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# Misery in dark shadows behind the high achievement scores in South Korean schooling: An ethnographic study

Soonjung Kwon<sup>a</sup>, Kristján Kristjánsson<sup>b</sup> and David I. Walker<sup>b</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>School of Education, Seoul National University, South Korea; <sup>b</sup>Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, School of Education, University of Birmingham, UK*

This article explores some of the hidden background behind the highly praised school results in South Korea. An ethnographic case study is used to cast light on how schooling is actually experienced by South Korean students. Two main results are reported from these data. First, evidence is presented of damaging *cultural elements* such as internalised norms of resistance and conformity, symbolised helplessness, studying without any interest in controversial issues, an internalised culture of “dealing” and widespread playing with mobile phones, sleeping and applying make-up in class. Second, evidence is presented of an *institutionalised school violence* involving mechanisms of control, abusive and violent everyday language, explicit school violence and delinquent/deviant behaviour. The article concludes that there is something *unique* and *deeply disturbing* about institutionalised violence in South Korean schools and that the abysmally low subjective wellbeing levels of pupils are no coincidence.

**Keywords:** South Korean education; school culture; ethnographic case study; institutionalised violence; covert violence

<sup>a</sup> Seoul National University, #606-1 Bld. 10-1, Seoul National Univ. 1 Kwanak-ro, Kwanak-gu, Seoul, 08826, Korea. Email: [sslove0123@gmail.com](mailto:sslove0123@gmail.com) Phone: +82(10)88684080.

<sup>b</sup> Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, School of Education, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, U.K. Email: [k.kristjansson@bham.ac.uk](mailto:k.kristjansson@bham.ac.uk) Phone: +44(0)1214144877.

<sup>c</sup> Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, School of Education, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, U.K. Email: [d.i.walker@bham.ac.uk](mailto:d.i.walker@bham.ac.uk) Phone: +44(0)121 414 4819.

## **Introduction**

This article aims to dig into some of the hidden background behind the highly praised results in South Korean schooling and to explore how it is actually experienced by students. South Korean students rank high in performance assessments (OECD 2012). Hence, the South Korean education system is often complimented, internally and externally, for achieving such results, with effective education seen as having contributed to national development (The Korean Times 2012). Despite some reason for celebration, we contend that this exclusively performance-and-test-oriented stance may cast dark shadows.

Although South Korean education tends to be positively described, consistent – if less vocal – criticisms have been lodged about the emotional and physical stress experienced by students (Blazer 2012). To illustrate, the reported level of happiness among South Korean students ranks very low in comparison with other OECD countries (Hangyeorae 2014). A number of social issues relating to the education system, such as the economic burden on university students, an increasing educational gap and a looming school crisis, were openly brought up in the World Education Forum held in South Korea in 2015 (The Korea Times 2015). More generally, there have been intermittent studies on problems seen as endemic to South Korean education – for instance, excessive educational fever (Hyun et al. 2003; Lee 2005; Seth 2002), symbolised (negative) aspects of tertiary education (Lee 2007; Lee & Shous 2011), violation of human rights in schools (Kang 2002; Joh 2012) and school violence (Kwon 2005; Kim and Lee 2010; Kim, et al. 2008).

While we share the concerns raised in those sources about deleterious large-scale features of South Korean society and their systemic intrusion into the educational system, we argue that too little attention has been paid to how these features actually play out in classrooms and how they are experienced by students. The main aim of this article is to begin

to ameliorate this shortcoming by adopting an ethnographic micro-lens of classroom observation and critical reflection.

The research project reported upon below was motivated by a number of exploratory questions: What needs to be addressed in order to understand South Korean education? What is the actual experience of schooling? Do students really feel unhappy there, and if so why? In order to answer those questions an *ethnographic case study* was conducted to explore classroom realities in South Korean high schools.

### **Background, Context and Research Framework**

Problems of South Korean education tend to be conceptualised in the existing literature via three main themes.<sup>1</sup>

*First*, the issue of private education, and the resulting financial burden for parents, is seen as critical. According to Statistics Korea (2011), 72 percent of students at all levels of schooling are involved in private education, costing on average 240,000 won (207 USD approximately) per month per student. Some argue that private education is sustained by a “tight linkage” between academic performance and later opportunities in higher education and the labour market (Baker and Letender 2005; Silova and Bray 2006). However, the close relationship between parents’ socio-economic status and private education (“cram schools”) has been used as ammunition to blame private education for exacerbating educational inequality and social stratification in society (Dawson 2010; Kim and Park 2010; Oh 2011). Engaging in the private education system is not simply an individual’s choice as it has become *institutionalised* and *symbolicised* as a mark of prestige in South Korean society (Lee

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<sup>1</sup> A forth discursive theme, on the educational implications of South Korea gradually but problematically turning into a multicultural society, is receiving more attention in the literature, but we leave it out of consideration here as tangential to the aim of the present article.

