

Emerging Consumerism and the Accelerated 'Education Divide': The Case of Specialized High Schools in South Korea

Hyu-Yong Park

University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Abstract

This paper criticizes the neoliberal shift in Korean education toward educational consumerism by analyzing the boom in Specialized High schools (SHs). For its theoretical background, this paper discusses the issues of freedom, equal opportunity, and choice in education, and investigates how neoliberal consumerism has been encouraging the boom in SHs in Korea. To support its arguments, the paper provides a brief overview of the historical background of Korean education vis-à-vis the growth of private education and the emerging parental demand for educational choices. Next, the case of the SHs is analyzed in terms of how the shift creates the vicious circle of 'education divide.' Finally, discussions follow to emphasize that educational consumerism may cause detrimental effects on educational equity by bringing about an educational crisis rather than an opportunity. Reflecting on the case of SHs, this paper argues that educational consumerism aggravates the education divide and accelerates social polarization.

Keywords: Neo-liberalism, Educational consumerism, Educational equity, Educational choice, Specialized High schools, Education divide

Introduction

Currently, the boom of Specialized High schools (henceforth, SHs) is one of the most sensitive educational issues in Korea. By 2006, there were 57 SHs nationwide, comprised of 29 Foreign Language, 18 Science, 6 Independent, and 4 International High schools; about 12,000 students in total were enrolled in those SHs.[1] What draws people's concern is the 'successful' outcome of these SHs in college admission.

For example, in the 2007 admission list, 52% of a total 2,165 graduating students from six SHs in Seoul entered 'the SKY,' which are big three universities in Korea: in reference to a specific school, about 70% of a total of 440 graduating students from DW high school (a popular SH in Seoul) were admitted to one of the SKY universities (Jung, 2007). This has been a continuing trend over the past several years: e.g. in 2006, 87.9% of the students from eight highly spotlighted SHs were successfully admitted to the top 7 universities, breaking the record of 80.9% for 2005 (Kwon, 2006).

Driven by such eye-opening results, there has been a boom of SHs among Korean students and their parents, which causes intense competition even from the elementary school level. A more serious problem is that the boom is fundamentally driven by the neoliberal ideology, which makes schools the target of educational consumerism: i.e. students as consumers. However, this paper claims that the boom in SHs demonstrates that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer through the means of education; consequently, educational consumerism makes schooling serve social reproduction and, in the end, social polarization.

To support this argument, this paper revisits the issues of freedom and equal opportunity in education as a conceptual groundwork, and criticizes the market ideology vis-à-vis school choice, which is supported by the myth of neoliberal consumerism. This neoliberal shift in Korean education is analyzed and criticized in terms of the boom in Specialized High schools: to do this, this paper: i) traces the historical and social characteristics of Korean education; ii) explicates how the SH case evidences the vicious circle of an education divide in Korea; and iii) highlights how the overheated boom of SHs brings about detrimental effects on the equality and stability of the secondary education system in Korea. This paper warns that educational consumerism will pervert the ideas of freedom, choice, and equal opportunity in education, and accelerate education divide and social segregation between the haves and have-nots.

A Critique of Neoliberal Consumerism in Education

Though the effects of globalization on inequality is heavily debated among socio-economic and political theorists, there is little attention paid to social variables, such

as educational and cultural factors, which might play a significant role in accelerating the economic polarization (Hytrek & Zentgraf, 2008). This paper takes critical perspectives on the social and economic polarization triggered by educational inequality, and argues that education inequality incites excelleration of social divide or social polarization. One way to take a close look at this issue is to investigate the effect of neoliberal consumerism in education since it is evidenced in the case of the boom of SHs in Korea .

To investigate the issue, neoliberal consumerism in education, this paper ventures into a brief theoretical discussion regarding, first of all, the notions of freedom and equal opportunity in education as a conceptual background. It then discusses how neoliberalism brings consumerism into the realm of education as well as foregrounding the issue of market ideology in terms of school choice. These discussions will support the following case analysis and criticism of the boom in Specialized High schools in Korea.

Conceptual background: Freedom and equal opportunity in education

Mithaug (1996) has differentiated two kinds of freedom, "freedom as power" and "freedom as right." According to this distinction, each individual's freedom as power conflicts with that of others since there is always a struggle between the exercises of power.[2] Consequently, one's freedom as power may encroach upon another's, while one's freedom as right does not. In a capitalistic society, for example, freedom as power is subject to the belongings of the dominant and/or wealthiest people since the market principles allow, through the effect of capital, this freedom as power of the dominant class to trespass on the freedom as right of subordinate classes. Here, freedom as right considers that any member of a society deserves a fair chance in the pursuit of personally desirable ends in life. By the notion of *freedom in education*, this paper means 'freedom as right' of common people in educational enterprise, and advocates that the freedom as right should be secured as long as it is exercised within a 'fair' rule.

