the academic competition overrides students' privacy. When it comes to the testing mode, the time before the midterm or final exams, the schools use more explicit methods for intensifying the competition. Although they know the students' grades should not be disclosed for privacy, they become careless because test scores are more important than the privacy issue. When I was in eighth grade in Korea, my homeroom teacher passed around a sheet with all our names and GPAs before and after the tests so that the whole class could check not only their grades, but also their class rankings by comparing their grades with others'. It was my teacher's brilliant, but cruel, way of indirectly pushing the students to study harder by stimulating the competition. Every time I saw the grade sheet, I counted how many people were ahead of me, and I felt accomplished when those numbers shrank. On the other hand, the students' privacy in American schools is very important; the teachers release grade sheets without students' names, but with different indicators such as student ID numbers to protect students' academic privacy. In Korea, there is no actual privacy for an individual's grade because releasing the grades to the class was the most effective and powerful tactic to motivate the students by either mortifying or straining them. The students with low grades would feel embarrassed, and the students with high grades would be pressed to do better than other students who tried to catch up. However, passing around the grade paper was a relatively mild tactic. I saw some teachers from other classes put huge posters on the classroom door with their students' names and grades ordered from highest to lowest GPA. Even though all these methods had violated the students' privacy, no one openly complained because they had been trained to admit that those methods were also a part of the competition. The parents also didn't oppose the school system that frequently violated their children's privacy because they believed that those stimuli would help their children study harder no matter what. Studying is students' duty and responsibility; however, it should not dominate their life or ruin their mental health.

One fall day in 2006, I realized that something was seriously wrong with the Korean education system when I watched my friend's mother hug her son's picture in a black frame, crying her heart out. My friend, who was four years older than me, decided to end his life, unable to bear the stress from high school studying and the burden from the college-entrance exam. In his suicide note, he said that he wanted to give up trying to

survive the brutal competition that was choking his throat. According to Statistics Korea (KOSTAT), a central government organization for statistics, in 2010, 10.1% of middle and high school students felt an impulse to commit suicide, the major reason being the stress from studying and entering into colleges. College entrance accounts for 53.4% of all the reasons to commit suicide (KOSTAT). Although the competition is omnipresent and necessary to motivate people to compete in the world, it should not persuade one to take one's life. The heat of competition should be just hot enough to simmer the water, not enough to angrily boil until all the water has bubbled out of the pot. The Korean education system has been calling for limitless competition to motivate everyone to reach the top, but it consequently corrupts the young students' souls and drives them to dehumanize themselves.

South Korean president, Myung-bak Lee, vowed at his inauguration in 2008, "One-size-fits-all, government-led uniform curriculums and an education system that is locked only onto the college-entrance examination are not acceptable" (Ripley). He was determined to save the Korean education system from boiling in the competition pot. President Lee's comment about the insufficiency of the current Korean education system is ironic since President Obama's laudatory remarks were meant to show the Korean education system as a good model for America. It seems there is a significant purpose behind all of this crazy competition over studying, but it is actually a purpose without meaningful visions for the future. For the Korean students, there is only one purpose for studying: going to the famous colleges: **S**eoul University, **K**orea University, and **Y**onsei University, often called together as S.K.Y., taking the initials of the college names. Entering into S.K.Y. is the most common dream of the Korean students, and they think their lives will be smooth and easy after they receive the acceptance letters from those colleges. Although it is not necessarily true, the schools brainwash the students in that way to make them study harder. My seventh grade math teacher always started his class by saying, "People! Are you ready to get into S.K.Y?" Then, all the students in the class were supposed to answer him back with one voice, "Yes, sir!" As a result of brainwashing, the Korean students thoughtlessly set up their life goals as entering into S.K.Y., selling their own dreams to the academic competition created by the school system.

Often Korean students' desire for going to the top colleges uncontrollably grows and dominates their lives. The Korean College Scholastic Aptitude Test (CSAT), which is also called college entrance exam, determines the level of colleges that the students can apply depending on their scores. It is not absurd to say that Korean students study for 12 years to take a nine-hour long exam and have higher scores. High CSAT scores and GPA's are the only things that matter when gaining admissions into the top universities. Therefore, the pressure to do well on the CSAT is unimaginable because the students believe that the level of college determines their quality of life. CSAT season starts during the second week of November and so does the rising number of suicides. I am often afraid to read headlines in the news because there are always tragic stories or articles about students who have committed suicide as a result of heavy stress and burdens from preparing for the test. After the CSAT is over, the number of suicides increases as more students decide to end their life because they didn't have satisfactory scores.

With mass competition, the Korean education system has critical problems with an ineffective studying method called cramming or learning by rote. The word *cramming* has some different meanings in Korea compared to the meaning used in America. American students usually think of cramming as hastily studying before the exam, putting all the possible knowledge into their brains, but to Korean students, it is just a standard studying method based only on the memorization of facts. It is the most common studying strategy taught to the Korean students, but it is not practiced only before the exam; rather, it is done every night of the week in the small studying hell called the *hagwon*.

