

The abolition of elite high schools as resistance to GERM—The case study of South Korea

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Abstract: Sahlberg first introduced the concept of a global education reform movement around standards, accountability, and decentralisation, which is now widely recognised as a "new educational orthodoxy" and exists in many education systems, however, scholars, including Sahlberg, began to show concerns about the effectiveness of this education mechanisms. Therefore, this paper examines the development of Korean education as a study, focuses on five broad characteristics of the global education reform movement, and discusses the changes it has brought in dimensions of the political, economic, and cultural through its development trajectory from the equalisation policies to the elite education. The paper argues that the global education reform movement introduced market mechanisms the Korean education system and created "education products," like elite high schools, and that these education reforms intensified hierarchical divisions and social stratification. As a result, the creation of a fairer education system is seen as a special concern in current education reform, and the elimination of elite high schools to create the fairest possible education environment can be regarded as a form of resistance to the global education reform movement.

1. The notion of GERM

The term GERM was first introduced by Sahlberg in his previous research to conclude the increased international exchange of policies and practices since the 1980s within many education systems as a global educational reform movement. This idea has become widely recognised as "a educational orthodoxy", which is fundamentally based on principles like standards, accountability, and decentralization (Verger et al, 2019) and operated within many education reforms throughout world, including the United States, many parts of Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, some Scandinavian countries, and an increasing number of countries in the developing world^[1].

According to Sahlberg's demonstration^[2], a series of education policies and reform principles from an unofficial educational agenda that relies on a certain set of assumptions have been employed to improve the quality or to fix the problems in education. However, there have been concerns about the effectiveness of GERM. The analysis of global reforms demonstrates well that the market cannot be relied on to produce either quality or equity^[3]. Sahlberg also identified GERM as spreading out of control and with something malignant "like an epidemic that spreads and infects education systems through a virus" ^[4].

Moreover, Even though it is a global movement, Kay Fuller and Howard Stevenson^[5] indicated that GERM has mutated in different features and developing at a varied pace through sufficient literature review in different countries like Sweden, Chile, and China, and different aspects of problems in the education system. Those revolts from the students' movement in Chile to the “Red States” strike waves of teachers in the USA showed that in some parts of the world, where GERM has been most deeply embedded have been challenged more than others as students and educators seek to speak back to an apparent problematic system.

2. Five globally common features

Although this restructuring of public education systems has been propelled forward by myriad drivers and has been implemented in various contextually as mentioned earlier. At least five globally common features have been identified by Sahlberg^[6] and these five trends can be observed in South Korea.

2.1 Increased competition among schools

The first trait is increasing competition among schools by providing alternative forms of schooling, such as the voucher system in Chile, free schools in Sweden, and charter schools in the United States. These schools were established to push the competition between schools hence improving the quality of education^[7].

In South Korea, apart from public and private high schools, students can also choose to enroll in autonomous public high schools, autonomous private high schools, and special purpose high schools, which have more autonomy in school operations and curriculum^[8]. Meanwhile, schools were ranked on their performance. According to Kim's description, autonomous private high schools have more strict school admission policies than traditional private high schools. Therefore, these schools allow parents to have more choice in their children's schooling but also bring more pressure to students as they are eager to enroll in a more reputational school. Also, it is indicated that there is a larger proportion of advantaged students studying in private schools or independent schools than before^[9]. To be specific, the data from the paper by Kim and Woo^[10] shows that more than 80% of students are currently enrolled at private universities and colleges in South Korea.

2.2 Standardisation in education

The second is standardisation in education. During the process of education reform, it started to become widely recognised that the quality of education can be improved by setting high-performance standards. Thus the focus of education reformers shifted from outcomes-based to standards-based. As a result, external standardized testing and school evaluation systems were produced by those standards-driven education policies^[11]. The ability in Korean, English, math, and social studies that is presented in the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) is a key measure of whether a South Korean student can enter a prestigious university.

2.3 Focus on common core subjects of the curriculum

The third common feature is moving focus to core subjects in the curriculum^[12], Breakspear indicated that some evaluation programmes like PISA are becoming a crucial element in assessing whether this nation achieves satisfactory teaching results at the national level. Some evidence shows that such assessment is being used to affect the learning focus of pupils, the key point of teacher's teaching, the emphasis of schooling, and the prioritization of national education

policies.

According to Kim's fairly substantial analysis of Korean high school administration from 2009 to 2016, there was increased teaching time for core subjects and decreased time for social studies since core subjects like Korean, English, and math take up the largest part of the CSAT. Therefore, narrowing the school curriculum into core subjects can meet the demand of students and their parents, who are educated consumers in the process of GERM.