One criterion to judge whether one's free choice is 'freedom as right' or 'freedom as power' can be determined by fairness. Simpson (2006) argued that a society should be responsible for developing a reliable social system influencing the options available to

individuals, and the individual choices must be harmonized and not conflict with fair rules.[3] In this sense, the notion of 'free-ness' at the individual level must be concurrent with the idea of 'fair-ness' at the social level. This paper argues that education (or school) is the arena that individual 'freeness' and social 'fairness' could either collide or harmonize: one of conditions that divert the direction is *equal opportunity*. According to Mithaug (1996),[4] equal opportunity is a starting point to obtain the fair chance that lay people can expect in the pursuit of self-determination in his/her life. Facilitating equal opportunity in a society is equivalent to providing each individual with fair chances as 'freedom as right,' and, as this paper claims, education is the most significant and influential way to ensure each individual fair chances and, consequently, equal opportunity.

However, educational consumerism actually restricts the chances or opportunities of students, especially, from poor families (Patterson, 1978). According to him, in a highly industrialized capitalistic society, market ideology served to stratify the social classes through schooling. If there is no equal opportunity, there is no fair competition in education and no chance to improve one's social status for students from poor social classes. For instance, the Center for Campus Life and Culture at the Seoul National University (SNU, 2003) reported that there is a high correlation between a father's occupation and the entrance rate at SNU[5]; the students who have fathers in higher administrative positions are 30 times more likely to be accepted at SNU than those whose fathers hold low income jobs. In this way, the socio-economic status is passed down from generation to generation, and it is so hard to guarantee equal opportunity if there is huge difference in financial support among students.

Critiques of neoliberal consumerism

There are two main tenets in neoliberalism: one is the myth of liberal individualism (Bird, 1999) and the other is 'the meritocracy myth' (McNamee & Miller, 2004). The liberal individualism myth is related to F. Hayek's (1986) conventional argument that the individual pursuit of profit can lead to the eventual collective profit of society. Armstrong (2006) argues, however, that the neoliberal doctrine of free-choice and rightful rewards is rarely realized; instead, neoliberalism begets severe segregation in the socioeconomic status of the different social classes. Meanwhile, the meritocracy myth is based on the credo that the social system distributes resources, such as wealth

and income, according to the merits (e.g., talents or efforts) of individuals. However, Miller and McNamee (2004) challenged this view by arguing that the impact of merit on economic outcomes is vastly overestimated by the neoliberal ideology. In addition, there are other non-merit factors which suppress the effects of merit by imposing unequal conditions, or which create barriers to individual mobility.

Grounded by these two tenets, neo-liberalists insist that there should be no intervention by governmental authority in the market (Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992). Since neo-liberalists consider education a commodity, school a supplier, and students and parents customers, they support the shift of education from the public domain of governmental regulation to the private domain of market regulation. In this way, neoliberalism is strongly connected to consumerism and its realization through market ideology; in fact, it is neo-liberal ideology that has brought the intense trends of consumerism into education (Scott & Linda, 2005). However, many have argued that the ideology of consumerism which suggests that consumers will have more choice in a market society is superficial and exaggerated (Gabriel & Lang, 1995; Miles, 1998); others have pointed out that the given choices are only available for those who can pay for them (Levett, 2003). In the market economy, therefore, the choices will eventually be given, primarily and predominantly, to the haves rather than the have-nots. From this position, Parsens and Walsh (2006) argued that individual consumer choice, by nature, systematically discriminates against deprived groups by overruling broader concepts of social equity and justice.

Therefore, the privatization and marketization of education should be carefully considered, since the educational service of the state plays a crucial role in social reconstruction, social (class) movement, and forming a democratic community as a *gemeinschaft* (Fritzell, 1987). In this sense, this paper warns of the following hazardous effects of having consumerism rule over education: i) market principles may block the possibility of public intervention, which can boost educational and social equity (i.e., equal opportunity or fairness); ii) educational choices will actually be given only to the students from richer families; and iii) schools will descend into institutes that simply consolidate the social hierarchy and reproduce the capitalistic system. In the long run, the introduction of neoliberalism in the realm of education

will accelerate the widening gap in the education divide and, ultimately, result in social disintegration.

To sum up, neoliberalism has conjured up market ideology in the domain of education, and the vision of marketized education is not promising but misleading. The myth of individualism or meritocracy needs to be scrutinized since it conflicts with the implications of freedom as right and equal opportunity in education. In fact, the recent phenomenon of severe social segregation in Korea becomes apparent in the realm of education, which is attributable to the influence of educational consumerism (Ha & Kim, 2004; Kim, 2003). This paper argues that the segregation between socio-economic classes originate from the 'education divide' (Smith & Noble, 1996) or 'educational gap' (Howell & Peterson, 2006) by analyzing specifically the boom in Specialized High Schools, which is one of the most prominent examples of the 'education divide' in Korea.

Case analysis: The boom in Specialized High schools in Korea

The recent boom in Specialized High schools (SHs) is representative of the overwhelming trends in educational consumerism, which are grounded in the neoliberalism which influences Korean society. Before speculating on the current phenomenal popularity of the SHs, this paper briefly overviews the historical background of Korean education by focusing on, especially, the development and popularity of private education and the growth of Korean parents' demand for educational choices. The case of SHs is then analyzed in terms of the vicious circle of the education divide, which was brought about by the misguided ideology of educational consumerism. Finally, a discussion follows which puts forward the argument that educational consumerism is a crisis rather than an opportunity, in terms of both the individual and the public level of education in Korea.

