

Modernization and Globalization
of Educational Competition:
Overcoming the High School Equalization Policy

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Abstract

Recently, the High School Equalization Policy has become a highly contentious issue in Korea. Agreeing in part with the equalization policy, this paper attempts to overcome its current limits. First, we find that the equalization policy has the effect of limiting the drive to achieve social justice, and that discussions of this binary opposition itself are a hindrance to grasping the fundamental causes generating the current problems plaguing Korea's educational system. Secondly, we put forward a new dimension of educational competition that has developed in the globalizing world, which can weaken the expected effects of the equalization policy. Furthermore, we attempt to develop these new settings within a scheme of modernization and globalization of educational strategies and by reformulating Fred Hirsch's achievements.

Keywords: equalization policy, marketization of education, educational competition, Fred Hirsch, modernization and globalization of educational strategies

Introduction

The High School Equalization Policy¹ has become the main subject of debate within the Korean education system. Lately, there has been increased support for the abolishment of the equalization policy, with government and economic sectors² leading the charge. Many arguments have been raised for the abolishment of the equalization policy. Opponents have argued that the equalization policy has been the root cause of the current crisis in Korean public education, some even blaming the policy for the emergence of the present real-estate bubble.³ In addition, those opposed to this policy maintain that parents and students who are eager to receive higher-quality education are forced to look to shadow education⁴ and overseas studies to fulfill their educational goals. Moreover, critics argue that the equalization policy has weakened Korea's national competitiveness by lowering students' academic achievement.

Meanwhile, supporters of the equalization policy—the majority of which are from the educational sector—argue that the above-mentioned criticisms are unfounded. Proponents claim that the argument that academic achievement and national competitiveness have been weakened because of the above-mentioned factors is mere speculation. The market size for shadow education and the number of people exiling themselves for educational purposes (for example, those who are studying abroad or have immigrated) have increased due to the serious state of educational competition, not because of the equalization policy. Proponents claim



that while the High School Equalization Policy is not a perfect one, it should not be abolished as it still serves to effectively control extreme competition for credentials.

This paper introduces various arguments both in favor and against the equalization policy and evaluates each in turn. While I am opposed to the abolishment of the equalization policy, I am also well aware of the need to seek alternatives to it. This would involve both questioning the temporary and limited influence of the policy as well as examining the structure of the debate over the policy itself. Questions regarding the influence of the policy will be discussed later in this paper; let us first take a look at the structure of the debate over the equalization policy.

Existing debates about the equalization policy have been structured in such a way that participants have been forced to be completely in favor or completely against it. Taking part in these debates means that an individual has taken a position along the binary opposition that has already been fixed. However, if we assume that the equalization policy is not the direct cause for either positive or negative side effects in education, that the composition and state of the issues that need to be regulated have changed, and that our control mechanism has become ineffective, then we realize that blindly adhering to either one of two extreme positions might be an obstacle to dealing with the real issues that should be discussed. This paper attempts to critically engage in the present debate that makes it impossible to identify and discuss the hidden causes and changes in Korean education.

This study will first attempt to present the binary assertions regarding the High School Equalization Policy, and critically evaluate them. Second, while agreeing in part with this policy, this paper also addresses the need to modify the equalization policy as part of a changing structure of educational competition and new educational strategies.

The Debate over Equalization: Illusion of Marketization and the Paradox of Equalization

The debate over the High School Equalization Policy has developed around four issues: the ultimate goal of education; current educational problems; the cause of these educational problems; and the role of the equalization policy. The opposing camps in this debate differ above all in their understanding of Korea's educational problems, particularly in terms of opposing views on the goal of education and the cause of these educational problems. Their differences are most clearly reflected in their diverging and contrasting views on the ability of the equalization policy to solve Korea's education problems.