2.4 Test-based accountability

The fourth trend is to place considerable value on school performance. This kind of management model is the introduction of a business model in the education field. A dominating policy of test-based accountability is the linking of teachers' salaries to student performance^[13].

An incentive model is also mentioned in Kim's research as a noticeable factor in affecting teachers' teaching time and the extent to which schools attract teachers. The performance-based pay and accountability system always leads to a problematic result in that schooling is always influenced by accountability mechanisms and somehow obscures what teachers and students pursue. For example, under the widespread social belief that entering a prestigious university is a guarantee of a successful future in South Korea, excessive pressure is put on adolescents^[14]. Also, teachers are forced to adjust the focus of the curriculum to achieve a higher progression rate.

2.5 School choice

The fifth trend is school choice. Increasingly countries started to hand the choices of educating children to their parents through funding more private or alternative types of schools^[15], where parents may need to pay tuition. Like the Seoul Local Education Authority once adopted a school choice programme to privatise about 20 percent of traditional private high schools into autonomous private high schools^[16].

Ideally, parents can access public education funds as a way of receiving education vouchers in Chile^[17]. However, there is a worth noting issue in South Korea that the high speed of expansion in higher education exceeded the government's willingness and financial ability. Typically, private schools were founded and sponsored by huge philanthropic donations and national finance. However, in South Korea, the majority of funding in private schools relies upon their revenue from tuition fees and limited subsidies from private citizens and organizations. As a result, such a heavy overflow of privatization places a significant financial burden on families, special for those in disadvantaged socioeconomic status, and aggravates the inequality of access to universities and colleges.

3. The privatisation in South Korea

As the above analysis shows, the five globalisation trends of the GERM are reflected in South Korea. While Sahlberg does not include privatisation in his paperwork, Carrasco and Gunter indicated that privatisation is a key feature of what is happening within the GERM thought series of analysis. Normally, privatisation means the shift of public services and ownership to private. This brought some changes the provision of service becomes more business-like and access to a service is based on the business brand and consumer choice. The trend of school choice is an outcome of shifting students and parents to the consumer position.

In South Korea, the conspicuous product during the process of privatisation is the elite high schools such as foreign language high schools and international high schools, which recruit almost all of the "top students" and charge high tuition fees for an elite education. This elite school has

brought more choice and higher quality education to students and parents but also aggravated social inequality. Thus in 2019, the South Korean Ministry of Education Yoo Eun-has announced that all elite high schools will be converted to general high schools in March 2025 out of the deep concern of the inequality in education leading to an anabatic social class disparity. However, in South Korea as a country, where equal education was once practiced and where privatisation is now rampant, whether such a move is resistant to GERM will be discussed below.

4. The traveling educational policy in South Korea

4.1 The Equalisation Policy

In 1968, the Korean government abolished the junior high school examination system, a move that led to increased competition in the junior high school entrance examinations. Therefore, another guideline named the Equalisation Policy was issued in 1974, which means that students can be recruited to high schools by recommendation, written materials, and regional allocation. To equalise the composition of students, the government employed a mechanism that randomly allocates students to public and private schools based on the district. During this period, the curriculum was designed by the nation, and public education funding was distributed equally to both public and private schools. As an exchange for financial subsidies in private schools, the curriculum design and school operations like teacher's salaries, tuition fees, and teaching schedules in private schools were controlled by the government^[18]. This means this policy equalised many aspects of private and public schooling. However, there is a distinguishing difference between schools that private schools had the autonomy in personnel decisions, including teacher hiring.

According to 2002 statistics from the public document, this equalisation policy had been implemented in 23 cities, including Seoul, accounting for 57% of the number of high schools and 74% of the total number of students in the country. However, the critiques of this reform can be found in many works of literature, mainly because the high level of government control caused a negative competitive environment in high schools. The low intervention of marketing principles like competition, accountability, and autonomy led to fewer incentives for teachers and administrators in schools to meet the needs of parents and students . At the same time, the demands from students and parents for prestigious universities had not diminished, even worse, some gifted students were denied a better high school education under this policy. As a result, the industry of extracurricular tutoring was beginning to take off. Meanwhile, the expansion of global reforms in public education systems has taken the form of neoliberal educational rhetoric as characterized by the market mechanism into the sight of policy actors at the beginning of the 1980s. Even though former Korean president Roh Moo-hyun indicated that the equalization policy in Korea has not made students less able to learn it would be possible for policy actors to reject the equalisation education out of political reasons. The appeal of reducing bureaucratic control and increasing the market's control in the educational system (Chubb and Moe 1988, 1990) had started to grow in force.

