

Inside View: A Comparison of United States and South Korean Students' Perspectives on Their
High School Experiences

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Author Notes:

I would like to thank Professor Leslie Babinski and Professor Ken Rogerson for their invaluable advice, insight, and support throughout the process.

I am grateful to the Sanford School of Public Policy, the SOL Program, Professor Alma Blount, Professor Kristin Goss, Kyu-min Lee, the Korean Educational Development Institute, Dr. Young Hae Kang, Richard Lee, Ashley Chang, the entire Honors Thesis Seminar, all the high school students who participated in the interviews, friends, and family for their time, patience, and assistance.

Abstract

The perspectives of Korean and American high school students were compared to consider the effects of different education systems and policies on their high school experiences. Twenty-one students from South Korea and twenty U. S. students participated in in-person interviews or focus groups completed in English or Korean. The investigator translated and transcribed the audio recordings to then code the responses for themes. Analyses indicated that the two groups of students to have significantly different viewpoints on aspirations, the central role of academics, and level of satisfaction during high school. The impact of societal view of education is discussed with regard to the students' experiences of high school and the implications for education policy changes.

Inside View:

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In his March 10, 2009 education speech, President Obama advocated for longer school days and school years for American schools, citing South Korea as an example (Quaid, 2009). Education groups and parents protested against longer school days for children and argued against applying South Korea's model to the United States based on the argument that the methods do not necessarily translate into success academically in the United States (Burell, 2009). While it remains undetermined how strongly Obama plans to advocate for longer school days or years, it is clear that South Korea's school system and curriculum does seem produce globally competitive students, especially by the numbers. Korean high schools have grown in reputation over the past years due to the high performances rates that surpass the United States on almost every subject on the OECD's International Standardized Assessment and the high percentage of South Korean students that matriculate prestigious American universities (Baldi, 2007).

At the same time, Korean high schools are infamous for their intense educational practices and extreme high-stakes testing that results in a hypercompetitive environment. With school days that can last until 10pm and a national college entrance exam that determines university acceptances, Korean high school students experience conditions that most American high school students could never imagine. In Korea, students, parents, and schools go to great lengths to study for the National College Entrance Exam because of the significant social and economic advantages that result from attending a prestigious university, as noted in a recent New York Times article (Choe, 2008). Even more, Korean society exerts a particular obsession with

education, now coined as “education fever,” leading many families to spend exorbitant amounts of money on private tutoring and to instill the importance of quality education to their children (Choe, 2009).

While perhaps the United States does not experience “education fever” to the same degree as Korea, the concept of an elite education at institutions like the Ivy League schools motivates many students for similar reasons. As a result, in the United States there is increased media attention on the highly competitive nature of college acceptance rates at top tier universities as more highly qualified high school students apply to the most prestigious universities (Steinberg, 2010).

This research project examined public high school students’ perceptions and attitudes about their learning environments in their respective countries. While test scores and even college acceptance rates can provide information on academic achievement, interviews give insight into inner motivations and opinions that are important to consider when developing policy. Students from New Jersey and South Korean high schools participated in focus groups or one-on-one interviews, answering questions about their educational experience, career prospects, personal interests, and desires in their high school experience to motivations for studying. Students’ responses are compared to determine similarities and differences between Korean and American students attitudes about their educational experience. Finally, the importance of societal values on education policy and the importance of comparing student experiences across countries in the consideration of potential policy changes are discussed.

Identifying Societal Values on Education

In comparing the societal values of South Korea and the United States, it is important to consider the cultural and historical context in which these two education systems function. After

the Japanese occupation and Korean War, South Korea experienced rapid industrialization and quickly developed a broad education system available to the masses. Some research indicated that Korea's development led to "education fever" and "prestige-oriented views" that have dominated opinions about education in the past few decades (Lee and Shouse, 2008; Sorenson, 1994). While the United States education system took longer to develop, scholars suggested that in the United States less universal views on prestigious education exist (Hearn, 1990). Although a few studies have researched student perspectives within a community or a nation, no studies have compared student perspectives in depth. This type of qualitative information can be an important factor in discussions on education policy.

Background on Korean Education

Following the Korean Civil War (1950-1953), South Korea experienced rapid economic growth in the 1960s. According to a report by the Korean Ministry of Education, with the development of new political and economic institutions post-civil war, the newly founded national government began several initiatives to democratize, equalize, and standardize education, enacting a comprehensive education law (Korean Ministry of Education, 2008). This resulted from a massive nationwide effort to expand education beginning in the late 1950s (Lee, 2008a). It established a 6-3-3-4 system: six years of elementary school, three years of middle school, three years of high school, and four years of higher education¹ (Korean Ministry of Education, 2008). This creation of a formal educational structure reflected a nationwide effort to make "education the foundation of the nation" by expanding educational opportunities in South Korea. Additionally, the country established *hongik-ingan*, or devotion to welfare of mankind, as

¹ Though this program established a four-year higher education system, most universities remain private, and all matriculants must pay tuition with the exception of a few scholarships (Korean Ministry of Education, 2008).

the national ideal. Furthermore, it mandated elementary school to reduce illiteracy rates, which reached up to 78% in 1948 (Lee, 2008). Consequently the illiteracy rate decreased from 78% to 4.1% over the span of ten years (1948-1958) (Lee, 2008).

After the Korea's basic education stabilized and compulsory elementary education took effect, secondary education began to expand in the 1960s and 70s to keep up with the nation's rapid industrialization. By 1970, there were 889 high schools, and that number continued to increase to 2,156 high schools with over 1.7 million students enrolled in 2005 (Korean Ministry of Education, 2008). Vocational high school sprung up in a systemized and technical manner reflecting the industrial nature of the country at that time (Korean Ministry of Education, 2008). By 1980, the number of high schools and vocational high schools had more than doubled. Furthermore, vocational high schools and education policies emphasized science and technology, establishing a "5-year scientific technology education encouragement plan (1967-1971)" (Korean Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 21). Additionally, by the 1970s schools and student enrollment had risen to a point where education policy attempted to normalize institutions (Korean Ministry of Education, 2008). The income levels of many South Koreans dramatically increased, allowing wealthier families to increase education expenditures significantly (Seth, 2002). In an effort to standardize educational opportunities, the government implemented regulations on the kinds of education expenditures allowed and attempted to eliminate entrance fees (Seth, 2002). A No-test Middle School Entrance System was established as a change from requiring students to take tests to attend middle schools. Furthermore, in addition to expanding high schools, Korea adopted a High School Equalization Policy that required students to attend local high schools based on residence to relieve excessive competition and bottleneck issues (Lee & Shouse, 2008). While these policies did reduce some pressure, attendance rates remained high

due to the baby boom during this time period. Also, the college entrance policies standardized college acceptances by creating on common college entrance exam and expanded college opportunities by extending many colleges to four-year programs.

The 1980s were a time when magnet high schools, science high schools, and foreign language schools began (Lee & Shouse, 2008). Furthermore, higher education started to become more sophisticated and expansive. The nation began to focus on life-long education in addition to formalizing education colleges into four-year establishments. Primary, or grades one through six, education saw few major structural changes, but elementary education was reformed to provide smaller class sizes and qualitative improvement. The government also introduced efforts to steer away from the focus on college entrances in favor of character and citizenship education (Korean Ministry of Education, 2008). However, given the increase in private after-school education, these measures do not seem to have been as effective as the government desired (Lee & Shouse, 2008).

In the mid-1990s, Korean education, in addition to the economy, underwent changes to usher in the globalization of the world. Called the “May 31st Reform of the Education System,” the Young-Sam Kim Administration instituted a new direction for Korean education focusing on creativity and life-long learning (Lee, 2008). Additionally, starting the late 1990s and early 2000s, Korea started the Education Informationalization Project, integrating computer technology and the Internet in teaching to help the spread of information. Throughout the last decade, the increase in number of schools (elementary through higher education) has somewhat tapered compared to the sharp increases in the 1960s and 1970s. In 2006, there were 526 public high schools, 282 private high schools, 707 vocational schools, and 175 universities, and the number of schools had not changed significantly since 2000 (Korean Ministry of Education,

2008). Additionally, in 2008, the OECD reported that South Korea's percentage of students that graduated high school on time was 93% (Lynch, 2008).

The United States Education System

Throughout the colonial times and first half of the 19th century, the public education system was not very well established. The Constitution gives much control over education policy to state and local governments. Up until the 20th century, much of the population did not complete high school, as most teenagers expected to join the family business or begin a family after junior high school, and the growth in public high school was slow (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007). Public or private high schools were not particularly widespread, and the cost of private schools prevented many students from attending high schools. Education at the higher level, which was influenced by the Enlightenment method and the patronage system, was limited to the privileged few (Urban & Jennings, 2008).