Those wishing to abolish the equalization policy maintain that the ultimate goal of education is to create the human resources that society requires in this globalized and information era (Bak Se-il et al. 2002, 13). They maintain that the most serious educational problems are the decrease in the diversity and quality of school education, and the growing dependence on shadow education by those who are not satisfied with the current school education system.⁵ Moreover, they stress that the root of these educational problems stems from the standardized control of school education inputs (2002, 176), and from the fact that this equalization policy is a



typical uniform control policy. They believe that while the equalization policy has failed to bring about the autonomy, transparency, and accountability of individual school units, it has standardized school education, and lowered the level of education (2002, 61, 181). These individuals believe that the equalization policy has actually had a negative influence on the issues it was first meant to address (2002, 178ff). As such, they believe that not only has the equalization policy failed to ease competition for the entrance examination, reduce the demand for shadow education, or restrain the concentration of population moving to cities, but it has actually made these problems worse. In addition, the equalization policy has caused other problems, such as making it impossible for schools to implement a normal curriculum because of the differences in students' academic abilities.

Those wishing to abolish the equalization policy insist that the policy has not contributed at all to the achievement of educational equality. While they admit that this policy has helped increase the demand for secondary education, they retort that the only form of equalization that has occurred is in terms of input (2002, 180). Furthermore, they claim that shadow education has increased because the limiting of input in the public school system has failed to satisfy the educational demands of parents and students. As the possibility of pursuing shadow education is completely dependent on parents' economic level, this phenomenon has actually damaged educational equality. In summary, opponents argue that the equalization policy has led to the over-standardization of school education, and has lowered the quality of education. Therefore, it has failed to meet the demands of parents and students, heightened the dependence on shadow education, damaged educational equality, and created un-equal conditions for the competition over university admission by helping to spread shadow education (2002, 181). In addition, they claim that the equalization policy is the source of the present educational problems that have left various needs for education unsatisfied by depriving options from those demanding education.

On the other hand, those who support the equalization policy argue that education is not an economic tool, but rather something that will nurture individual student's potential abilities, and instill a community-oriented mindset (Kim Cheon-gi 2002, 70). Both proponents and opponents of the equalization policy agree on the basic problems in education. However, opponents of the equalization policy blame the problems on limiting students' right to choose schools and weakened educational competitiveness, while the proponents of the equalization policy see the examination-oriented education system based on a selection-oriented method and the hierarchy of schools as the biggest problem. Of course, this does not mean that the proponents are uninterested in educational competency or that they ignore the demand for the diversification of schools. Those supporting the equalization policy say that the argument claiming that it lowers students' academic ability is baseless, and that most of the arguments presented by opponents of the policy are ideologically motivated.⁶

The two camps also have different approaches regarding the roots of Korea's educational problems. Those supporting the policy regard entrance examination-oriented education and credentialism as the main causes of the present educational problems, such as the spread of shadow education, the failure to introduce complete education, and the stunted development of students' individual



characteristics. The equalization policy, they argue, has helped to control these problems rather than worsening them. Thus, despite all the problems involved, the equalization policy must be maintained as long as measures to solve the fundamental above-mentioned problems are not established.

Three most divisive issues are the expansion of shadow education, the decrease in students' levels of academic achievement, and the weakened autonomy of private schools.⁷

With regard to shadow education, those wishing to abolish the equalization policy assert that because this policy has not satisfied various educational demands, the dependence on shadow education has increased. They base their argument on the growth in the size of the shadow education market following the implementation of the equalization policy (Yun Jeong-il et al. 2002; Kim Dal-hyo 2003, 402). However, the relationship between the two is not so clear. There might be factors other than the implementation of the equalization policy that have led to the growth in shadow education, such as the increase in average income, thus making more money available for educational expenses than in the past. This is one of the reasons why supporters of the policy assert that there is no direct relation between the equalization policy and the increase in shadow education (Kim Cheon-gi 2002). However, those points raised by the supporters of this policy have no empirical foundation either. Therefore, debates over this issue remain tied in that both parties have failed to provide any objective proof to support their assertions.

