



The Failures of Education in the West

PART 2

The Defects of Different Education Systems

Education itself is a putting off, a postponement; we are told to work hard to get good results. Why? So we can get a good job. What is a good job? One that pays well. Oh. And that's it? All this suffering, merely so that we can earn a lot of money, which, even if we manage it, will not solve our problems anyway? It's a tragically limited idea of what life is all about." – Tom Hodgkinson

In a bid to understand the Western educational tradition, this article of the series will endeavour to deconstruct the systems of education which are held in the highest esteem, and the underlying problems pertaining to them. The 2015/16 poll of the best performing countries listed South Korea as No.1 followed by Japan at No.2 and Finland at No.5. The Singaporean education system at No.3 reflects many of the same educational issues as South-Korea, and Hong-Kong at No.4 closely mirrors the U.K. educational system, and thus the focus will remain primarily on the aforementioned countries.

1. South Korea

Educational Aims

The aims of Education in South Korea according to a background report carried out by the Ministry of Education in 1996 were listed as follows:

"To foster each student's personality and ability needed to preserve and strengthen the backbone of the nation; to develop students' knowledge and skills to prepare them for jobs needed in society; to promote each student's autonomy, emotional development, and critical thinking abilities to be brought to bear in and out of school; and to improve physical strength and foster a sound mind."

The education system is divided into three parts similar to other educational systems but under different terminology: six years of primary school, three years of middle school, followed by three years of high school. Approximately 25% of middle school graduates go on directly to vocational education, with the greater majority graduating from high school and pursuing tertiary education which they prepare for from as early as Kindergarten.

With South Korea at No.1 2015/16 and No.2 in 2012, the first thing to note would be that children attend school seven days a week. Already a remarkable difference can be seen in regards to the educational approach of the country in comparison to other nations. The second thing to note would be the teaching of 'moral education', a subject not often come across in the U.K. and America. The third thing to note would be the general timetable of a student's school day which begins at 8:00 A.M., has 50 minute classes, morning break, lunch periods, and ending with 'classroom cleaning.' Richard Diem, Tedd Levy, and Ronald VanSickle also wrote a paper on South Korean Education in which they noted the following; 'Students may then take a short dinner break at home, or they may eat at school. Teachers typically move from room to room, while students stay in one place ... Students return to the school library to study or attend private schools or tutoring sessions until between 10:00 P.M. and midnight. They return home where they may have a snack, listen to music, or watch television before going to bed. Elementary and middle school students have similar but somewhat less rigorous days with shorter hours and more recreational activities.'

Problems and Challenges

“The anxiety children feel at constantly being tested, their fear of failure, punishment, and disgrace, severely reduces their ability both to perceive and to remember, and drives them away from the material being studied into strategies for fooling teachers into thinking they know what they really don’t know.” – John Holt

A brief glance at the South-Korean education system shows us proof of a thriving knowledge based economy boasting incredible economic success, literacy rates of 97.9% (99.2% males and 96.6% female), and the highest number of science graduates per 100,000 25-34 year-old employees both male and female.

Nevertheless, even with such impressive statistics, a national report carried of the Republic of Korea by the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development in the International Bureau of Education identified three key failures of the South Korean Education system, three problems that are echoed by its student population;

1) Overheated Competition for University Entrance

The fierce competition that students in Korea engage in has distorted the purpose of education, which is no longer viewed a tool for development and creativity, but rather an instrument used in assisting entrance to top colleges/universities. Therefore, ‘grades’ are of paramount importance and have become the primary goal of students and parents alike.

2) Excessive Private Education Expenses

The ruthless competition rife within the education sector has meant that in addition to public schooling, students are studying extra hours in private academic institutions in a bid to increase their entrance chances. However, the financial expenditures attached are ‘exorbitant’ - high school student families spent \$11,373 million in 2002, which was 2.3% of Korea’s GDP and 55% of the education budget.

3) Rigid Academic Management

A direct quote from the study shows us that although academic management improved, schools in Korea are ‘still operating from the supplier’s point of view, rather than the learners. Students still cannot select schools, and teacher evaluations are not properly conducted.’

Se-Woong Koo, a lecturer in Korean studies at Yale, echoed the issues within the system when he lambasted the South-Korean schooling tradition for being far too strict and not allowing children to express their views or develop rational thinking. He wrote in *The New York Times* of the shortcomings of South-Korean education; ‘The world may look to South Korea as a model for education — its students rank among the best on international education tests — but the system’s dark side casts a long shadow. Dominated by Tiger Moms, cram schools and highly authoritarian teachers, South Korean education produces ranks of overachieving students who pay a stiff price in health and happiness. The entire program amounts to child abuse.’ He went onto write about intellectual reformist Yi-Kwang-Su’s view on young people in Korea and quoted her writings comparing them to ‘slaves or livestock’.