After the Civil War, the United States entered a more rapid state of modernization and sought to develop the education system on the national level. The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 provided land grants to develop technical and vocational universities (Urban & Jennings, 2008). The education system further developed throughout the Progressive Era with the development of formal pedagogy and the centralization of high schools around districts and cities due to figures like Horace Mann (Urban & Jennings, 2008). Moreover, in the beginning of the 1900s, the nation experienced a "high school movement" that sought to expand educational opportunities after junior high schools, emphasizing more practical curricula, open enrollment policies, and decentralizing school districts (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007).

By mid-20th century comprehensive high schools became more common in order to allow any student to attend school for 12 years for free, and due to the post-World War II "baby boom"

the number of young children exploded, increasing enrollment numbers (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007). A huge boom in college enrollment followed the GI Bill of 1944 that subsidized college attendance for World War II veterans. The issue of race took center stage during the 1950s with the landmark *Brown v. Board of Ed.* case that became a catalyst for education reforms throughout the country. The Civil Rights Act solidified these changes in an attempt to provide more equal opportunities for education (Urban & Jennings, 2008). Furthermore, with the opening of universities to women throughout the latter half of the 20th century, college attendance has risen.

A variety of public schools are available in the United States in addition to the traditional four-year public high school. In many areas, students may elect to attend charter schools, science and technology schools, magnet schools, vocational schools, or schools with Gifted and Talented programs. These other types of high school can require examinations or applications for admission and offer more specialized or diverse curricula as well. Still, generally high schools, especially typical public high schools, offer a diverse, broad curriculum requiring students to take classes from a variety of subjects, often including history, mathematics, English, and science (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2007). Usually schools require students to take up to three years of these core subjects and two years of physical education (NCES, 2007). Most high schools also offer electives ranging from art, music, foreign language, and computer science, as well as the opportunity for study hall periods (NCES, 2007). Furthermore, in recent decades, the standardization of high school curricula has increased with the emphasis on state-wide examinations to promote improved educational quality and accountability, particularly with the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001.

According to the United States Department of Education (2007), a total of 15,078,000 students were enrolled in public high schools in 2006, and the national dropout rate was at 8.7%. However, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (2010) calculated the United States graduation rate at 68.6%. The difference in percentages could be attributed to the various definitions and methods of calculating “dropout rate.” The Dept. of Education identified dropouts as those who never obtain a high school degree, whereas the National Center for Higher Education Management calculated the individuals who do not graduate from high school within four years.

The Education Department estimated overall post-secondary enrollment to be 17,759,00 in 2006 and projected the numbers to increase through 2017. In 2006, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems estimated that 61% of students go on to college and calculated the number of first-time freshman in higher education to be 1,913,501 in the nation (NCHEMS, 2010). Furthermore, high schools have been placing a greater emphasis on college preparation in the recent decades by offering Advanced Placement (AP) Programs and International Baccalaureate (IB) Programs, which offer more rigorous courses and potentially allow for college credit. According to College Board, the non-profit organization that offers Advanced Placement Program, over one million high school students took over two million Advanced Placement exams, which are end of the year tests on AP subjects in 2008 (College Board, 2008).

Korea’s Education Fever

Although in recent years interest in Korean education has grown, education researchers have been studying South Korea’s success in educational standards in elementary and high school education since the early 1990s. Clark Sorenson (1994) studied Korean history and

culture to understand the key behind Korean students' high achievement rates, particularly in science and math. Though Sorenson recognized that traditionally Korean students were not considered to be naturally more gifted in math or science compared to other countries, Korea's complex history, path to development, and culture intertwines to produce an educationally focused society with students quite proficient in these areas (Sorenson, 1994). Furthermore, Sorenson argued that while Korea's ties with Confucian principles and values, such as the importance of status in society, have played an important role in developing an education focus, Korea's rapid industrialization played a larger role in creating this sense of education fever, or simply zeal for education (Sorenson, 1994). Status in Korea today is achieved rather than inherited, and education is a primary factor in one's earning abilities, making one's status dependent on the level of education obtained (Sorenson, 1994).

Soojeong Lee and Roger Shouse (2008) took a different approach to education fever, defining it as a more intense "amalgam of intensified social disposition, orientation, expectation, and activity that highlights, reinforces, and to extent exaggerates the value and pursuit of higher academic attainment among families and students across socioeconomic levels" (p. 114). While Lee and Shouse acknowledged that traditional East Asian culture and the social capital theory are both relevant hypotheses for education fever due to the importance of university educated people in Korea's development, the authors posited that other factors influence the various degrees of education fever among individuals, resulting in a more complex phenomenon than others perceive (Lee & Shouse, 2008). Through case studies, the paper discussed the tightly knit relationship between occupational attainment, social status, Korean culture, academic goals, and mobility that results in educational fever (Lee & Shouse, 2008). Lee and Shouse asserted that in Korea pathways to high social status have very limited interpretations. According to the authors,

Koreans tend to believe that higher education and hard work are the only two methods of achieving higher social status (Lee & Shouse, 2008). Therefore, schooling and high academic achievement became closely related to higher social status and future potential, resulting in increasing importance of good education in Korean society. Further, the authors asserted that such educational fever does not exist in the United States, because social status, occupational reality, and academics are not as tightly intertwined as Korea (Lee & Shouse, 2008). However, they provide little evidence for this conclusion.

Prestige-oriented view in South Korea

Soojeong Lee (2006) sought to explain the motivations behind education fever, particularly the immense expenditures (one study by Hyunjin Kim calculated over \$12 billion spent annually) on “shadow education,” or “prevalent private tutoring companies,” in Korea (p. 2). Shadow education is a term, defined by Soojeong Lee (2006), used to describe the out-of-school educational activities that parallel formal schooling, ranging from private tutoring to test prep, in South Korea. Lee argued that the utilization of shadow education, hypercompetitiveness, and more broadly education fever are related to Korean society’s prestige-oriented view of education (Lee, 2006). Although she acknowledged that acceptance into prestigious universities has quantitative benefits, the author argued that Koreans’ distinct views about college reputation have an important effect on their attitudes toward education, including the institutionalization of shadow education in Korean education (Lee, 2006). Lee asserted that this is evident by the fact that a majority of Koreans desire acceptance into the few, prestigious universities, even vocational high school students, despite extreme competitiveness and the grueling experience of the national college entrance exam, the Sooneung (Lee, 2006). The author attributed this prestige-oriented view to Korean society’s belief that academics have the power to influence job

prospects, resulting in students and families feeling uneasy about college prospects (Lee, 2006).

Ultimately, Lee argued that because such prestige-oriented views exist in Korea, short-term solutions to limit shadow education would not reduce overall utilization of private tutoring services. Instead, long-term measures must be taken to influence Korea's perceptions of the value of college education due to the financial, emotional, and social tolls on families from expending financial and social capital on college acceptances (Lee, 2006).

Elite Colleges and Social Stratification in the United States

The United States does not experience such widespread preoccupation with prestigious universities, but perceptions that elite schools serve as a pathway to social and economic success do exist. Randall Collins (1979) considered the sociology perspective of stratification and education in the United States. Collins asserted that historically in modern society the general rationale for stratification is that college education is equated with a greater skill set, and therefore success (p. 7). However, the author noted only some stratification is attributed to educational attainment, because increasing numbers of people seek education but relative positions have not changed (Collins, 1979). Nevertheless, Collins acknowledged that education does play a big part in social status (Collins, 1979). The author further clarified that grades are tied to occupational status primarily as a certification value of education degrees rather than for skill (Collins, 1979). Generally employees do not select candidates solely based on school grades but also consider more abstract characteristics, such as personality, leadership, and ability to work on a team (Collins, 1979). Additionally, Collins qualified the importance of education and academics by asserting that grades often correlate with class background, implying that family background also plays a role in education attainment and stratification (Collins, 1979).

Kingston and Lewis (1990) compiled studies of elite schools – college preparatory

schools, universities, and professional schools – to investigate how elite schools relate to social stratification. Ultimately, the authors determined that type of schooling does matter (Kingston & Lewis, 1990). Prestigious degrees do have economic consequence and serve as a way to climb up the social ladder, and elite schools serve as cultural markets and identifiers (Kingston & Lewis, 1990). As a result, some people strive for elite status at young ages if they have the resources by attending prestigious elite elementary schools (Kingston & Lewis, 1990). However, the authors say that elite is a broad term in the United States, and the idea of “the best” is open to diverse interpretation (Kingston & Lewis, 1990). While well-known universities exist, or even groups of universities like the Ivy League or “Little Three²,” no school has formal rights or privileges over their status, because “American education is not differentiated on an objective dimension that makes identification of elite clear” (Kingston & Lewis, 1990, p. xvii). While reputation does influence elite status, the diversity of the United States, sheer size of the nation, and lack of governmental control has resulted in a “less than sharply demarcated prestige hierarchy” (Kingston & Lewis, 1990, p. xviii).