With regard to the decrease in students' levels of academic achievement, those who favor abolishing the policy argue that because the equalization policy has placed students with different levels of academic ability in the same classrooms, teachers are faced with difficulties in teaching, students have lost their interest in studying, and students' levels of academic achievement have decreased. On the other hand, supporters of the policy reject these arguments and introduce various empirical studies, which compare students' levels of academic achievement in equalized and non-equalized schools (for example, Seong Gi-seon 2002). According to these studies, the level of academic achievement of students in equalized schools was not far behind that of those in non-equalized schools. Those supporting the policy have more persuasive arguments regarding the alleged decrease in students' levels of academic achievement, while those who oppose the policy supply arguments with no empirical basis.

Finally, those hoping to have the policy abolished note the weakened autonomy of private schools as another problem caused by the equalization policy. According to the policy's opponents, private schools should have the right to select their students, and to manage their curriculums in accordance with their establishments' purposes. However, the equalization policy has allegedly damaged the autonomy of private schools, by transferring the rights of choice and school management to the government. In reaction, the supporters of the equalization claim that it is impossible in the first place for private school to develop and implement activities other than those laid out in the curriculum, which is designed to prepare students for the entrance examination, because school education is based on competition for admission to university. Supporters insist that the autonomy of private schools will institutionalize the hierarchy of schools and result in the further expansion of entrance competition to junior and elementary schools. It is difficult to make a



clear judgment on the issue of the autonomy of private schools, as the arguments made by both parties cannot be proved by empirical studies. Nevertheless, considering the fact that no private school ever designed independent curriculums based on their own educational principles before the implementation of the equalization policy, nor did any choose their own students in accordance with these principles, and that no current non-equalized private schools has ever done so, the arguments of those wishing to abolish the equalization policy are more reasonable.

Let us summarize and evaluate the arguments of both camps with regards to the three main issues of contention surrounding the equalization policy. The arguments presented by those opposed to the policy lack empirical proof, as well as a plausible explanation to support their positions on these three issues, illusion of marketization. Meanwhile, the supporters of the equalization policy? arguments do present empirical proof as to the decrease in the level of students? academic achievement. However, on the third issue of weakened autonomy of private schools, supporters of the policy present only indirect historical proof for their arguments. Nevertheless, based on the above-mentioned issues, the supporters of the equalization policy suggest more plausible arguments than do their opponents.

Ironically, many of those who have criticized the government? authoritative intervention and control methods in the past eventually became supporters of the equalization policy, also supporting government intervention (paradox of the equalization policy). The situation on the opposite side is similar. Government departments concerned with education and the economic sector, which in the past monopolized the education field by cloaking themselves behind the power of the authoritarian government, are now calling for the government? power to be decreased. However, both sides remain silent about the government? management of the university entrance examination, which is the core issue in the current comprehensive school education reforms.

The fact that both camps have remained silent on the issue of the entrance examination is very important, as the government? standardized management of the entrance examination might very well be the cause of the credentialism that has produced all the educational problems (Yi Du-hyu 1999). The basic characteristics of Korean credentialism can be summarized as the measurement of one? grade based on one factor, the entrance examination, and the institutionalization of school hierarchy based on evaluation results (grades received on the entrance examination). From the government? standpoint, this is a very effective management system, and an objective control method to deal with both schools and education curriculums. The objectivity and effectiveness of this method have proved very useful to the authoritarian regimes of the past. As such, this entrance examination method helped increase confidence in the education policy by regulating the illegal methods of selecting university students, which was a common practice in the past. In addition, the government could effectively control the content of textbooks and curriculums used at various school levels, because it prepared the test questions for the entrance examinations and directly controlled the whole process. The institutionalization of school hierarchy was the price the government had to pay to assure the effectiveness of and confidence in its education policy.