Three characteristics of the development of Korean education

Korea has been referred to as one of the "Asian Tigers," which have demonstrated a remarkable economic growth compared to other Asian Pacific countries. Baker and Holsinger (1997) argued that the common secret of such outstanding development can be attributed to the countries' highest concern for and investment in education and

human resource development. They argued that, following Trow (1961) and Carroll (1981), there is relationship between the national growth rate and the secondary school enrollment rate: "rapid economic growth continues while the secondary school enrollment rate runs from around 30% to 90%" (p. 119). During the colonial period under the Japanese Empire, educational opportunities have been limited and the educational desires of Korean people have been repressed, which gave way to a huge demand for education after the liberation of Korea in 1945 (Ashton, Green, & James, 1999). In the arduous effort to reconstruct the country after the ruin of the Korean War in 1950, Korea has been largely indebted to its development of human resources; this depends on the quality of education rather than natural or financial resources.

Generally speaking, the educational development of Korea has shown three distinctive features: i) education fever in chasing a higher level of education; ii) extraordinary reliance on the private education sector; and iii) a highly constructed social ideology vis-à-vis education as social capital. A discussion of these issues provides an understanding concerning the historical and social backgrounds of Korean education and the recent boom of SHs.

First of all, Korea's education fever has been represented in the high enrollment rate in formal education and the pursuit of higher degrees (Asia Development Bank [ADB], 2003). For example, Korea's secondary school enrollment rate and the number of tertiary level students are the highest among Asian developing countries, as represented in table 1 (Booth, 2003, p. 150).

[Table 1]

Secondary and tertiary school enrollment among Asian countries

Country	Gross secondary enrolment ratio		Tertiary students per 100,000 people	
	1980	1996	1980	1996
South Korea	78	102	1,698	5,609
Taiwan *	80	96	2,035	3,160
Singapore	58	72	963	2,722
Malaysia	48	62	419	971
Thailand	29	57	1,284	2,096

[Source: UNESCO Statistical Yearbook 1998 & Taiwan Statistical Yearbook*]

The increase of the number of tertiary students from 1,698 (in 1980) to 5,609 (in 1996) is salient, showing Koreans' reliance on higher education and the consequent expansion of the infra-structure of formal education. As a result, according to UNESCO (2006),[6] Korea represents the fourth tier in the percentage of 5A graduates (35%), following Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, and the second tier in 5B graduates (46%), following Australia, among Asian Pacific countries.

The second feature of the history of Korean education is that Korea has been highly dependent on the private sector for formal education since the Korean government had to spend a large portion of its national funds and resources on the defence and social welfare system in its effort to bring about national reconstruction (Li, 2002). Consequently, the Korean people's high demand for educational opportunities could not accept the lack of public education system, and therefore there came to exist a heavy reliance on private schools, mostly founded and funded by religious organizations, for both formal and informal education. For example, the percentage of private school in formal education increases dramatically as it goes to higher education: private schools share 1.3% of the primary school, 31.5% of the secondary school, and 87.6% of the tertiary school (KEDI, 2005).

In terms of the enrollment rate in private schools, compared to other Asian countries, Korea is also relatively high. Several Asian countries' private school enrollment rate for secondary and tertiary levels is shown in the following table 2 (Cummings, 1999, p. 138).

[Table 2]

Private school enrollment rate in several Asian countries

Private school Enrollment (%)	Philippines	Japan	S. Korea	Taiwan	Indonesia	Thailand
Secondary	37	14	41	10	51	11
Tertiary	85	80	79	70	65	30

[Source: UNESCO (1991)]

The noticeable reliance on private school represents the Korean people's educational fever and mistrust of public education, which has a historical cause as this is related to Korea's contemporary history. On the one hand, the modernization process in the early 20th century and the colonial experience during the first half of the 20th century

nullified the old Korean class system and made a relatively homogenous society. After the Korean War in 1950, Korea had to start from scratch, and education emerged as the most reliable channel for social and economic advancement for the next generation, provided students could succeed in school and their parents supported them. Since Korea's national economic growth has been synchronized with the development of human resources, education became the most important source for the accumulation of human capital and, then, social stratification (Ashton et al., 1999).

On the other hand, however, the mistrust of public education can be traced back to the authoritarian regime of Park's government in the 1960s and 70s. Park's regime, though it had shown impressive leadership in Korea's economic development, implemented centralized control over private as well as public schools and colleges through the Private School Law (Ashton, 1999, p. 63). As a consequence, in supporting democratic and decentralized administration today, most Korea parents take governmental regulation or intervention in education as the legacy of the old dictatorship, while considering educational choices their rights and privileges as fruits of a democratic society. Currently, Korean parents tend to believe that public schools are out of date, inefficient, and helpless in meeting their educational demand, while private schools are more advanced and may provide their children with better educational opportunities. As a result, for Korean parents, neoliberal consumerism, which offers efficient alternatives to statism (Pasha, 2000), has emerged as a substitute for the old governmental regulations, and the consequent market-generated inequality is seen as a necessary evil.