In ending, Koo wrote the following which aptly summed up his sentiments towards the system and highlighted the dissatisfaction of the people; ‘Before South Korea can be seen as a model for the 21st century, it must end this age-old feudal system that passes for education and reflect on what the country’s most vulnerable citizens might themselves want.’

Concurred time and time again by an array of academics, journalists, parents, students etc., these issues remain prevalent within South-Korean society. Writing for Time Magazine, Emily Rauhala spoke on behalf of the youth in Korea and wrote; ‘For young people in Korea now, however, life is full of impossible targets. You have to go to the right university, get the right job and marry the right person. And when your kids are born, you have to put them through the same trials and tribulations. Life is in some ways impossible.’

2. Japan

Educational Aims

The general objectives and aims of education in Japan have been defined in the Japanese constitution enacted in 1964 and succeeded by the Fundamental Law of Education in 1947 as follows;

“The full development of personality, striving for the rearing of people, sound in mind and body, who shall love truth and justice, esteem the value of the individual respect labour and have a deep sense of responsibility, and be imbued with an independent spirit, as builders of a peaceful state and society.”

Similarly to the South-Korean education system, Japan’s school system is also split into three parts: Elementary School, Junior High School, and High School. It has six-hour school days which are followed by drills and homework, but the school week sees Sunday as a no-school day. The school year for Japanese students begins in April at the height of the cherry-blossom, unlike most other countries where the initial intakes are in September.

In contrast to South-Korea, 85% of Japanese students are said to feel happy in school and often eat with their teachers during lunch time in order to forge better relationships. Japan also leads the world in literacy rates with the country’s demographic displaying an impressive 99%.

The second term starts in September and follows through to December, and even though satisfaction statistics are relatively high, the highest suicide rate in Japan is on the 1st of September at the beginning of the second term. It is argued that this is down to the pressure students face in schools, but a more likely explanation lies with the bullying epidemic widespread in Japanese schools.

Problems and Challenges

“By the early 1970’s students had begun to rebel against the system. Some students began refusing to attend school; some began a pattern of violence against fellow students; others began to attack their teachers while still others began destroying school property.” – An Insider’s Guide to the Real Japan (2005)

The main issues facing the Japanese Educational System included, but not limited to:

1) Truancy

Over the years, the number of students refusing to or skipping school has steadily increased, with some missing up to thirty days of school at a time. In 1991, the number was recorded as an average of 12,645 elementary school students truanting, rising to 26,047 by 1999. In secondary schools, the number was listed as 54,172 in 1991, and doubled by 1999. According to John Nathan, the figures stand as follows; “The conservative estimate is that 150,000 children between the ages of six and seventeen are permanently absent from school. Others assert, extrapolating from their own classrooms, that up to 5 percent of the student population, 350,000 children, are chronically truant.”

2) Discipline

In *The Japanese Self in Cultural Logic*, Takie Sugiyama Lebra noted the disciplinary issues widespread in Japanese school. She noted how teachers no longer commanded respect, either among their pupils or among the students’ parents, who are more commonly known to support a teacher’s authority.

Aaron Joseph, an Assistant Language Teacher relayed how the schools had a specific approach to discipline; it was not their concern, “Interac made it pretty clear at orientation that discipline was not our business.”

3) Bullying

The issue of bullying, also known as *Ijime*, is said to be the underlying reason as to why there is such a high rate of student truancy in Japan. According to former Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto, 100,000 students would refuse to go to school out of fear.

Statistically, one-third of public school students have reported being victims of bullying, in its varying forms; ridicule, verbal threats, physical violence, shunning, hiding property, coercion, etc.

4) Textbook Controversies

In January 1996, a group of university professors formed the Society for the Creation of a New History. Their mission was to create a middle-school textbook designed to restore balance to a 'masochistic version of history' whose effect, they claimed, had been to inculcate in schoolchildren feelings of horror and shame about Japan's past. In their view, the self-vilification that informed the official version of Japan's motives and conduct during World War II, in particular, promulgated in middle-school textbooks since 1947, was in large measure responsible for the uncertainty and disheartenment besetting Japanese society." *Japan Unbound: A Volatile Nation's Quest for Pride and Purpose*

5) Violence

In senior high schools, general school violence had a steady upwards trajectory going from 7.5% in 1986, to 22% in 1996.