2007; Lee and Shous 2011). Even though research studies show varying reasons among different income segments for spending money on private education (Lee and Shouse 2011; Yang and Kim 2003), it is striking that more than half of the population follows this trend. Private education has become a form of social capital with which to pursue higher status or maintain the present one by entering a top university. Overall, authors such as Lee and Shause (2011) argue that a debilitating form of private education can be witnessed in South Korea which perpetuates social inequality and widens the educational gap.

*Second*, human rights issues are controversial in South Korean schools. Recently, a Students' Human Rights Ordinance was issued; it was applied first in Gyunggi-province in 2010 and then extended to several other provinces. Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, adopted the Ordinance in 2012. This ordinance was needed because the rights of students in the past had been severely curtailed. For instance, corporal punishment was used by teachers, and students were not allowed to choose their own hair style or look. Sometimes teachers held random inspections of students' personal belongings. Under these circumstances, the basic rights of students have been seen to be violated, with children perceived as immature beings in need of constant adult care and control. The Students' Human Rights Ordinance prompted changes away from the image of a perfectly controlled student, ending corporal punishment and the regulation of students' hair styles, amongst other things. As the Ordinance has prohibited corporal punishment in controlling students in schools, it encouraged teachers to enforce a "penalty point system" instead. To demonstrate this, all schools where fieldwork was conducted had introduced a penalty point system. However, the enactment of the ordinance prompted some confrontations with teachers complaining that the foregrounding of students' rights compromised their own rights, especially their right to classroom authority (Lee and Sung 2011). Yoo (2011) and Joh (2012) argue that this account is a misreading of the

human-rights concept and makes neither educational nor legal sense. However, this discourse may be symptomatic of an underlying tendency in South Korean education to reflect power issues and to consider exercises of power a zero-sum game.

*Third*, school violence, in its overt forms, is becoming more and more intense. Overt school violence, by definition, takes the form of physical and verbal assaults, bullying, stealing and sexual violence among students, both inside and outside school (Korean Educational Development Institute 2011). Recently, about 2.4% of students in South Korea have thought about and tried to commit suicide, and the most critical reason given was depression caused by school violence (Kim et al. 2010; Korean Statistical Information Service, 2015). Researchers also found that such violence has been taken over by gangs; it has become increasingly brutalised, feminised and committed by ever-younger children (Kwon 2005; *Newisis* 2013). Gang violence is brutal; for example, victims are burnt with cigarettes, and groups of senior students commit acts of sexual violence towards younger female students (Moon et al. 2012). Additionally, new forms of violence in schools, called *Bbang Shuttle*,<sup>2</sup> have become normalised. A substantial body of research already exists on such explicit violence and its correlates in family factors, gender, academic achievement, parents' socio-economic status, stress, peer relations, the influence of the Internet and so on, as well as on various possible ways of remedying this problem (Kim 2005; Kim et al. 2008). Interestingly, being a victim of school violence in South Korea has been closely related to being a perpetrator; students often adopt both roles consecutively (Lee et al. 2008), with victims changing to attackers. This vicious circle continues until they reach high school. School

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<sup>2</sup> *Bbang* means “bread” in Korean. *Bbang Shuttle* is a new Korean term used by school teenagers. It refers to an action or a person who commits it: that of buying bread or cigarettes or other things for peers who have power over them and would otherwise punish them.

violence does not only affect students; a recent video showed a young female teacher being verbally and physically abused by students (Kim 2012).

These three discursive themes merit further research and discussion; indeed, some of them are reflected in our findings below. However, in our view, the research lens adopted has tended to be too wide and too focused on “objective” features, often relying on quantitative methods alone, with insufficient attention being paid to students’ own experiences, understandings and conceptualisations. Moreover, the three “problems” explicated above are often dealt with independently without attention to their dynamic interconnections, for example, in the habitus of the students themselves who bear the brunt of those problems in school settings.

Schools inevitably educate people on the basis of certain values and norms and teachers inadvertently reproduce values which serve the status quo. Arguably, students in traditional schooling may frequently be expected to digest knowledge and values uncritically and to produce their own “capital” – cultural and symbolic – on the grounds of those values (Bourdieu 1977). Previous research studies in South Korea have often stressed the relationship between cultural capital and academic achievement (see e.g. Baek and Kim 2007). In addition, Baek explored teachers’ understanding and perception of cultural capital – focusing on their perceptions about the possession of and rewarding mechanism for such capital (Baek 2008; 2012). Baek’s findings, however, found that cultural capital did not seem to have a strong influence on students’ academic attainment; teachers also said that there was no close link between them. We consider this research problematic, however, because the chosen parameters of cultural capital were modelled on Western cultural elements, as used by Bourdieu (1977) in France at his time, for example, watching opera, visiting museums and possessing linguistic competence. Kim and Baek added the experience of going abroad (for

travel or English study) and the amount of reading, but it is unclear why these factors were used to represent cultural capital in South Korea. For example, as English became important globally, those with a mid-to-low economic background may have overextended their budget to go abroad occasionally (Hong 2010). In general, the contexts of contemporary South Korea and France in Bourdieu's time are very different; thus the primary source of inequality in regard to academic achievement is likely to differ too. In our view, if Bourdieu's theory is to provide a helpful lens to understand cultural capital and educational inequalities in contemporary South Korea, it has to be reconfigured considerably to take account of cultural differences.<sup>3</sup>

In our attempt to provide a level of descriptive depth that is currently missing from the existing literature on South Korean schools, we focus in this paper on the ways in which social relations in the home and classroom (at the micro-level) are connected to those of the school (at the meso-level) and influence – and are influenced by – broader social and cultural patterns (at the macro-level) that tend towards maintaining the societal status quo. As will become apparent in what follows, the main pattern that we identify has to do with covert, institutionalised violence.