Kingston and Lewis’ compilation included a variety of studies, but only a few focused on the perceptions of prestige at the university level. Only one study considered the pathways to attending such universities. The book included a study by the editors – Kingston and Lewis – that considers the desirability of elite institutions and the resulting type of student body at those institutions. Using enrollment data and trends of college costs, the study found that while the prestige and elite status is desirable, people cite the access to such institutions as a major issue (Kingston & Lewis, 1990). Rising costs of attending elite institutions concern the middle class people, and subsequently middle class families feel that they are being squeezed out of the

² An informal name for three prestigious liberal arts colleges, Amherst, Williams, and Wesleyan Colleges

system (Kingston & Lewis, 1990). As a result, the elite status of institutions reflects connection to money rather than high intellectual standards, even though the academic performance of the students who attend the universities may be very high (Kingston and Lewis, 1990).

James Hearn (1990), a professor at the University of Georgia and prominent researcher on higher education, completed the only study in the book about pathways to elite college and concludes that the college acceptance process has both objective and subjective aspects. The investigation conducted a study of high school seniors and follow up college data, especially the ones with the highest cognitive test scores (Hearn, 1990). From the data, the author concluded that academic performance and intelligence is considered to be the major factor, but socioeconomic status, gender, racial and ethnic characteristics are also important criteria for college acceptances (Hearn, 1990).

Leslie Killgore (2009), a professor of sociology at the University of Holy Cross, investigated similar focuses on merit, competition, and elite colleges and asserts that preoccupation with elite institutions is not equal across all class groups. Students with parents who have no college education usually desire access to college level education, but middle-class students with college-educated parents increasingly place importance on elite university education (Killgore, 2009). The professional and upper class expect degrees from elite universities to provide advantageous social connections and generous financial returns, and because of the selective universities' elite statuses, the public expects such schools to provide opportunities for the disadvantaged (Killgore, 2009). Furthermore Killgore argues that while the academic criteria for college admission are relatively straight forward, the non-academic portion, such as extra-curricular activities, is less clear (Killgore, 2009). As a result, the lack of transparency results in tensions and anxiety from students and families who value attendance at

an elite university.

Investigating Student Perspectives

Though the literature is not widespread, a few studies have investigated the student perspectives on Korean education. Lee & Shouse (2008) took an in-depth look into student ideas and opinions by conducting interviews with Korean students who were attending American universities. These students described their experiences in Korean education, in which some had completed high school, and spoke about their motivations for studying in the United States (Lee & Shouse, 2008). The researchers found that culture influenced educational decisions and behaviors, making education reform difficult in South Korea (Lee & Shouse, 2008). Another study completed by Jung Mi Nam (2005), researched Korean college student perspectives about education in Korea at the university level. The investigator sampled students to complete interviews and analyzed for common themes and categories to determine opinions about English teaching methods in Korean universities (Nam, 2005). The research discovered several pedagogical weaknesses in English teaching methods based on student interviews (Nam, 2005).

Similarly, researchers have used interviews to investigate American student perspectives. Schultz and Cook-Sather (2001) interviewed students in middle and high schools about their high school lives. Described in the book *In Their Own Words*, the researchers interviewed twenty-eight students from various backgrounds and ethnicities that attended schools in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Cook-Sather and Schultz, 2001). The authors primarily sought to discover what students thought about schooling, teaching methods, social lives, and ongoing education reforms and allowed them to determine the important issues in school lives (Cook-Sather and Schultz, 2001). Phelan et. al. (1997) also took a comparable approach to student perspectives in their work *Adolescents' Worlds: Negotiating Family, Peers, and School*. The

authors interviewed 55 students from five urban California high schools to highlight their perspectives on socioeconomic conditions and its effect on education as well as other factors such as immigration and transportation to schools (Phelan et. al., 1997). The researchers found that often “at-risk” youth were anxious due to the pressure to succeed academically and felt that they needed to separate school life and family life (Phelan et. al., 1997). The study concluded that teachers, as well as others in education, needed to focus on student perspectives and opinions on their experiences (Phelan et. al., 1997).

Despite the dearth of research on student perspectives, especially comparing students across different countries, a few have stressed the importance of student perspectives in education policy. Cook-Sather, one of the primary investigators of the previously mentioned *In Their Own Words*, advocated for the importance of student perspectives in the education policy process (Cook-Sather, 2002). She wrote that student perspectives introduce into “critical conversations the missing perspectives of those who experience daily the effects of existing educational policies-in-practice” (Cook-Sather, 2002, pg. 3). As a result, Cook-Sather determined that student perspectives were essential in understanding ways to improve education policy and indicate future directions for education reform (Cook-Sather, 2002). In the same way, Gunter and Thomson (2007) completed a case study on students as researchers and policy makers within a school and discovered that students brought information that adults often did not anticipate or did not want to hear. They determined student voices in the policy process were crucial in developing changes that affected students’ experiences (Gunter and Thomson, 2007).

Therefore, it appears that based on previous studies, the United States and South Korea have distinct societal views on education with Korea’s education fever and America’s less exclusive focus on elite status of education. While much of the past literature has focused on

individual countries' views on education, few have compared these views across different countries. Therefore, not only will this investigation attempt to gain insight into the perspectives of some of the most central actors in education policy—the students—but also analyze the similarities and differences of these two nations' educational values and philosophies.

Research Methods

Research Design

This project used focus groups and one-on-one interviews with high school students³ from South Korea and the United States to compare and contrast student experiences in the high school education. Given the particular similarities and differences between the two education systems, the comparisons of the students' perspectives are intended to provide insight into both educational systems and potential policy improvements.

In some ways the educational systems in South Korea and the United States are similar—they both have the benefit of well-developed public education on the primary and secondary level. In addition, both governments mandate school attendance until the secondary level, resulting in the majority of students attending public schools (Korean Ministry of Education, 2008; Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007). Furthermore, given the well-developed tertiary education system, in both nations, a major focus of the educational system is to create paths for students to graduate high school and attend higher education institutions (Korean Ministry of Education, 210; Pulliam & Van Patten 206). As a result, due to the relatively high secondary school attendance and similar national education structure, comparisons could be made.

This project utilized qualitative methods to obtain a deep and comprehensive understanding of the experience of participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The project used focus

³Duke University Institutional Review Board for Research with Human Subjects approved this project under Protocol 2817 in 2009 and Protocol A0084 in 2010.

groups and one-on-one interview rather than surveys or other methods of data gathering for several reasons. Rather than limit the student responses to certain predetermined variables, the use of qualitative methods allowed the flexibility and openness necessary to get an adequate sense of students' own responses (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Interviews and focus groups allowed students to create their own responses rather than choosing from a confined set of choices (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

South Korea	United States
Total: 21 students	Total: 20 students
Sex Male: 6 Female: 15	Sex Male: 14 Female: 5
Age Sixteen: 3 Seventeen: 16 Eighteen: 2	Age Fifteen: 4 Sixteen: 14 Seventeen: 1
Grade First Year: 0 Second Year: 19 Third Year: 2	Grade Freshman: 0 Sophomore: 4 Junior: 15 Senior: 1

Participant Demographics

Participants from each country included college-bound students from several public high schools. The focus group sizes ranged from two people to five people with a total of twenty-one Korean students and twenty U.S. students. The Korean student data collection methods included

seven focus groups and no one-one-interviews⁴. The American students opted to participate in four focus groups and six one-on-one interviews. The Korean students were second and third year⁵ (equivalent of junior/sophomore and senior years) high school students from Suwon and Bundang, which are part of the greater Seoul Metropolitan area. The American students were public high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors from Bergen County, New Jersey.

Because the United States population includes greater ethnic diversity as compared to Korea, the two groups of students were different in the range of ethnic diversity. Whereas the Korean data set only had students of Korean descent, the United States data set included students of multiple backgrounds, such as Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and Asian students. Because this investigation did not consider the differences in diversity, the ethnic backgrounds of individual students were not recorded in specific numbers. Despite the difference in degrees of diversity, this study appropriately included students from various backgrounds as it represents the student makeup of United States high schools.

Interviewing the Students

The investigator recruited participants through existing personal and professional networks but did not personally know any of the interviewees. Interviews occurred in public locations, such as Starbucks or Baskin Robbins. The interviewer used an iPod to record the responses in order to verify field notes. The Korean student interviews were conducted in Korean and then translated by the interviewer who is fluent in Korean⁶.

⁴ All participants were given the opportunity to choose between focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

⁵ Korean high schools consist of three years.

⁶ The transcripts were not translated word for word but aimed to capture the meaning of the responses, because there are several idioms and sayings that do not translate readily into English.

The interviewer asked questions about students' daily life, their post-high school plans, dreams and ambitions, ideas on the purpose of high school education, and desires from their high school experiences. The students from each country answered analogous but not identical sets of questions in order to allow for cultural and institutional differences. For example, in South Korea, all students must take one standardized college entrance exam, whereas in the United States, students can opt to take the SAT Reasoning Test (SAT) or American College Testing (ACT) exam for college entrance.