For the third feature of Korean education, there have been pandemic social discourses constructed, which represent education as 'social capital' (Bourdieu, 1986). Education has been deeply impressed in Korean parents' minds as effective social capital for socio-economic success, and schooling has been regarded as the most reliable channel to develop human capital at the individual level. One problem with this attitude is that the positioning of education as social capital is aligned with neoliberal perspectives: it is the pursuit of individual success through the logic of competition and of 'educational choice.' Because the Korean people suffered from a long and uneasy history in terms of their civilization, colonization, and military dictatorship, they deem the word 'choice' educational freedom or opportunity as a form of educational

democracy. Since democracy had been introduced in Korea by the U.S. military government along with the educational system, Koreans are now easily persuaded of the linkage between 'democracy' and 'choice,' such as 'choices in a democratic society.' For Koreans, educational democracy now means more opportunity than responsibility, which has made educational discourses incline toward neoliberal trends.

Another problem in treating education as social capital is that the 'game' of educational competition is not favorable to poor students who do not receive equal socioeconomic support from their families; in other words, these students cannot afford the educational choices. In fact, there is a large volume of research which has investigated the positive correlation between the level of education and economic compensation (Choi, 1997; Yu, 1998): though the relationship between education and income is universal phenomenon, it is noteworthy that the income inequality became striking after the IMF (International Monetary Fund) crisis in 1997 (Choi, 2002; Choi & Kim 2003; Kim, 2001; Kim, 2002; Yu, 2002).[7] After the IMF crisis, the connection between schooling and the labor market has become much more solid and the major factor of success in school can be attributed to a student's socio-economic backgrounds (Kim, 2005; Lee, 2003). Under these circumstances, the education divide, which relies on students' socioeconomic backgrounds, becomes larger and it seems as though the gap cannot be closed: if this phenomenon is true in reality, it signifies that education may promote social stratification.

To sum up, due to its idiosyncratic historical background, Korean society has shown high educational fever as well as a high preference for private schools. This tendency is synergistic with the neoliberal trends which bring educational consumerism into education, and conjure up parental demand for more educational choices. The exemplary case of these trends can be found in the SH case which is analyzed in the following section.

A vicious circle of education divide: The SHs case

After the IMF crisis in the late 1990s, there have been dramatic changes in Korean education. As Lawn (2001) argued, neoliberal trends have brought business-led ideas, such as 'school improvement,' 'efficiency in educational product,' 'value for money,'

etc. into education, and schools are full of "private suppliers, financial and management consultants, commercial businesses, and new educational traders" (p. 181). As the schools being the marketized places, the academic notions of readiness/aptitude, achievement, accountability, or 'learnability' transform into the business terms of 'fitness to job market,' 'human capital,' or 'productivity/marketability.' These notions are so popular in Korean society's social discourses regarding education that students and parents cannot resist against them: the highlight of such phenomenon is the boom of SHs.

SHs as 'prep' schools. Recently, the Specialized High schools (SHs), which were initially conceived to educate talented students in special areas, such as science, foreign language, art, and so forth, are gaining great popularity among students and parents because, above all, the SHs have been showing outstanding results in college entrance exams. For instance, students from 57 SHs, out of 2000 high schools across the nation, have demonstrated outstandingly high admission rates -14.1% in 2004, 15.2% in 2005, and 17.1% in 2006- to SNU (Kwon, 2006). Because the social value of the diploma from top-ranked universities is extremely high (Kang, 2005), these outcomes incite parents to become more aware of the impact of those SHs on their children's college preparation. It is no exaggeration to say that those SHs are actually 'specialized' in preparing for the national college entrance exam. Taking advantage of their popularity, the number of SHs is rapidly growing; since there had been established a science high school for talented education in 1983, 46 SHs existed in 2005, 57 SHs by 2006, and 20 more SHs will be established within four years.

These SHs are now facing severe criticism due to the very reason that they have abandoned their original aim and became 'prep' schools. For example, in 2006 only 30.3 % of students graduated from 6 foreign language high schools in Seoul selected related majors to their high school specialties (Kwon, 2006). Reflecting on this phenomenon, three latent problems in the popularity of SHs are of concern. First, the extraordinary popularity of SHs has created increased competition for privileged prep-courses aimed at admission to top universities, even starting as early as elementary school.

Second, the super-heated competition for SHs admission has caused a sharp increase in home expenses for private tutoring, not only for the families that can afford those