Enterprises may regard the hierarchy of schools as being effective because, in many ways, schools are helping them set employment standards. Unfortunately, this situation has increased educational competition even more. As seen in Adnett and Davies' work on the case of New Zealand (2000, 10), the more that schooling emphasizes success in terms of a uni-dimensional ranking, the greater the positional component of the outcomes. Although the control of selection by the government is very effective, the problem is, once people's future opportunities are decided based on which school they graduated, a situation emerges in which people have to concentrate on educational competition in order to get a higher grade on the entrance examination. In the end, the suggestions made by the supporters of the equalization policy to fix the current educational problems without considering the basic problem of credentialism end up as a mere hope that the current educational problems would not worsen, rather than a real effort to solve them. Such demands to introduce new unverified institutions, marketization of education, can be regarded as being irresponsible.⁸

Changes in Educational Competition: Modernization and Globalization of Education Strategies

While I believe that the equalization policy should be tentatively maintained, the current system has limited effectiveness. As rapid societal changes have altered the fundamental structure of educational competition, the effectiveness of the equalization policy has decreased even more. This study has attempted to analyze the structural change of educational competition that has occurred because of modernization and globalization.

In his reinterpretation of Hirsch (1977), Brown (2003, 10) separated the power that influences competition into two categories: competition rigging and competition ranking. Competition rigging is related to power (for instance, the monopolization of opportunity) that influences the rules of competition, while competition ranking is related to the usage of resources that can be mobilized during the competition. Modernization of educational strategies lays out the changes in the competition rules that have limited the use of the power of competition ranking. According to Brown (2003), as the social closure theory focused on analyzing competition rigging, difficulties emerged when explaining the change from meritocratic to market rules of selection that have recently been observed in England's education system. The spread of market-oriented competition rules has resulted from efforts by the middle class to remove the competitive barriers (such as the quota system and the school district system), which have placed limits on their ability to use their resources in educational competition. But while the middle class has attempted to use the power of competition rigging, it has no intention of monopolizing education. Rather, its efforts are intended to lay the groundwork for the establishment of conditions that facilitate its use of the power of competition ranking's power based on economic and cultural capital, which the middle class possesses more than other classes. Thus, the middle class is forced to use the above-mentioned indirect methods, because it cannot monopolize educational results in a democratic society, and also because its educational success cannot be



justified solely based on the usage of the power of competition rigging.

In Korea, the modernization of education strategies has taken on different aspects. As seen in the resistance to maintenance of the equalization policy, the marketization of education, as it is understood in the West, has yet to fully take root in Korea. In other words, the Korean middle class has not yet begun to attempt to make use of the power of competition rigging to remove the barriers that limit their use of the power of competition ranking. In fact, quite the opposite has occurred. The Korean middle class has used the power of competition ranking to maintain its competitive edge in various ways, such as resorting to expensive shadow education; attempting to enter those elite high schools with the highest rate of students entering university under given conditions⁹; sending elementary and/or secondary school students abroad to study; emigrating for educational purposes; and sending tertiary school students abroad to study.

The globalization of educational strategies is closely related to the modernization of educational strategies. The above-mentioned issues about the modernization of educational strategies can be understood as being the result of the current domestic education system's inability to fulfill the middle class's desire for education. Therefore, in response to the above, the middle class has decided to change their view of the foreign education system in order to obtain better educational opportunities. However, the important fact is that this rush on the doors of educational opportunity by the middle class has not been caused by a sense of despair about the Korean education system in itself. What the Korean middle class seeks to acquire are academic degrees that have more positional value in the overall educational competition. In other words, what the Korean middle class wants is not a higher quality of education, but superior educational degrees in order to secure positional quality. The globalization of educational strategies has led to the formation of strategies that can overcome the limits of nation states in the race for more positional and competitive academic degrees.

Two important facts should be singled out about the globalization of educational strategies. The first is that the subject of these educational strategies is focused on the positional value of education, not on the quality of education, while the second concerns the global hierarchy of educational institutions. The global hierarchy of educational institutions is related to the stratification of jobs that has formed under the conditions created by a global economy (Lowe 2000, 366). As Lowe points out (2000, 373), the globalization of educational strategies pursued by Korean elites should be understood as the pursuit of symbolic capital that is needed to acquire the international qualifications to maintain their socioeconomic advantages amid extreme educational competition. The fact is that Korean elites have already pursued this new dimension¹⁰ of educational strategies, which can solidify their socioeconomic advantages, regardless of domestic competition rules. Therefore, the influence of the domestic educational competition structure is very small on the Korean middle class.