Data Analysis Process

After completion of the focus group interviews, the investigator transcribed the recordings and analyzed the data using NVivo Qualitative Analysis Software (QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 9, 2010). Because students from Korea and the United States responded to a similar, but not identical set of questions, the responses categorized into relevant topics and then coded for attitudes and opinions through content analysis of the interviews (Stewart & Shamasani, 1990). Coding the data encompassed looking for key words or concepts in the student responses and recording the frequency of similar answers for a given topic or question (Stewart & Shamasani, 1990). Furthermore, the analysis included a hierarchy of categories and sub-categories created from most important to least important as a way to organize the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Categories and concepts were also analyzed to see if relationships between one another exist, and the concepts and categories will be expanded (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Then, the investigator compared the types and frequencies of responses across the two data sets to determine larger trends between and within the Korean and American data sets, integrating the data (Corbin & Straus, 2008).

Given the nature of focus groups and one-on-one interviews, certain limitations applied to this project. Because participation in the focus groups and interviews was voluntary, some selection bias existed. The students' responses may have been skewed by the fact that students and parents must consent to the interview process. Furthermore, because for the focus groups some students responded in groups of three or four students, it was possible that certain respondents influenced others' frequency of answers or candidness. Additionally, due to the small sample size of both data sets, it is possible that the focus group and interview responses were not representative of larger populations in South Korea or the United States. Nevertheless, this data collection method provided the flexibility for a variety of student responses and the details that surveys methods would not be able to offer (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Despite the relatively small sample size, the length of the interviews and the number of students provided insight into larger trends in students' opinions and experiences that remained the core of this study (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

Student Responses on the High School Experience

Data analysis showed that Korean and American high school students had significantly different perspectives on their educational experiences regarding school structure, classroom environment and teaching methods, high school lifestyle, and futures after high school. Subsequently, the two groups of students demonstrated differences on views about their respective countries' education policies and directions for high school education. Still, some areas showed variation or similarities across all students, demonstrating that the two data sets did not have distinct differences across all topics or questions.

The following main categories were the predominant themes⁷ in the interviews:

Academic Life, Social Aspects, and Aspirations and Opportunities. The students' discussions of academic life consisted of the focus on academics and college preparation, the importance (or lack thereof) of standardized examinations, and the stresses associated with high school life. The responses related to social issues included subtopics of social atmosphere among students and classroom environment. Student discussions of aspirations and opportunities focused on choices available in high schools, desires to study in another country, and existence of opportunities to succeed and pursue interests.

Academic Life

Focus on academics and college preparation. While there were no direct questions about the degree of focus on academics or college preparation, many of the answers discussed these aspects of students' high school life. Over half of the South Korean students said that a major issue for the high school education system was that it was too focused on academics and college admissions. Nine of the twenty-one students specifically mentioned that the focus on academics was to the detriment to those who were not academically oriented and were talented in arts or other areas. A second year high school student responded:

Classes like gym, music, and art are unnecessary. They are not needed when getting into colleges. It doesn't matter if you get zeros in those classes. So more and more those classes will disappear. But I don't think that's good. It's possible that some people are really good at music and art, but they'll never know if those classes do not exist.

Also, a few students felt that the high school education was geared solely for college admissions and did not give a path for students who did not want to or could not pursue a college

⁷ Full coding scheme can be seen in Appendix C

education after high school. One student mentioned that “if parents have a major that they want their children to go into, but if that major is not offered in Seoul colleges, that major is not an option anymore.” The Korean students frequently answered that all the teachers would say to the students that college admissions were the most important thing and that academic subjects took precedence over extracurricular activities or nonacademic subjects. Several students explained that extracurricular activities were not offered for third year students and that performing well in subjects like art and music were not considered to be useful. Moreover, because Korean society values university reputation, students felt immense pressure to get into those schools from their parents, teachers, and themselves due to the advantages of graduating from an elite university. Students responded:

P2: Everyone only looks at the university a person attends. If a person goes to Seoul National University, people will think “Oh that person is really smart” and accept that person. If a person goes to a small, rural university without a famous name then society ignores that person. Everyone is like that, Korean people.

P1: People forgive grades for the most part. When people apply for jobs, the employers look at the college name first. People who graduate from the SKY⁸ schools get picked first. The people from lesser-known schools get cut first. It’s like that. People who go to schools that are not well known have a handicap.

Many of the American high school students mentioned that grades and college preparation were important part of their lives, although they did not talk in detail to the extent as the Korean students. Many students said that academics were important to their high school career. Five students responded that the quality of colleges was important and that their parents

⁸ An informal abbreviation of the three most prestigious universities in South Korea—Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University

emphasized the colleges, but none of the students indicated that their lives completely depended on college attendance like the Korean students. Any negativity about the focus on academics was that the teachers failed to focus on the academic performance of all the students. At least two of the respondents specifically stated that the teachers should do more to encourage the lower achieving students to improve their grades.

However, few responded that it was the only grades and academics that were emphasized at school. Furthermore, only one student stated that grades were the most important. Three also mentioned that they planned on pursuing other options than attending universities, such as going to community college or the armed forces. While three to four students stressed the importance of competitive course loads such as taking AP classes, the students as a whole did not indicate feeling pressured to take those classes. One junior said that while all of the student's friends took AP exams, the respondent did not feel the need to take such high-level classes or examinations to get into college. The student preferred to take classes at a comfortable level of difficulty without the rigors of AP exams.

Moreover most of the students responded that extracurricular activities played a fairly large role in high school careers, even if they did not participate themselves. Some of the most commonly mentioned extracurricular activities were athletics, debate, and orchestra. A minority of students responded that there were not enough types of extracurricular activities offered at their school. However, overall the American students replied positively about the availability of extracurricular activities in schools. One student described the United States education as "holistically oriented" and that it doesn't focus "on just academics... focus on extracurriculars and sports, the person."

High-pressure examinations. The Korean students frequently mentioned the Sooneung as central to their educational experience. One student responded:

The Sooneung is an exam that tests everything we've learned in school all in one day. If we screw up on that exam, we're dead meat. We have to wait a whole year to take that exam again. We answer those questions to go to college. It's our life, our future. But if we bomb that test, we really don't want to study again. It's twelve years of studying that is determined by that test.

All of the students responded that they did not like the way the exam was administered. Eleven out of the twenty-one Korean students said that they would want to change the exam by offering it multiple times a year, allowing some choice in the subjects chosen, and making the exam only one factor in college admissions rather than being the main determining factor. Most of the participants cited this exam as their main source of stress and the reason for many stressful situations in their high school career, such as four-hour long mandatory study halls, taking prep classes, and immense competition in schools. Two high school seniors wished that they could take the exam in some alternate form:

P2: I think it's [the Sooneung] absolutely ridiculous. It tests everything we've learned for the past twelve years, and it's all decided in one day. It's unfair.

P1: I think it's not good. If your condition is not good or you're not feeling well that day you ruin twelve years of studying. Then you have to wait a year to try again. It's not good. Right now, people take the exam once. I wish we could take the exam in a few parts or the exam was only four hours long [as opposed to eight hours long]. Or people could choose based on what people like or are good at, so people could develop their

interests and take the exam based on that. People who have talent but are bad in school could do better on the exam.

Overall, the responses from American students were quite different. A few students did mention it frequently as something that should be changed to have less importance in determining students' futures. One student specifically mentioned that he believed that "it's standardized tests that limits people" and that "there are students that can show their potential more than they show in SAT scores." The student continued on to explain that colleges should focus more on qualitative measures to determine college acceptances rather than numbers and exams. One student responded:

I don't feel that the SATs and ACTs should determine your life, because it's just a test. It's just reading, math, and science. Well if I become a geologist, none of the stuff that's going to be on that test is really going to apply to my life ever. But if you get a really bad grade on it, you can't go to a good school. Why should that grade determine anything about you? It shouldn't. That's dumb. I feel that they say that you have to get a good grade. No you don't. It's nice if I did. But if I don't, I'll still be able to live my life and do whatever I want. This test doesn't prove anything. It's a number. One number on a test. Or the other test you have to take to graduate. [Like the] The HSPA⁹ [High School Proficiency Assessment]. That's dumb too. If I get a bad grade, it should reflect the teachers, because they're not teaching us anything. Maybe if they stopped changing the test around, they didn't lie to about what's going to be on the test, I wouldn't do so badly on the HSPA. Once again just numbers.

⁹ The HSPA is a state-mandated exam that is administered to high school juniors in New Jersey, and all students must pass in order to graduate high school.

Some of the US students did mention standardized tests, such as the SATs, as a source of stress, however it did not dominate the substance of the interviews as did with the Korean students. A number of the students did mention dissatisfaction at the level of importance that standardized tests played in college admissions, but they did not feel completely overburdened by the pressures of the exam. Fewer students compared to the Korean students responded that they utilized private tutoring services to get a good score on the SATs. The U.S. students acknowledged that college acceptances depended on other factors such as G.P.A., extracurricular activities, and personal interests, taking the pressures off of the exams.