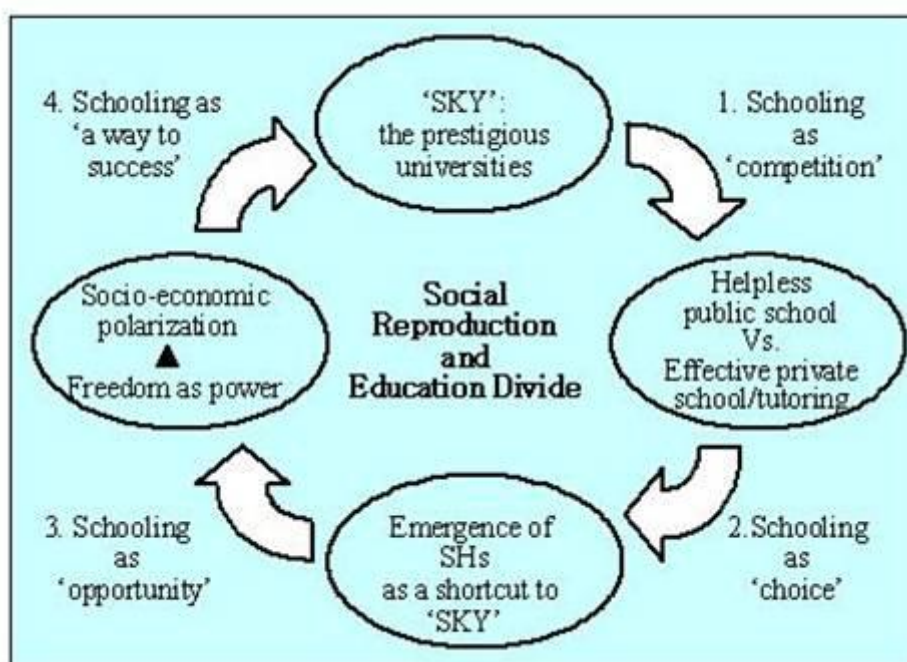
expenses, but also for those who cannot. According to Choi, Ryu, and Kim (2003), the gross expenditure on private education was amount to \$13.6 billion (2.3% of GDP) in 2003, which is equivalent to about a half of gross national budget for education (4.97% of GDP) for the same year. For example, many *hagwons* (private tutoring institutes) or online lessons are currently open for tailored lessons, aimed for entering those SHs: as results, for instance, among 289 freshmen admitted in a SH in 2007, only 6 students (0.02%) replied that they have not been helped by *hagwon* or private tutoring. In another SH's case, 82% of freshmen replied that they have been enrolled to the specially organized 'SH-targeting program' in various *hagwons*. Since the services provided by the *hagwons* are effectively tailored for high school entrance exams, it makes the public school curriculum unwarrantable and helpless (Yoon, 2006). Consequently, public schools have lost parents' trust; most of the parents rely more on private institutes or tutors than on regular school curriculum (Choi, et al., 2003).

Third, the over-heated competition for the entrance to SHs increases the gap between families of different social stratas. For example, the average yearly educational expense is over four times higher than normal public or private high schools: to include the beneficiary expense of schooling, which is affected by parents' financial strength, the gap becomes much larger.[8] Since the household expense for SHs is such incredibly expensive, the budget of a normal household cannot afford it: consequently, today only students from strong economic backgrounds are eligible for those SHs that will lead them to top universities.[9] It becomes common sense in Korean society that if a family invests more in private tutoring, it guarantees their children's succeed in the college examination.

SHs for consolidating a vicious circle. This reality exposes several significant facts about schooling in Korea. The pyramid-shaped hierarchical structure of the single-track system of Korean education begets more severe competition as students move toward higher education. Under such circumstances, public education is regarded as helpless because, due to severe competition in the college entrance exam, students and their parents push themselves into reckless race and highly rely on private sectors for the preparation of college. This encourages parents to rely more on private tutoring, and schooling becomes a game of 'choice': choices for effective programs, efficient

teachers, and competent institutes for exams. Here, a major bifurcation point begins within social classification because the choices highly rely on parents' economic capabilities. Furthermore, the earlier the bifurcation point emerges, the harder filling up the gap becomes because every choice that parents make is accumulated and has an effect on the race for the best education. Under the situation of such determinant bifurcation of the education divide, how can the hope of poor students be redeemed? Clearly, if the ideologized concepts of 'choice' and 'opportunity' are based on the logic of capitalistic consumerism, the educational choice is merely the exercise of 'freedom as power,' which collides with the 'freedom as right' of disadvantaged students. Consequently, the unequal opportunity of choice based upon the family's financial strength debases education to an apparatus for social polarization and dilapidates schooling as a channel for social reproduction.

In fact, the boom of SHs in Korea represents an example of the ever-widening gap between students of different socio-economic status, and uncovers that there are, at least, four kinds of social discourses conjured up in Korean society, regarding the issues of school choice: schooling as 'competition,' 'choice,' 'opportunity,' and 'a way to success.' [10] Unfortunately in Korea, the situation is creating a viscous circle that aggravates the 'education divide.' It can be illustrated as the following [figure 1]:



[Figure 1] Vicious circle of 'education divide' by schooling in Korea

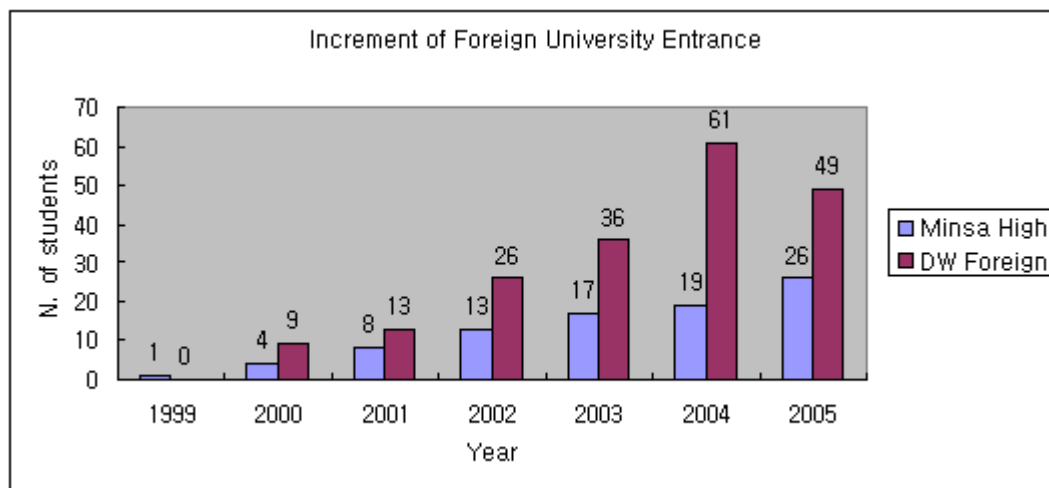
The above diagram shows how the boom in SHs can be depicted by the social discourse about schooling. Many of the opinions, logics, and arguments represent this socially constructed, shared, and appraised discourse about 'schooling as competition, choice, opportunity, and a way to success.' The idea of 'schooling as competition' turns the school into an area full of games or races; the idea of 'schooling as choice' overemphasizes the private aspect of education and neglects the public role; the idea of 'schooling as opportunity' propagandizes, as if the opportunities are equally given to all students; and, finally, the idea of schooling as a way to success presumes education as 'a survival game' and highlights only the individual goal in 'the game.' The problem is that such discourse is excited by the neoliberal ideology and distorted by educational consumerism, which is armored with market ideology. In fact, the boom in SHs in Korea discloses how school choice is strongly affected by such idealized discourse.

To wrap up, educational consumerism expedites the education divide and postulates its rationale, supported by market ideology, under the banner of free choice, competition/survival, efficiency/effectiveness, excellence/success, and so on. The SH is the case of Korean society's discourses on educational choice are culminated: in reality, the SHs have been functioning only as 'prep' schools for entering, either domestic or foreign, prestigious universities. Furthermore, the actual choices have been given to only richer students. The next section addresses how such educational consumerism conflicts with educational equity and distorts the role of education for social reconstruction.

Entering SHs: Opportunity or Crisis?

Helpless choices in the endless competition. The Ministry of Education announced that 30% of parents of elementary school students want their children to enter SHs: 94.2% of their students and 87.6% of all middle school students are taking private tutoring aimed at successfully entering SHs (MOE, 2007). Alarmed by the current devastating 'SH effect' on public education, the Ministry of Education finally acknowledged SHs as the origin of the expansion of the private education market and an index of a potential education divide. However, educational segregation is not only occurring in the relationship between normal high schools and the SHs; it is happening inside the SHs. Around the college entrance season each year, the news

that SH graduates have been admitted to the 'so called' Ivy League universities in the U.S. hit the news-stands. SHs encourage students to enroll in brand name foreign universities, and advertise the result as the SHs' accomplishment. For example, the following figure 2 shows the increments of the number of students from two top-notch SHs who were admitted to famous foreign universities (Ha, 2005).



[Figure 2] Increasing number of SH graduates who entered foreign universities

Taking advantage of this trend, SHs are currently expanding classes which target foreign universities, such as the 'Global Leadership Program' and 'Overseas Study Program.' Since these programs are so popular even among students who are already enrolled in the SHs, it is very competitive to join these programs, and only a small portion of students, who have specific backgrounds, get the chance to participate in them. For example, since English competence is a critical criterion of screening, the students, whose parents are diplomats, professors, or business delegates and have already lived in English-speaking countries for several years, have an advantage. Under these circumstances, it is very difficult for students without such backgrounds to join the program. Consequently, even among the students in SHs, some students who do not have the right family background feel unequipped to cope with the demands of their schools. Here are some students' responses concerning the different socio-economic backgrounds and competition in their schools (Personal communication, from March 19 to March 30, 2007):

Sometimes it's hard to ask my parents money for private lessons. My friends seem not to worry about it because their fathers are richer. I feel like I could

catch up with their record if I got the lesson. I feel like I'm falling behind. (M-J., 16, First grader in DW high school)

I was so confident in my English (competency). In this school, all students are like native speakers. There are some who got a perfect score in the TOEFL! I found that many students have lived in foreign countries for at least a couple of years. (H-M., 16, First grader in DW high school)

Many of my classmates are going to study abroad this summer. But I can't because it costs over \$6,000. (S-K., 15, First grader in HY high school)

We don't share information for learning resources. If I share any information, my grade will be affected by it because we are compared to each other for grades. (Y-R., 17, Second grader in DW high school)

I was top ranked in junior high school. Here, you know, it is hard to maintain a ranking in the middle. It's like a war. (H-S., 16, First grader in HY high school)

Not only the students are struggling in the SHs: parents also experience financial burdens and difficulties in supporting their children. Here are two exemplary cases (Kukminilbo, 2007) of mothers who have children attending SHs.

