What Koreans Wish Obama Understood About Their Schools

In my travels throughout Korea, in virtually every meeting I heard a variation of the same theme. “Why does President Obama think that Korean schools are good?”

Although there are disputes about how much Obama or Education Secretary Arne Duncan like Korean schools—see here and here, for example—there is no question that Korea’s students’ consistently high PISA scores and schools attract some praise from not only Obama, but also many others in America and worldwide. In particular, Obama has praised the role that Korea’s teachers play in society—and many note that Korea’s top students become teachers unlike in the United States. Obama has also discussed the longer hours that Koreans spend in school.

So are these the reasons Korea’s students succeed?

As I explained to those with whom I spoke, I think Americans who praise Korea’s schools misunderstand the realities on the ground. My sense is that Korean students have high educational achievement not because of Korea’s schools, but often despite them. Students sleep routinely through their classes. The lecture style that teachers employ is not effective enough to keep them awake. It’s hard to imagine that the teachers are so talented that they can cause their students to learn through osmosis.

Students do spend long hours in self-study after school, which helps undoubtedly, but for many, they tend to excel because their parents spend huge sums to send them to hagwons after the self-studying, in which students do their “real” learning, teachers, parents, and school leaders told me again and again. The educational experience is far from efficient.

And there is a real societal price to pay, as students are sleep-deprived and unhappy, employers question how ready they are for life and work after leaving school—the College Scholastic Aptitude Test incentives memorization at the expense of thinking because of its structure and time limit—and the birth rate has declined markedly in Korea at least in part because of how expensive it is to have children.

Although students’ success because of how much their parents’ care about their education (a point Duncan does understand) seems to have helped the Korean economy experience miraculous growth, given that Korea now needs...
to pioneer another wave of disruption to continue to grow, other skills that have not been fostered—like creativity—may now increase in importance. And a more balanced and sustainable approach to life seems critical.

Given Korea’s emphasis on education across the board, my sense is that if public education remained widely and freely available but not compulsory, many middle- and upper-class parents would stop sending their students to their current schools and instead send them to hagwons for what is often a truly customized and personalized—but quite expensive—learning experience. I wonder what sorts of innovations in learning we would then see to provide customized experiences for other students—and whether we might see a reduction in the hours of education in exchange for a more efficient, student-centered education in which students continued to achieve but were fundamentally happier.

If Korea uses its famed skill of rapidly adopting new trends and ideas to scale innovations like the flipped classrooms in Busan about which I have written and other forms of blended learning that escape the factory-model of education, then perhaps some praise from President Obama would be well deserved.

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