Stress from being a high school student. All students interviewed responded to questions relating to stress in their high school experience. They were not limited to discussing academically related stress. Rather, any stress that arose out of their high school experience whether it was from their social life, interactions with teachers, or extracurricular activity.

Almost all of the students interviewed, Korean and American, felt that they were stressed out about something. Almost all of the Korean students responded that they were very stressed about the college entrance exam and their school grades, because they were worried about not gaining acceptance to college. One student went as far as saying that the Sooneung was the greatest source of stress for Korean high school students. Other students mentioned that the stress became so intense as the exam day came closer that schools had to take measures to prevent students from hurting themselves:

P1: When it's time for the Sooneung, some people even commit suicide. Die. But we can't die at school, because they put bars on the windows.

P3: They put up metal bars

P2: The really claustrophobic thing about school is that there are huge windows, but there are huge metal bars over them.

P3: So people can't jump out the window

P2: There's a lot of people who feel like they want to jump out the window. During the time of the exam.

P1: It's like a prison

P2: A true prison-like school. It's all the high schools in Korea.

P1: But they did that to make it safer for students

P3: It's so suffocating.

P1: Yeah it really is like that. That's why during college exam preparation time, after first period, people want to kill themselves. Some people really do commit suicide.

Even though they block off the windows, students find a way to fall off of something

P2: Some place close by

P3: They jump off from somewhere

P1: From a high place

P2: Whenever it gets closer to exam season, someone always commits suicide. I feel so bad for them. So bad

P1: But I can understand

P2: Me too, really

Many of the American students also said that grades, tests, and colleges were sources of stress as well, although there were varying degrees. Half of the students felt that they were very stressed due to college preparation. However, for several of the students, academics were not the cause of anxiety. Instead, they were worried about their ability to stand out against their

competitors for college admissions. Four students mentioned the high costs of higher education and the need for financial aid and scholarships as major sources of stress. Another category of stress for American students that was not present for Korean students was social pressures. Several U.S. students mentioned pressures to engage in activities like drugs and partying that cause anxiety for some of the participants.

Three students mentioned that they were not stressed usually, except during tests. Two American students mentioned that the tests were stressful, when teachers did not teach properly or would give tests that did not reflect the learned material.

One student answered:

I'm only stressed when the teachers teach one thing and give a test on another thing.

That's the only time I feel stressed. I don't feel stressed about homework or anything.

I've had a teacher that gives packets that we're supposed to review, and we get tests from the textbook that had nothing to do with the packet. And it's just like what is this? Or they don't give us enough review time. We'd learn something one day and have a test the next day. How are we supposed to study? I'm not going to waste my time at home.

You're going to change it anyways.

Therefore, overall American students had diverse answers for sources of stress. Their responses indicated lower levels of stress, especially related to academics, classes, and grades. Many replied that stress came sporadically only when students had to take tests for their classes. Others indicated that they were stressed but could not identify sources of stress, and one student even answered that the individual was not stressed at all.

Social Aspects

Social atmosphere among students. Overall students in Korea cited that social interactions in school and outside of school with peers played a positive role in their lives. One student went as far as to say, “I go to school to see my friends. I don’t care about seeing my teachers. I really don’t want to go to school, but I go because of my friends. Only that.” The Korean students mentioned that students in school got along with each other and few divisions existed among the students. Several students responded that kids bonded with each other over the struggles and pressures of high school life and that because of the extended amount of time spent in school, many students became very close throughout the years. Some did mention that competitiveness did exist among the students, though it was teachers that fostered much of the competition. When asked about the good things about their high school experience, many cited good friends and the opportunities to spend time with friends as positive things:

P3: There’s a lot of people.

P1: Good friends.

P3: The kids at our school are especially nice.

P1: It’s better to study at our school compared to other schools. Most of the students study at our school. The atmosphere is nice. The truth is that the environment is nice, but all we do is study.

The US students had a less positive view of the social atmosphere in their high schools overall. Some students did mention that high school was “fun,” because “you know everybody.” These students enjoyed the closeness of the student body and that their school was comforting like a safety net. They cited good friends and meeting new people as one of the best things about their high school experience.

Though five did feel that their high schools had a good social environment, many felt that there were many cliques and social divisions based on other identifying factors such as race, social status, athletic ability, and others. Six students mentioned that these cliques forced people to form groups and exclude others, leaving certain individuals out and hurting the overall experience in high school. One student stated that an ideal school would not have racial divisions, a characteristic of the respondent's current school.

Also, some responded that peer pressure was one of the biggest issues facing high school students in the US. These students felt that pressure to do drugs and party were pervasive issues in their high schools. One student cited it as the greatest source of stress saying:

I guess peer pressure is the biggest thing. Yeah peer pressure. If you go to parties and hang out with friends, you meet those kids who drink and you think about drinking and hanging out with them or not be their friends anymore.

Another student said that these types of pressures were some of the most life changing experiences of the high school career. Often because of these pressures friendships changed for the worse, because of the reputations attached to people who do or do not do drugs or go to many parties. As a result, many students felt that the social atmosphere harmed the high school experience for them.

Teachers and classroom environment. While classroom environment and teacher methods are broad topics, these questions focused on how the students felt in their respective classrooms and how they perceived their teachers' attitudes towards the students and effectiveness.

Overall, the Korean and American students all stated that much of the teacher effectiveness and classroom environment depended on the individual teacher. Both groups of

students agreed that the style of the teacher varied and that they had teachers that they liked and did not like. Also, students from both groups expressed a desire for improved teacher evaluation through unannounced teacher evaluations and increased student input.

One Korean student responded:

Once in a while, the principal or the superintendent will come and sit in on a class. When this time comes, the teachers will prepare one week in advance and do things out of the ordinary, telling the students how to act. The teacher will take a couple of really good students and tell them to answer certain questions, just to them, giving certain roles to students. We don't do that usually. The teachers tell the students how to act if there is a surprise visit. One kid does one thing. Another fills a different role. Then people don't know how the real classes are.

Two American students answered similarly:

P1: I think a better evaluation of teachers. More often. Some surveys for the students.

That would be more honest than administrators coming to watch them.

P2: It's better than the teachers performing, on their best behavior.

P1: That happens. It's easy to see through for the students. Because they know how the teacher usually is.

However, the Korean students frequently mentioned the blatant bias showed by the teachers and administrators of the school towards the academically better students. The students described how better students were given preferential treatment with separate classrooms as a private study space, separate teachers, and accelerated curriculum. Also, many students stated that teachers would openly show their preference students with better grades, comparing students in front of the entire class. A few students also mentioned that there was biases towards males and that rules were more strictly enforced towards the male students.

Many of the US students also mentioned that some biases and preferential treatment from teachers. Some students said that the teachers and administrators showed preferential treatment towards the academically better students. Others said that teachers showed favoritism towards the students that the teachers liked, regardless of academic performance. A few said that bias inherently existed even though teachers tried not to show it explicitly.

The Korean students also described the teaching style as forced¹⁰ and focused on memorization. All of the Korean students stated that the teachers tried to cram as much information in the students' heads, not caring whether or not they understood the material. Five students said that there were very little opportunities for dialogue and collaboration at any point in the high school career. Mandatory study halls were times for individual review and students were not allowed to talk. During class time, the teacher gave a lecture, wrote on the chalkboard, and students would write things down. One student did describe system where students would give a five-minute speech once a semester, but she felt that the time allotted was not enough to develop speaking skills or to discuss the topic. In fact, eleven students responded that they would describe their high school experience as forced or forceful, not only because of the mandatory study halls or pressure, but also because of the way teachers teach the material.

The American students gave less uniform answers about the classroom environment. One student described how her school tried to introduce computers and technology into the learning process. Another student just described it as desks and chairs with a teacher in the front. Three students did respond that they wished the method of testing students was more focused on understanding and analyzing the material rather than memorization. Two mentioned that he preferred essay based tests rather than multiple choice:

¹⁰ In Korean the word is 주입식 or *joo eep shik* meaning a cramming method of teaching.

P2: I think the way they test kids is wrong. The way they assess people's smarts isn't right. Memorization and the way they test have nothing to do with what people do with the rest of their life.

P1: Anyone can memorize. They need more open ended questions. Anyone can answer "What date did this happen?" They just studied that for an hour. They should be tested more on their thought process.

P2: Yeah, their thought process.

P1: Which is why I like essay based tests better

Despite the variety of answers given by the American high school students, some did agree that certain evaluation methods did need to change to better test students' understandings rather than factual knowledge. The aforementioned students who were quoted replied that they rarely received essay assignments and desired more ways to synthesize information learned rather than regurgitating the material. Nevertheless, the proportion of students strongly advocating for such a change was smaller than the majority of Korean students who all stated about the dominance of memorization in learning styles.