YJ's (13, First grader in the middle school) mother. To make her daughter, YJ, enter a SH, she 'puts' YJ into a *hagwon* (private institute) in Kangnam, Seoul for three days a week, 5 hours every day for 5 subjects - Korean, English, Math, Science, Social studies. The tuition is, in total, over \$2,000 a month, including Logical Writing and Speaking lessons, which are also exam subjects for most of SHs. Since her other son is a student in a SH, she spends about \$4,000 for her children on private lessons alone. She has applied for an English-immersion program in Canada for this summer, which costs about \$3,000 for 7 weeks. Her husband is a head director in a corporation, whose net income is about \$6,500 a month. Because the father's income is 'not enough' for the children's education, though it is a much higher salary than the average worker receives in Korea, she herself considers taking a part-time job.

TH's (13, First grader in the middle school) mother. In 2005, she left her company, where she received a pretty high salary (\$70,000/year), to help her son prepare for an SH. She could not do anything as a 'working mom' because the preparation for a SH is said to be *jungbojun* ('competition for getting valuable information'). There are various kinds of 'mom's clubs' for sharing information about SHs: she had to join mom's clubs clustered around fitness centers, golf clubs, or the explanatory meetings

sponsored by *hagwons*. As her son's grades do not seem to be improving in spite of her devotion, she finally pours forth her heart:

Working moms can't do this. I should have left the company earlier. It is the mom's responsibility to figure out 'which hagwon is best,' 'which instructor is good for which subject,' 'the changes in each college's policy for its entrance exam,' etc. It is mom's responsibility to make them (students) concentrate only on their studies.

The above examples disclose that the enormous economic and managerial - e.g., as a 'road manager' - sponsorship of parents is indispensable for the SH preparation. This is a great burden even for middle class families, and parents feel a lot of pressure from it. As Fiske and Ladd (2000) investigated, for parents, school choices can sometimes become a "neurosis" because they are "motivated by fear, not to destroy their children's futures" (p. 183). However, the real question is who the people that get the actual choices are: as Fiske and Ladd argued, the schools seem to be globally hierarchized by ranking, and school selections seem to depend on factors that are not grounded in fair rules.[11]

Who has the choices? Though educational consumerism emphasizes such keywords as 'individual achievement,' 'choice,' 'competition,' or 'efficiency' (Engel, 2000), this paper rather asks cross-questions as: 1) what does educational consumerism aim for?; 2) who has the choice?; and 3) how is educational equity secured?

First of all, educational consumerism eventually aims for personal privilege in society, which is analogous to the pursuit of 'social-value,' rather than 'use-value.' As Baudrillard (1996) criticized, the choice of consumer in educational consumerism relies on the 'social logic of consumption,' which again perverts the choices in education as the pursuit of 'freedom as power.' The typical scheme of achieving 'freedom as power' is trying to win in the 'zero-sum' game through competition. The reason why so many students and parents are endeavoring to enter the SHs is that those SHs are good at this 'zero-sum' game as prep schools. In the 'zero-sum' game, if one wins or succeeds, the other must lose or fail. Thus, it distorts the social purpose of education that promotes fairful coexistence.

Second, the emerging popularity of SHs in Korea is revealing how schools are changing in the presence of overwhelming neoliberal trends in society; however, these

trends are only reproducing a model where a few winning schools can choose a few winning students. Since the students' choice of college or high school is grounded in the rule of exclusive competition for social privilege, the limited opportunity for entering prestigious schools might summon class-segregation in the society (Kottkamp & Nault, 1996). In the long run, the choice will be available only for a few students; or it will be the school that can choose students in the end (Walford, 1994). The boom in SHs falls into this case. Even though the Ministry of Education had authorized such SHs to offer more choices for talented students, the result has been more inequality in school choice. This reconfirmed the fact that, if there is no system to assure fair competition, the actual 'choice' will be given only to the privileged. In the marketized school based on educational consumerism, it is hardly possible to maintain the condition of fair competition between richer and poorer students.[12] This is what most of educators and parents are worrying about that 'education hereditariness' is settled down in Korea.

As for the third issue, how can educational equity be secured? The issue of equity has always been a major concern in educational policy making. Dewey (1966) once noted that school facilities need to be established to mitigate the effects that originate from economic inequality, and to equally prepare the whole nation for the future. For example, it is a controversial issue whether the students in SHs deserve a differentiated school environment, compared to the students in normal high school. In this sense, the public expenditure on education must be deliberate on publicity, fairness, and equal opportunity.[13] A favored investment on the name-only 'public' SHs might contribute to the 'education divide,' without an effort to amend the drawbacks of SHs as merely preparatory schools for richer students.

In sum, the boom in SHs in Korea clearly indicates that poor students are hardly given a chance at school choice because the opportunity is decisively determined by the socio-economic background of the students. Since the school reform initiated by neoliberal ideology might result in the more severe stratification of the social classes, helpless students in poor families will not have any hope in attending such schools. Educational consumerism might be a crisis rather than an opportunity for both students from richer and poor family; therefore, educational consumerism should be very cautiously conceived, at least, in the public domain of education.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the boom of SHs in Korea , which has been driven by neoliberal trends of educational consumerism in terms of freedom, choice, and equal opportunity in education. Even though neoliberalism highlights the notion of choice (freedom as power), competition, and efficiency, it only contributes to the educational divide; the result is social polarization. The case analysis of SHs illustrated the tendency of the emergence of social polarization in school choices. Due to the social function of education, economic inequality easily transferred to educational inequality, and vice versa.