4.2 The Elite Education

Although neoliberal education reforms based on market mechanisms for public education systems are highly controversial as introduced. The government of South Korea has still embraced such reforms since the mid-1990s. Elite education was legalised in 2002 and from 2008 onwards, South Korea began to focus more on transforming the public school system into a market-oriented system imbued with neoliberal policies and strategies, such as school autonomy, diversity, and choice. , Based on the information collected by Oh from official documents and data. The

government believed that the newly deregulated education system would give parents and students more opportunities to choose their education while enhancing the competitiveness of the national public education system in the world market.

Over the decades, South Korea has experienced dramatic privatisation, and the pace of such development is remarkable, but according to the data, 83 percent of education in South Korea is financed by families, a proportion that exceeds even that of the United States, where the private sector dominates. This over-reliance on private funding demonstrates the inadequacy of the government's system of regulation and raises concerns about social tensions.

4.3 The negative impact of the elite high school

The negative impact of elite high schools on South Korea will be discussed from three perspectives: political, economic, and cultural because the social process generally dominates in these three main areas. However, it is clear from the former government's official statement that the primary reason for abolishing elite high schools is out of the consideration of educational inequality, so this aspect will be highlighted.

From political aspect

In terms of political orientation, the development of education that is more than the government expected can be an inducement. Privatisation is usually linked with government deregulation and the introduction of market mechanisms as presented. As a result, the self-care reforms in the elite high schools, such as the selection of quality students and teachers, the restructuring of the core curriculum, and the increased interference of private funding all accelerate the cycle of school reform, while policies, as idealistic prognoses, can lag behind the school process, possibly leading to many hurdles for the government to issue policies, thus may ultimately lead to an unexpected outcome. Moreover, Lubienski argues that there is a contradiction between the rhetoric of neoliberal reform and the reality that policies pursuing purer market dynamics may undermine the intended outcomes of government policies when market mechanisms and privatisation of the public education system coexist. Therefore, the emergence of such school diversification policies in South Korea leading to unanticipated results is where the contradiction lies.

From economic aspect

The tilting of the economy inevitably leads to the birth of inequities. A salient theme of the globalization discourse concerns the emergence of transnational capital—financial and industrial capital which freely “roams around the world in search of profits and efficient production sites”. Such financial flows present South Korea with opportunities as well as great challenges. This contradiction can be seen in many pieces of literature, there are two main perspectives empirical or moral with one view pointing to the importance of restructuring national education systems to make them cost-effective. And another view stands in defense of the state's commitment to education for equity and justice in condemning the more or less harmful effects of globalisation. While KI analyses the failure of the former centralization system in South Korea and the importance of decentralisation, he also explains that globalisation should be adapted to the specific circumstances of each country.

In South Korea, elite high schools, have more affluent economic capital and educational conditions than ordinary high schools, leading to superior admission rates to prestigious universities. Such family backgrounds, human capital, and the prestige of reputable universities give this elite-educated group a further advantage in the labour market, which shows that such a financial bias is also a major cause of inequality.

From culture aspect

The cultural dimension is relatively subjective, so although it was mentioned in loads of

literature always glossed over. Most articles analysing the phenomenon of privatisation on a broader level focus on aspects such as the cultural impact of the national restructuring of the education system and policy implementation, or the changes in schools under market intervention. There seems to be no doubt that globalisation and privatisation had an impact on nation-state cultures such as South Korea's, but such broad-level analyses rarely find convincing data. Therefore, the culture scope will then be narrowed to the individual level, such as the excessive academic stress that led to a high rate of academic burnout in South Korea.

According to a recent analysis of a questionnaire that meets academic requirements from the Korean University, Teenagers are experiencing significant academic stress in South Korea. Although this survey mainly analyses the causes of academic burnout and does not compare the number with the era of equalisation, some of the findings suggest that there is an increasing academic frenzy in South Korea that lead to significant stress for students:

‘Finally, the results present another profile peculiar to Korean adolescents, named the Struggling group, which was not found in previous studies (J. Lee et al., 2010) and we introduced it. This unique burned-out group represents the dark side of Korean education caused by overheated academic aspirations.’

Moreover, Choi pointed out that academic pressure resulting from university entrance exams is the most critical factor in students’ suicidal events in South Korea. And this pressure was further amplified by the presence of elite education.

5. The abolition of elite high schools as resistance to GERM

The GERM introduced the market mechanism into the education system of South Korea and created some products like the elite high schools, but these reforms were rooted in the less responsible structures of consumer demand and choice and led to hierarchical segmentation and social differentiation. The creation of a more equitable education system is perceived as a particular concern in Korean education reform efforts. Therefore, the abolition of the elite high schools to create as equitable an educational environment as possible can be regarded as resistance to GERM.

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