Aspirations and Opportunities

Freedom and choice in school. The Korean and American students answered questions about freedom¹¹ and choice in their respective schools. The topic of freedom centered on class choice, availability of subject matter, and behavioral limitations, such as uniforms, within the school. For the Korean students, the issue of freedom meant freedom to study voluntarily, flexibility and diverse choices, rather than a fixed number of a few choices for classes, extracurricular activity, or projected paths after high school. The American students rarely

¹¹ The Korean students frequently used the word 자유 or *jayoo*, which means liberty or freedom, in their responses.

mentioned the term freedom, but when asked about whether they felt limited by choices, they did respond that there were areas, such as class choice, where the students could benefit.

The Korean high school students frequently cited lack of choice in academics and studying as one of the aspects of high school they would like to change. Almost all of the Korean students responded that they did not like that the schools predetermined class choices and implemented mandatory study halls after official classes end. When asked about any changes they would make, nine students or almost half of the Korean student participants responded that they would make the high school experience more flexible and with more freedoms, such as a truly voluntary study hall. All of the students interviewed mentioned a mandatory four-hour study hall, known as *jayoolhakseup*,¹² after official classes end everyday when students individually study for the Sooneung. Because such measures literally force students to sit down at a desk for hours at a time, Korean students cited that they wished for more freedom with respect to when they could study.

All of the Korean students wished they had greater flexibility towards class choice and area of study, because curriculums are divided into two sections, humanities and sciences, one of which all students must choose at the end of their first year when they are around fifteen years old. Moreover, all of the students described how grades and exam performances determined their class choice rather than interest or talent. Furthermore, the Korean students cited the lack of free time during the hours of school. They had few breaks that allowed students to relax. One student explained how the teachers only allowed students to get up from their desks to go to the bathroom. Two female high school students responded:

¹² This word's literal translation is individual or independent study time.

P1: For something like study hall, students should study just what they need. Because the teachers would go around asking, the kids who need extra help would select the teachers. But right now, the teachers just choose the students and force them to study.

P2: You have to take the classes that the school already chooses for you.

P1: We have to follow whatever the school lays out for us.

On the other hand, many of the US students felt satisfied with the availability of class choices. Although when asked, the American students said that in the situations, in which they were not able to take all the classes they wanted, it was due to schedule conflicts rather than lack of ability to choose. A minority of students felt that their schools did not offer diverse enough classes to satisfy their interests, such as music classes or vocational classes. However, a few students felt that the schools did not provide enough college preparation and real world experience. One male student who wanted to study the medical field said “I think academically, if a given students is interested in a career...I don’t think my school is vocational enough. If a student wants to pursue a certain subject or a profession, our school is too general and is not specific enough to guide them on their way.”

Very few students felt that there needed to be more flexibility in the class choices. One student felt that the course requirements did not apply to the individual’s future plans:

Kind of because they make you take a year or two of language in order to graduate, and it’s kind of useless. I’m never going to use it, and I barely pass anyway. So it’s like why do I have to take it. Or I found out you have to take a business class, and I didn’t know we had to take it. It wasn’t part of my schedule from now until senior year, and now I have to drop something to take a business class, which sucks because I’m not going to use a business class. It’s dumb.

Two other students responded similarly:

P1: There are requirements. You have to take a year of fine arts, like music or photography.

P3: You're going to get screwed up for that.

P1: Yeah you have to take a year of practical arts, like business or computer science.

Nevertheless, the majority of American students did not indicate major areas of lack of choice in their high schools. While they may have mentioned school course requirements to graduate, they did not appear extremely perturbed by these requisites and did not answer at length about the nature of course requirements or how they felt about them.

Study abroad in a foreign country. All the students answered questions about desires to study abroad during high school. Almost all the Korean students wanted to study abroad in another country during high school. The two most frequently cited reasons were to learn English and to experience a different lifestyle with more flexibility. Australia, Canada, and the United States were the most common choices. While three students admitted that there were drawbacks to studying abroad such as separation from family and that financial limitations did factor into the final decision, all but one of the students said that they would want to study abroad, if given the opportunity.

While many American students showed a desire to study abroad, fewer students compared to the Korean students expressed a desire to go to a different country. In some ways, the reasons were similar to Korean students. Many U.S. students wanted to experience something different by studying in a different country, although they did not explicitly say that they wanted to learn a different language. A few replied that they would not want to go to another country, because they were satisfied with their education in the United States and did not want to be away from home.

Student hopes and dreams. In the interviews, the students discussed whether or not their had concrete dreams or hopes for their future and whether or not they believed opportunities to follow these dreams were available to them. All of the Korean students stated that they felt limited by their academic grades and economic status with respect to access to educational opportunities. Most felt that they were not able to pursue certain fields or careers, because they did not have the grades to get into colleges with those majors. One student said that her dream was to work as a prosecutor but felt that she would never become one, because her grades were too low to get into a law program at a respectable university.¹³ Also, because wealthier students were able to pay for prep classes and private tutors for the Sooneung, many of the respondents felt that the wealthier students had greater access to prestigious universities. Many Korean interviewees also mentioned that they did not have a specific passion or dream, because Korean education was so focused on academic performance and numbers.

Three students explained:

P1: Even if I want to do something, if I'm not good at it. Even if I want to become a doctor, if my grades are not good enough...even worse, if I would actually be good at something, if my grades are not good enough

P2: We should be going to college based on our dreams, but we have to find our dreams based on the colleges we attend.

P1: They say first you need the grades. First need to raise your grades in order to go to the college of your choice.

P3: Then after you go to college, you pick your job or dream.

¹³ In Korea, like many European countries, there are no graduate professional programs for law. Instead, people enroll in law, medicine, and etc. programs at universities directly after high school.

The U.S. student responses were more varied. Some had never thought about their dreams. Others did feel like their parents were pressuring them to go into certain professions. A few did know what they wanted to pursue beyond high school, such as business, medical, or art and did not feel constrained in their abilities to achieve those dreams, even with some disadvantages. One junior did not feel discouraged by being dyslexic:

P1: I'm dyslexic, so I mix up words all the time. I can't read well, so I can't do anything with writing. So I thought art, and I guess I'm good at art. So I can make things without writing. Maybe if I could read better, I would have broad places to pick what I want to do.

Researcher: Do you feel that the fact that you're dyslexic would hinder your chances to be a success?

P1: No, because people are so different in every way. If someone would treat me different, because I couldn't read, I would just treat that person different, because they're treating me different. Calm down. Chill out. I don't like that. I'm pretty sure if I applied to a job and I wasn't go at it, they would say that they were going in a different direction, which is understandable, cause they need someone who is capable of doing it. But at the same time, give me a chance, maybe I am capable at my own pace.

Some students did cite college admissions processes as limiting certain opportunities. A few mentioned affirmative action policies and the cost of higher education as factors influencing students' access to higher education. Others felt that in general people could pursue whatever they wanted in the U.S. education system.

Discussion

Given the increasing relevance of looking to other countries for methods of changes in policies and approaches, it is worth looking at the Korean model of high school education. Despite the similarities in overall structure of the high school education system between the Korean and United State systems, significant differences exist. Nevertheless, these differences highlight the importance of policy, attitudes, and philosophies behind education. Moreover, perspectives of high school students give insight into how these policies and attitudes affect the very people towards whom education is directed. As a result, through comparisons of the high school student responses can give information towards methods of improving policy in an effort to make American education more competitive globally and areas of caution when considering how to encourage students to value education and higher achievement.

Education in Society

One of the most evident differences between the two education systems was the different education philosophy and goals embodied in the high school systems, providing evidence to support preexisting research. Although Korea and the United States have some similar values and goals in higher education, such as universal education at the secondary level and a desire for high quality education to help better society, the two nations focus on different aspects of education, and education has differing significance in respective societies. The high school student responses reflect such values and approaches in their experiences and perspectives of the education policy in their respective home countries. While both nations see higher education as a means to success, wealth, and higher social status, South Koreans tend to obsess over grades and place great importance on the names of universities, basing judgments of people on their academic pedigree. On the other hand, while in the United States the emphasis on the prestige of

schools exists, much of the focus on education is dropout rates, equal education, and creative development.

South Korea's immense value of higher education and the importance of the prestige attached the reputation of universities in society is apparent from the fact that discussion of college acceptances, supporting the existing literature that Korean society's beliefs about education affects the people's behavior and phenomena like shadow education (Lee, 2006). Given this preoccupation with prestigious universities, the Sooneung, quite literally the sole criteria for university acceptances, dominated much of the interviews for the Korean high school students. Students felt that the Sooneung and the effects of taking this extremely high stakes test defined their high school career and the rest of their life. College reputations determine people's occupation, social standing, and happiness, making it one of the most important, if not the most important, factors in a person's life. Furthermore, the fact that students must all take the same exam on the same day and that a number determines college acceptances shows the emphasis universal and equal education without consideration of economic or social factors.

On the other hand, the U.S. high school education system's emphasis on the achievement gap and other initiatives reveal a focus on other areas (United States Education Department, 2010). The responses from the American high school students support the notion that the American high school system has different approaches to education compared to the South Korea. Initiatives like the No Child Left Behind Act and students' responses about the importance of teachers' encouragement of low achieving students indicate that the U.S. education system values equalizing the level of achievement across all different types of students or at the very least bringing up the standard to a minimum level. Also, the emphasis of the

diversity and various groups of students through affirmative action and financial aid reveals the value of different types of students and taking into account differing backgrounds.