Where and only where the freedom as right is secured by society can people expect equal opportunities. Where and only where the promise of equal opportunity is guaranteed may every member of society enjoy the chance of having a fair choice. Under marketized education, it is difficult to maintain equal opportunity, individual freedom as right, and fair choices in schooling because the marketization of education consolidates the exclusive rights of the rich in terms of educational choices. Finally, educational consumerism will work only for the students from richer families by furnishing them with more choices, as a consequence making schooling serve for social reproduction and social polarization.

Education is the last shelter for the disadvantaged classes in society, where they are provided with hope. As Freire (1970) asserted, the real 'praxis' of education aims for the transformation of the world, through the real reform of the structure of knowledge and power in a more democratic way. Since democratic education promotes equal opportunity (freedom as rights), cooperation, and equity, which support educational and social integration, it will provide a space for the real 'praxis' to solve social inequality and injustice.

Notes

[1] These SHs are mixed with private and public schools: for example, all of the Independent high schools are private schools, and all the Science high schools are public; meanwhile, the Foreign language high schools are mixed with private and public schools.

[2] Pagano (1999) defined 'power' as positional goods, which is "only consumed with inequality" (p. 64). This is applicable to the marketized education in a capitalist society where education primarily serves as a means for securing the positional goods, e.g., power and prestige.

[3] His argument is based on the Rational Choice Theory that actors are rational in the sense that they calculate the relative costs and benefits of alternative actions and make a choice that maximizes their expected utility.

[4] The idea of equal opportunity proposes that "all societies should optimize prospects for self-determination among those 'least-advantaged' members by increasing their capacity and improving their opportunity" (Mithaug, 1996, p. 10).

[5] Since SNU, which is the top-ranked university, is regarded as 'a path to success' in Korea. The SNU-related data is often used as an educational index: e.g., the admission rate at SNU is considered the key criterion for the performance of high schools.

[6] According to The 1997 UNESCO International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED97), tertiary education comprises ISCED level 5 (undergraduate) and 6 (graduate). ISCED 5B programs are typically shorter (2 to 3 years) than 5A, which is for theoretically-based and/or high skilled profession (4 to 6 years) (UNESCO, 2006).

[7] For instance, Choi and Kim (2003) argued that, after the IMF crisis, the income difference between the secondary school graduates and the tertiary school graduates became greater from 21% in 1997 to 38% in 2000: they interpreted that the college graduates were more able to adapt to new structure of labor market, such as, IT and high-skill service industry.

[8] The educational expense of high schools in Korea consists of two items: the regular tuition, including the admission fee and school operation fee, which is universally applied to all students and the beneficiary expenses – e.g., additional in-school lesson, teaching material fee, or boarding expenses – which is optional. The tuition of public high schools, which is not free, is less expensive than private schools. In average, the tuition of SHs is about 4 times higher than normal high schools.

According to a report to an Assemblyman, Ki-hong You, for the parliamentary inspection of the Ministry of Education (August 13, 2007), the regular tuition fee for normal high schools is about \$1,200 a year, and over \$5,000 for 6 SHs in Seoul.

[9] According to MOE's (2007) survey, the students in six SHs in Seoul mostly have parents with higher and professional occupations: company executives or higher (39%), private business owners (22%), professors or educators (13%), public officers (8.2%), and so forth.

[10] For example, one of school guidance counseling books is titled as "The way to become top 1 % of Korea: Strategies for entering SHs." The author of this book is the alliance of *hagwons* which run 'SH-targeting' programs. They advertise their programs with the catch phrases like "overcome the limit of public school curriculum," "tailored and differentiated teaching," or "for the most talented students."

[11] According to Fiske and Ladd (2000), for example, the high correlation between ethnicity and socioeconomic status suggests that parental choice has increased polarization of students by their socioeconomic status: hard-to-educate children are found in the lowest-decile schools (p. 193).

[12] In this sense, Bourdieu (1968, as cited in Murdoch, 2000) argued that "access to the legitimated stock of cultural capital actually exists only for a person who has the means to appropriate it or to decipher it," and furthermore, "access to the requisite knowledge and competence is systematically maldistributed" (p. 134).

[13] For instance, the Seoul Regional Bureau of Education is planning to establish a 'public' SH, whose estimated spending is 7.5 times more for construction costs, and six times higher for the space per student than that of a normal high school scheduled for around the same time. A member of the Board of Education criticized that this is a privileged investment only for a few students who are given a chance to be admitted to SHs, not because of their talents, but because of their family support (Lee, 2005).

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Author's Details

Hyu-Yong Park is at University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Curriculum and Instruction

Correspondence

813 Eagle Hts, Apt. B,
Madison, WI 53705,
USA

Tel: 608-358-9294

Fax: 608-263-9992

Email: Park2@wisc.edu