Arguments over the equalization policy should be understood within the structure of the modernization and globalization of educational strategies. These arguments are about a power struggle between two groups with opposite views of education, vying to secure the power of competition rigging. The group with the superior competition ranking power pursues the globalization of educational strategies,



moving beyond domestic power struggles. Modernization and globalization of Korean educational strategies have emerged as a result of the extreme competition in Korean education. This educational competition is based on positional competition that is in many ways akin to a zero-sum game (Hirsch 1977, 52). Therefore, although the marketization of education has been achieved, the dependence of shadow education will continue, and the movement to obtain international academic degrees will also continue. What middle class parents and students need is not education for everybody, but education that can allow them to get ahead of others, that is to say, that gives them positional advantage. Therefore, the modernization and globalization of educational strategies should be seen as concepts useful in developing an understanding of this new dimension of educational strategies.

The concept suggested in this paper has its basis in the argument that the equalization policy should be seriously overhauled, but maintained. This can be seen as a contradiction. The reason Korea should maintain the equalization policy is that implementations according to the arguments presented by those wishing to abolish it will only further increase educational competition, without providing any alternative socioeconomic advantages. Based on the above-mentioned factors, the equalization policy is somewhat valuable. At least, this equalization policy has played a positive role in restricting the educational competition to some degree, by limiting the middle class's ability to use the power of competition ranking. That being said, the equalization policy remains in need of a fundamental overhaul. The competition for entrance into university, which is caused by the government's monopolization of education through the university entrance examination, is not an issue that can be solved through the equalization policy. At the same time, it is crucial to overcome the current limits of the equalization policy, as the debate on the policy weakens the mindset of academic and political reform and makes it impossible to curb the state's monopoly and control of education.¹¹

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1. The High School Equalization Policy was introduced in 1974 to solve the phenomenon of extreme competition in the entrance examination for admission to elite high schools. The main goal of this equalization policy was to introduce a school district-based approach to schools' selection of students in order to do away with existing high school hierarchy. The equalization policy began to be introduced in big cities, and has been repeatedly expanded and scaled back in accordance with entrance examination policies.



2. National institutes, such as the Korea Development Institute and the Korean Education Development Institute, economic newspapers representing the opinions of the economic sector, and economics scholars are leading the drive for the abolition of the equalization policy.

3. The real-estate bubble has been an issue attracting much interest recently. On this issue, refer to Koh's article (2003).

4. Shadow education refers to private education, which has become institutionalized in East Asia. This concept is borrowed from Stevenson and Baker. They defined shadow education as "a set of educational activities outside formal schooling that are designed to improve a student's chances of successfully moving through the allocation process" (Stevenson and Baker 1992, 1640).

5. Those demanding that the equalization policy be abolished have put forward various arguments, and I analyzed the arguments presented in the paper written by Bak Se-il, U Cheon-sik, and Yi Ju-ho (2002), which most systemically argue for the abolition of the equalization policy. Though there are varied arguments, due to the limited length of this paper, I focused on the arguments presented above for simplification purposes so as to be able to clearly introduce the opposing views on the equalization policy. In addition, for the sake of convenience, only the page numbers will be cited hereafter whenever this book is quoted.

6. This issue will be dealt with later on.

7. The analytical framework for these arguments on the equalization policy was borrowed from Kim Dal-hyo (2003).

8. Brown insisted that conservative demands to control credential competition through the marketization of education is an illusion, and that market reforms have made people more and more dependent on credential competition (2003, 25).

9. In other words, they still have to live in the relevant school district. Parents and students pay high educational costs due to high price of real estate.

10. International credentials bring a qualitatively new dimension to the issue of credentialism and credential inflation (Lowe 2000, 363, italics added by the author).

11. The presentation of detailed alternatives is beyond the scope of this paper. The author would like to point out that inferences for policy (ch. 13) might provide important implications in the search for measures to solve the current education problems. The inferences for policy suggested by Fred Hirsch (1997) were concerned with the issue of how to ease the wastefulness of positional competition in acquiring credentials.

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