In the book, *Unmasking Japan Today: The Impact of Traditional Values on Modern Japanese Society*, the author uncovered a troubling pattern; the main perpetrators of violence were high achieving students who inflicted their outbursts primarily on their mothers.

Japanese academics have found themselves questioning whether it is the influence of nations such as the United States, of 'Western' ideas that have influenced their youth, and resulted in the deterioration of respect, spikes in violence, and general decline of traditional multi-generational family values in Japanese schools. Nevertheless, in his book *Japan Unbound: A Volatile Nation's Quest for Pride and Purpose*, John Nathan still believed that majority of Japanese schoolchildren still had the "earnestness and the innocence that have always distinguished them." He also revealed the mounting scepticism with which the Japanese now view their 'half-century-old connection to the United States of America.'

3. Finland

Educational Aims

The purpose of public education in Finland can be found listed on the Finnish Education Reform as follows;

"Public education guarantees every child good basic education and equal opportunities to further learning. Public education also equalizes the differences that income inequalities and other socioeconomic characteristics create to different learners. In brief, public education is basic human right and basic service to all children and their families. One of the key factors behind Finland's good and equitable educational performance in international studies is the strong role of public education. Public schools have an important role in building democratic nation up here in the north."

The compulsory school system is split into three parts, with one year in pre-primary education, followed by nine years in basic education, and 3-4 years in upper secondary education. Higher education in Finland is also available freely to the public and vocational routes are strongly encouraged.

Problems and Challenges

Finland most certainly deserves recognition for an uprooting and complete reformation of its education system which has proved unprecedentedly successful by consistently topping the Programme for International Student Assessment rankings. But what often goes amiss regarding the Finnish and their gold standard of education, is the context.

1) Teachers Placed as the Sole Success behind Attainment

It is common knowledge that the Finnish education system places an exceptional importance on its teacher, with only 11% of applicants being accepted into the profession. However, what often goes amiss is that those who do apply for teaching positions are often expected to have pursued post-graduate study, which has left equally qualified graduates behind. The idea of teaching has leant more towards subject-knowledge and qualifications as opposed to skills and ability. Another issue with such a strong focus on teachers alone is that it leaves no space for how the students approach studying. Finland also dropped significantly in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, which highlights that good teaching is not the only prerequisite to success in education.

2) Suicide Rates

In a graph detailing the percentage of students who report being happy at school, the OECD noted that Finnish students were below the average at 60th place out of 64, with the last being Korea and the first being Indonesia. The young people's suicide rate in Finland is also high by European standards and the lack of fulfillment in schools is often attributed as the reason.

3) Scoreboards

Maarit Korhonen in her book *Wake up school!* criticized the Finnish system and labelled it 'myopic and old fashioned'. She continued to refer to it as being confined to the PISA chart at the expense of 2 out of 3 students receiving a sub-standard education. A comparison of the PISA results with the TIMSS indicates that there is a strong focus on literacy, but not on other aspects – essentially not a holistic approach to a student's development.

When attributing educational success to Finland, it would be wise to recognise the homogenous and very small population the country houses; approximately five million. Being such a small, racially homogenous country, whose main language is Finnish, contributes greatly to the educational success in Finland. But what the Finnish education system severely lacks is an address to the different issues facing the education sector globally. Finland does not have the diversity of culture, religion, race, and language that other nations do, nor does it have the poverty crises found in many countries. This reality shows that the system the Finnish have in place is not one that could be applied on a universal scale, as it lacks solutions to fundamental issues.

The Defects

After reviewing the different education traditions, one can conclude that where these systems fail monstrously is their aim. The primary aim of each system is success for superficial and worldly gains leading to exorbitant spending for private tutoring, and the spiritual and moral vacuum has resulted in a dissatisfaction within students and has led to shocking suicide rates and disciplinary issues. This void has also led to moral decadency which at face value is basic examination malpractice, sexual abuse from ages as young as 5, dishonesty, pilfering, bullying, truancy, and violent revolts against discipline. When morality becomes baseless and a matter of choice, the education of the youth becomes difficult, and this general decline in morality has adversely affected the standard of teaching and learning.

Majority of top educational countries; South-Korea, Japan, Hong-Kong, Finland etc., are chiefly homogenous countries with individual contexts. The nations which are held as the pinnacle of educational attainment come with a range of issues, but the core problem with taking these systems and revering them as the gold standard, is that they are not universally applicable.

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