Furthermore, while many of the respondents indicated that they valued education, the desperate need to attend a prestigious university was not evident from their answers. Despite what Kingston and Lewis (1990) write about elite schools serving as cultural markers of success and elite status, the students interviewed rarely mentioned elite schools or the need to attend elite universities. Although one student specifically mentioned Columbia University, a member of the coveted Ivy League, in the sense that a degree from Columbia offered many options for future careers, the majority of the students did not express the need or the desire to attend elite universities. Additionally, the diverse results from the American high school students support Kingston and Lewis' assertion that in the United States a very strict hierarchy of prestige does not exist (Kingston and Lewis, 1990). For example, the success of entrepreneurs and professionals who never completed or attended college like Mark Zuckerberg or Rachael Ray, signal that graduating from an elite university is not always necessary to achieve wealth, success, or elite status in the United States ("100 Top Entrepreneurs who Succeeded without College," 2010). As a result, in America the goal of an education is to produce knowledgeable citizens who can find opportunities to succeed, but it is not the only way to reach success unlike South Korea ("Race to the Top Assessment Program," 2010).

Educational Approaches

Given the varying goals of each nation, it is not surprising that the two countries utilize different methods of educating the youth. While some of the approaches are logical reactions to the forces of society, others indicate the intentions of teaching the students in a certain way and have an impact on the level of achievement and the students' satisfaction throughout their high

school careers. While current literature on education has discussed methods of teaching, few have considered the relationship between societal values and educational methodology, especially from the perspective of students. Given that the student responses indicate that they take note of various approaches to learning, this area seems significant in the comparison of American and Korean student perspectives.

The intense desire for prestigious higher education has resulted in a bottleneck effect of numerous high school students vying for a limited number of elite universities spots in South Korea (Korean Ministry of Education, 2008). As a result of all university-bound high school seniors having to take the Sooneung, a multitude of specialized preparation programs, such as focused test prep program companies, have erupted on the education scene. Furthermore, the extended periods of practicing for the exam reveal highly uniform approaches to studying for the multiple-choice exam through mandatory individual study hall periods. The focus on facts and memorization and utilization of a single exam demonstrate the emphasis on quantity of material covered rather than the development of skills and understanding or other aspects of the individual, despite recent attempts by the Korean Ministry of Education (2010).

On the other hand, despite some of the students' responses that the United States and high schools in general need to improve methods of teaching and evaluating students, the American high school system does not seem to have as extreme focus on facts or using tests to admit students into universities. Although the focus on standardized testing has increased in recent years due to No Child Left Behind, the trend of using tests like the SAT or ACT as a dominant factor in college admittance has decreased with several universities allowing for optional test scores (Moses and Nanna, 2007; Lewin, 2008). Only a few students stated that the overall method of evaluation was based on multiple-choice tests. Additionally, some students responded

that dialogue and interaction between students and teachers existed at their schools, giving evidence to utilization of other forms of teaching.

Moreover, the inclusion of extracurricular activities as a prominent part of education in the United States remained an important topic in both the Korean and American student interviews. Korean students felt that a lack of extracurricular activities, an aspect of education that many Korean students mentioned as desirable, prevented them from exploring other areas of interest and demonstrated that the school did not care about student interests. Through clubs and sports team, American students spend a great deal of time in alternate environments that do not include textbooks or traditional tests. While this discrepancy between the United States and Korean high schools may be partially a result of the competitiveness of the Sooneung, the fact that the American high schools have retained many extracurricular activities throughout the years demonstrate that this is an important part of high school life for high school students. Eccles, Barber, Stone, and Hunt (2006) asserted the importance of extracurricular activities in the development of adolescents and found that high school students participating in extracurricular activities had better educational outcomes than students who did not, even when controlling for gender, age, social class, and aptitude. Similarly, Mahoney, Cairns, and Farmer (2003) found that consistent participation in extracurricular activities were consistent with higher educational achievement in the United States.

Implications on Education Policy

Societal Views and Education Policies

Despite some similarities with the structures of education institutions between the United States and South Korea, the types of government oversight and policymaking bodies differ in the two countries. In South Korea, the national government and the national Ministry of Education,

Science, and Technology create and implement many policies, such as the national curriculum and the Sooneung. Regional and city governments have less input in the policymaking process. On the other hand, in the United States, the state and local government are more involved in the day-to-day workings of high schools and education policy. Nevertheless, in recent years the federal government has sought a greater role in the education policy with No Child Left Behind and President Obama's recent initiative to improve America's competitiveness with other countries ("White House Initiatives 2010," 2010).

Still, the differences in educational experiences cannot be solely attributed to the different policymaking processes. As highlighted in the data, the students' differences in opinions and experiences have root in the distinct social values that influence policy outcomes. As the Korean students responded, because so many students in South Korea competitively study for the Sooneung, on the day of the exam, the national government prevents airplane flights over the nation and forces businesses to close in order to prevent any distractions to the students. Furthermore, the national government has even created centers to study the function and influence of the mass test prep industry. In the United States, despite the rise in SAT prep companies, the industry has not reached the level as it has in South Korea, where the industry accounts for over 6% of the national GDP (Dobbs, 2005; Choe, 2009). Rather America's value of equality of education has resulted in focuses on closing the achievement gap as well as other issues education has resulted in extensive policy and research on standardized tests, dropout rates, and race (Liu, 1998).

However, from the data and history of education policy it is also clear that the policies can influence the values and educational approaches that emerge, creating mutually influential relationship. In South Korea, the policy of equal opportunity in the sense of using a single

standardized test for college acceptances has shifted families', students', and schools' focus on the single exam rather than other areas of learning. The data from the interviews reveal that students do not learn any material that is not tested on the Sooneung with some students even making conjectures that subjects like music and art will disappear in the future. In the United States, policies have similarly influenced values and focuses in education policy. Due to affirmative action policies, many universities employ different acceptance standards for students of various ethnic backgrounds, and some high schools do continue to bus students to ensure ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. Though these policies do stir controversy today, people, such as some of the respondents in the interviews, do consider these policies to be important in ensuring equal opportunities for students of diverse backgrounds.

The Value of Comparisons across Countries

Because society's values influence people's behaviors, educational approaches, and subsequently policies, policymakers must consider how such values and policies will affect the behavior and experiences of high school students. Considering the vastly different responses between the Korean and American high school students, policymakers must consider the ramifications of altering policies in favor of Korea's approach to educating their high school students. In doing so, policymakers must take into account the types of goals for these policies and the kinds of responses from the students, families, teachers, and society that will occur from changes in policies.

Currently, the Obama Administration's campaign to improve America's global competitiveness and improve the quality of education in the country indicates a potential shift in policy towards the Korean model. President Obama has mentioned the Korean education system in an exemplary way and has suggested a move towards longer school days to improve American

students' achievement ("Obama Lauds Korea's Education of Children," 2009). Similarly in October 2010, Obama cited Korea again by stating that the United States should not settle for second best with education when Korea strives for the best education for their youth. While Korea's education policies may result in highly competitive students, based on the interviews the students are significantly less satisfied with their experience and even desire to learn in a different country. According to a 2009 Korea Times article, almost 30,000 pre-college¹⁴ Korean students left South Korea to study in a foreign country in 2006 and 2009 (Kwon, 2009). In the United States, studying abroad in high school is more geared towards short-term exchange programs and summer experiences rather for academic purposes. The lack of statistics on high school students who study abroad indicates the small numbers of students who choose this alternative.

Therefore, when shifting to policies that encourage more competitive environment, decision makers should take note of the possible consequences. Extending the school day would take time away from extracurricular activities that usually occur in the afternoons. For both Korean and American high school students, much of the social life occurs during school given that much of the students' time is spent in the institution. However, for most Korean students, social interactions are limited to meal times and the short breaks between classes, because there are few opportunities for group work and dialogue. For U.S. students, they have more free time inside and outside of school to interact with friends outside the academic setting. Given the level of interest and resources attributed to extracurricular activities and athletics, it is questionable whether such policy moves are appropriate for the United States. Additionally, because Korea's education system is so focused on college acceptances, one should consider the degree of

¹⁴ This includes elementary, middle, and high school students who have not attended college or university.

emphasis that is necessary for a country like the United States. However, if the goal of a globally competitive education system is one that decision makers and society desires, the perhaps the Korean education system is worth examining.