Hagwons are private academies that help students study certain subjects, similar to private tutoring in America. However, hagwons are much more systematic and strict almost like a smaller version of school except that it takes place for hours after school. According to the Korean Pediatric Society, 53% of 498 students, including elementary students, who participated in the survey taken in Seoul, spend two to three hours at hagwons, and 34% of the students spend four to five hours after school at the hagwons. Moreover, 96% of students answered that they go to hagwons during vacation to learn the next year's subjects ("Stress from hagwons"). The average number of hagwons that most students attend is three, but I was lucky enough to go to only two hagwons. When I had to go to math and science hagwons that took two hours each, I felt that I was in a studying

factory where the machines of teachers cracked open my head and poured algebraic and chemical equations into my brain, and forced me to memorize. Since the purpose of hagwons is to get ahead, they are taught at a very fast pace and at times I often felt overwhelmed. This forceful learning style continued for four hours every day, for eleven months. I got angry; it was not simple anger from irritation or annoyance, but real anger that gave a feeling of my blood stirring up from my toes to my head. I thought I was going mad. However, I was not the only one who had this feeling of going insane, all my friends who went to the hagwons with me felt the same way. Repetitive, purposeless procedures of learning significantly decrease the interest in subjects and leaves students mentally exhausted. By applying these strategies, the hagwons inhibit the students from developing their own creative learning styles that are effective for them. The students that are dependent on hagwons, including myself, tend to become passive and lack creative thoughts and never question the belief that cramming is the only and best way to study.

The public schools also go along with this cramming strategy by providing late-night study sessions. Most Korean high schools have a voluntary after-school program called self-study time from 6pm to 10pm. Although it is supposed to be "voluntary," all students' names are already on the program roster, which is ironic. Furthermore, it is very hard to drop out of the program or have an excused absence unless the student's parents directly call the teachers asking for permission. This involuntary after-school program reduces students' sleep and represses their freedom to choose the place and time they want to study. Because high school students take more classes at hagwons, they have to go to hagwons and study at least two hours more after the tiring late-night studying session. However, this is not the end; there is the last thing left, called homework. A bunch of homework given from school and hagwons are waiting for the students when they come home late at night and ready to steal their sleep for another two or three hours. Due to the influence of unnecessarily long "self-studying time," the average study hours of the Korean high school students came out to be ten hours and forty-seven minutes per day (KOSTAT). By requiring extra time for studying till late night, the after-school program not only reduces the students' sleep but also their free time to find their own interests and specialties.

Ten hours and forty-seven minutes of studying does not provide the students enough free time to develop their own talents and release their stress. Strict time schedules filled with hours of studying don't allow students to find what they really want to do in the future. For example, American students usually participate in sports, choir, club activities, or voluntary works that they are interested in when they are done with classes at 3 pm. By spending free time with friends and doing what excites them, students can develop their own dreams and connect their specialties with academics. However, the Korean education system does not provide outlets such as these where students can express their talents and release their stress from the heavy competition. Although they want to do something they are interested in, there is no time left because of the school, after-school study programs, hagwons, and homework that take up the entire day and night. After I entered sixth grade, my parents stopped planning for vacation trips or other big family events because they realized I was not able to spare the time due to studying. All I did during summer and winter vacations was study next year's math and science in order to get ahead of other people or at least prepare for the upcoming year. According to KOSTAT in 2011, 45.1% of the people aged between 13 and 19 said that they did not have satisfactory free time because of a shortage of time. This surpassed the percentages from all other age ranges that stated that shortage of time was their reason for inadequate free time (KOSTAT). The students in Korea suffer from a shortage of time because they spend their entire day studying math and science inside and outside of the school. They don't have enough time to discover themselves: their interests, their personalities, their talents, and their dreams. The Korean education system that deducts more free time from the students eventually limits essential opportunities to find their specialties and set their dreams with valuable purposes.

In my eighth grade class, our class motto was written in the two wooden frames hanging on the front wall; in one frame, it said, "Boys, if you study one more hour, you will have wives with a prettier face;" in the other frame, it said, "Girls, if you study one more hour, you will have husbands with a higher-paid job." Though everyone knew that the literal meaning of the class motto was only a funny joke, the real purpose hidden behind the joke was not funny at all. All my friends and I had been brainwashed into believing that studying harder is the only way to be successful in our lives and be happy in the future.

Achieving a higher level of education is important for success in our society; however, it cannot determine the life values of growing students.

The Korean schools have constrained the students and their unlimited possibilities by making them mentally and physically suffer from heavy academic pressure and an excessive amount of studying. According to the American futurist Alvin Toffler, South Korea needs "diversification in educational systems and curricula" limiting study hours and fostering various extracurricular activities ("Toffler Says"). Instead of clinging to hagwons and the same studying mechanism, it is crucial to allow the students to have satisfactory free time with various activities to express their passions and develop their creativity. By cooling down this too-hot competition for higher grades and top college entrance, the Korean students will have room to consider their dreams with meaningful purposes and lasting values. Therefore, it is time to say, "Take a break."

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