Similarly, Korean President Myung Bak Lee has stressed the importance of education reform in Korea. When he began his term as president in 2008, President Lee vowed to change the education system, taking into account the extreme pressures on students and the need to keep students internationally competitive. Soon after, Lee introduced national English teaching (ESL) reforms to facilitate teaching English to Korean students and implemented a law preventing the utilization of private tutoring services after midnight, according to the Korea Times (Do, 2010). Recently, Lee reaffirmed his dedication to finding more ways to help students attend universities without relying on shadow education, though he did not specify his current plans (Do, 2010). Despite the fact that the long-term effects of Lee's policies are still unknown, student responses pointed out that these have had limited impact on the overall educational experience. Several students from the interviews said that hour limits on attending prep classes failed to deter people from using these resources. Many students they knew secretly went to these classes after hours, and the respondents said that getting home at midnight still took a toll on the students' lives.

Instead, as the Korean students indicated, it appears that Koreans need to change their perceptions about the role of Korean education in people's lives and in society in order for the education system to change. Therefore, policymakers should consider how to shift societal values to influence behaviors rather than simply trying to limit or prevent stop certain practices. Despite the differences in Korean and U.S. education systems, Korean policymakers can look to various meanings and values American society has with education, particularly with college education. The importance of creative thinking, individuality, and alternatives to purely

academic learning in the United States may provide guidance for Korean education policymakers to shift away from the emphasis on purely numerical methods of evaluating students and on the reputations of universities. While not all values and approaches may translate successfully from the American model to the Korean education system, looking to another country can provide new ways of approaching this complex issue.

Limitations

In this comparison of American and Korean high school students, several key differences that were not considered limit the applicability of the results and analysis. Firstly, this study did not consider the differences in socioeconomic status or diversity in ethnicities among American students, which may have skewed the results. Furthermore, this study did not consider the diversity in socioeconomic status in the South Korean high school students as well, because both samples were small and limited to local high schools in a specific community and were not random samples. Therefore, the opinions and observations cannot be extended to nationwide observations to either nation.

Additionally, given the nature of focus group and one-to-one interviews, some of the responses may be skewed. Some individuals may not have been comfortable expressing personal opinions in a group setting, or others may have felt uncomfortable talking freely in a one-to-one setting with the interviewer. Also, certain emotions in tone or facial expressions cannot be captured in transcriptions, resulting in some loss in depth of understanding in the student responses. The male-female ratios in the two groups could have also affected the types of responses obtained, given that there were significantly more females in the Korean group compared to a majority of male respondents in the U.S. group. Furthermore, because the Korean students' interviews were translated from Korean to English, things may have been lost in

translation. Idioms and phrases that do not readily translate into English may result in differing interpretations in reading the student responses.

Future Directions

Given the small scale of this study, several opportunities to expand upon this project exist. Large-scale investigations with random samples of thousands of students using questionnaires designed to measure degrees of emotion, such as stress and satisfaction, could provide a more systemic effect of different policy structures. Studies comparing the United States to other nations, such as China, with highly competitive high school education systems, may give insight into whether these differences in student responses were unique to the United States and South Korea or exist in relation to all other competitive countries. Additionally, projects to analyze the effects of family and ethnic backgrounds on educational outlooks, performance, and policies across different nations could prove successful in enhancing this area of study.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Korean Students (English Translation)

Background information:

- Gender
- Age
- Grade
- High School

High School Life:

- How many hours of sleep do you get at night? (Weeknights? Weekends?)
- How many hours do you study on a given day?
- How many hours do you get private tutoring?
- Why do you get private tutoring?
- What is your favorite subject? (Are you able to take the classes you want?) How many classes do you take?
- What are your hopes and dreams?
- How would you describe your high school experience so far?
 - What are the good things about it?
 - What are the bad things about it?
- Have you ever desired anything different from your high school experience?
 - If so, how would you go about making those changes?
- How many extracurricular activities do you do? Are you able to do all the extracurricular activities that you want?
- If you could create your ideal school, what would that school be like?
- How would you describe your high school experience to a stranger?
- Have you ever wanted to study abroad during high school?
 - Why or why not? (Or have you never thought about it before?)
 - Do you believe you are in the majority or minority in thinking this way?
- What do you think are the differences between studying in Korea and studying abroad?
- Where do you get information about overseas education and high school life abroad?
- Have you ever concretely thought about your strengths and weakness or your future?
- What are your thoughts about Korean education as a whole? What are your thoughts about college entrance policy in Korea?
- Do you ever feel stress? What do you feel stressed about?
- Throughout your educational experience, has there been any experience that has significantly changed or influenced you?
- Do you have anything else you would like add?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for U.S. Students

Background information:

- Gender
- Age
- Grade
- High School

High School Life:

- How many hours of sleep do you get at night? (Weeknights? Weekends?)
- How many hours do you study on a given day?
- How many hours do you get private tutoring?
 - If so, why do you get private tutoring?
- What is your favorite subject? (Are you able to take the classes you want?)
- What are your hopes and dreams?
- How would you describe your high school experience so far?
 - What are the good things about it?
 - What are the bad things about it?
- Have you ever desired anything different from your high school experience?
 - If so, how would you go about making those changes?
- What do you do in your free time?
- Do you do any extracurricular activities?
- If you could create your ideal school, what would that school be like?
- How would you describe your high school experience to a stranger?
- Have you ever wanted to study abroad during high school?
 - Why or why not? (Or have you never thought about it before?)
- Do you believe you are in the majority or minority in thinking this way?
- What do you think are the differences between studying in the United States and studying abroad?
- Have you ever concretely thought about your strengths and weakness or your future?
- What are your thoughts about U.S. education as a whole? What are your thoughts about the college admissions process in America?
- Throughout your educational experience, has there been any experience that has significantly changed or influenced you?
- Do you ever feel stress? What do you feel stressed about?
- Do you have anything else you would like add?

Appendix C
Coding Scheme

Key
United States = US
South Korea = K

Are you able to take all the classes you want?

- K-no
- K-yes
- US-no
 - Not enough choice
 - schedule
- US-yes

Do you do any extracurricular activities?

- K-no
- K-yes
- US-no
- US-yes

Do you do any private tutoring?

- K-no
- K-yes
 - To get ahead
 - Get into college
- US-no
- US-yes
 - Bad at the subject
 - Parents
 - Standardized tests

Do you ever feel stressed?

- K-no
- K-yes
 - College entrance exam
 - Future
 - Grades
 - Lack of choice
- US-no
- US-yes
 - College acceptance
 - Grades
 - Peer pressure
 - Scholarships
 - Tests

Have you ever concretely thought about your future?

- K-no
- K-yes
- US-no
- US-yes

Have you ever wanted to study abroad?

- K-no
- K-yes
 - English
 - More opportunities
- US-no
- US-yes
 - Experience something different

How would you describe your experience to a stranger (someone who knows nothing about your education system)?

- K-bad attitudes about education
- K-forceful
- US-boring
- US-between middle school and college
- US-challenging, but fun
- US-different
- US-lax
- US-not all about grades
- US-peer pressure

If you could create your ideal school, what would it be like?

- K-freedom
- US-better teachers
- US-encourage all students
- US-free financially
- US-fun
- US-more opportunities
- US-more privileges
- US-more types of classes
- US-no racial division
- US-performing arts
- US-shorter classes/school days
- US-wouldn't change much

Is there anything you want to change?

- K-bias
- K-exam
- K-lack of interest or direction
- K-level of freedom in school
- K-opportunities
- K-shorter school day
- US-ability to take more classes
- US-administration

- US-nothing
- US-racism
- US-standardized tests
- US-teacher evaluation

Throughout high school experience, has there been anything that has changed you?

- K-communal lifestyle
- K-no
- US-college preparation
- US-extracurricular activities
- US-friends
- US-learning social skills
- US-no
- US-rankings
- US-work

What are the bad things about high school?

- K-competition
- K-favoritism
- K-focus on grades
- K-lack of choice in classes
- K-long school day
- US-bad classes
- US-bad teachers
- US-cliques
- US-college prep
- US-lack of extracurricular activities
- US-not sure
- US-short lunch
- US-small school
- US-work

What are the good things about high school?

- K-field trips
- K-friends
- K-none
- K-study
- US-easy
- US-free
- US-friends
- US-learn
- US-safety zone

What are your thoughts about Korean education policy? (only for Korean student responses)

- Competition
- English focus
- Focus on education
- Forceful
- Opportunities

What are your thoughts about American education policy? (only for U.S. student responses)

- Affirmative action
- Bad testing
- Can get education without paying a lot
- Dumbed down
- Financial aid
- Hard
- More opportunities
- Not sure
- Random, different

What do you do in your free time (time not studying)?

- K-I have none
- K-I have some
 - Hang out with friends
- US-I have none
- US-I have some
 - Eat
 - Extracurricular activities
 - Friends
 - Movie/TV
 - Sleep
 - Sports
 - Video games

What do you think are the differences between Korean education and other countries' education? (Just Korean responses)

- Korea forces people to study
- Korea has less extracurricular activities
- Other countries are better

What do you think are the differences between U.S. education and other countries' education? (Just U.S. responses)

- Different
- Not sure
- Other countries focus on academics

What is your classroom environment like?

- K-bias
- K-every teacher different
- K-forced
- K-lack of discussion
- US-competitive
- US-it depends
- US-teachers gives a lesson