### **Research Methodology**

Extensive fieldwork was necessary to generate detailed data to address the gap in the literature, discussed above, and the method of *ethnographic case study* was adopted to describe and understand South Korean education. “Ethnography is a form of qualitative research employed...to study human society and culture” (Merriam 2001, 13). A *case study* method is often used in conjunction with ethnography, and it involves an in-depth exploration

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<sup>3</sup> The first author has attempted to do so elsewhere (Kwon 2015).



of an actual “case” (Creswell 2008). This approach facilitates an in-depth exploration of how participants interact with each other and form a culture. To illustrate, instead of visiting many schools to meet various students and teachers, the first author chose three classes at S high school,<sup>4</sup> the main site of the study, and spent much time there building rapport for in-depth observations. As explained earlier, the aim of this methodological approach was to explore the culture of the macro as seen through the lens of the micro (here: the students’ perspective) in their South Korean high-school education.

For this research, we used *observation*, *interviews* and a *qualitative questionnaire* (including the so-called *draw-and-tell method*, see Williams 2013), as well as documents, such as students’ diaries and official documents, textbooks and photos. Field notes and a diary of the first-author’s fieldwork experience provided critical data. Observation was one of the most productive methods used in this research, aimed at gauging how students spent their time and interacted with each other and how relationships between students and teachers were formed. The first author did not use a checklist to observe, although she had in advance chosen several possible targets of observation in order to formulate criteria. For example, she looked at the interaction between teachers and the class as a whole and, at the same time, she focused more specifically on students whose behaviour was unusual: noting where they sat, how they spent their time and how they interacted with their friends and the teacher. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with students and teachers in S high school with questions prepared on the basis of the observations. For practical reasons – such as time constraints and students’ preferences – some group interviews were also conducted.

The first author’s advancing reflexivity about connections between theory and data (Glaser and Strauss 1967), together with her awareness of the micro-phenomena of students’

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<sup>4</sup> The names of the schools were abbreviated to the initials of their English names.

behaviours, became an important part of the field notes. Processes of researcher positionality also involved the writing of memos, which is an act of representation (Gray 2008). The first author was the *ethnographer*, reflecting on the students being observed. She scrutinised the data by carefully considering her ideological background/bias *vis-à-vis* the participants' common world and its relationship with social constructs, noting that she herself formed part of the social constructs under scrutiny, as often happens in qualitative studies. Moreover, she sought a sense of how students and teachers felt during the class, through exploring their facial expressions and demeanour.

Taking several ethical and practical concerns into account, this research was mainly carried out in one high school (S), located in a north-western district of Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, and only this main site will be introduced in the present article. As places for methodological *triangulation*, D middle school on the northern outskirts of Seoul and two high schools – Y girls' high school, located in the centre of the city and G high school in south-western Seoul – were also chosen. The north-western part of Seoul where S high school (founded in 2006) is located is known, economically speaking, to be middle to lower class, with around 90% of S high school students living in rented apartments for people with low incomes. The stated goal of education in S high school is to “nurture students to become creative global citizens through personality and intelligence”. Classes have been mixed since 2012 and there is a separate class for students with special needs. S high school follows the normal pattern for South Korean schools where students stay in the same classroom, while teachers move from one room to another.

Bongsu Jo<sup>5</sup> (the research gatekeeper in S high school) teaches Korean history, a non-

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<sup>5</sup> All names of participants are fictitious.

mainstream subject, and is not a form tutor.<sup>6</sup> Bongsu's timetable comprises teaching his subject and working as a member of the Humanities Education Department where his task is to organise club activities for the students. Bongsu facilitated the observation of three classes (Class 6, Class 7, Class 8). Each class had about 35 students and all participants agreed to be observed. Form tutors and selected students also agreed to be interviewed. Students were selected for this if they conspicuously resisted teachers or experienced stress studying, based on field notes and letters of self-introduction passed on by their form tutor. In addition, the teachers in the Humanities Education Department participated in interviews and allowed the researcher to stay in their office and observe everyday events. Demographic features of the interviewees in S high school are shown in *Tables 1*<sup>7</sup> and *2*<sup>8</sup>.

**[Insert tables here]**

The research took place between August, 2011 and November, 2012. Observations took eight months in S high school, three months in D middle school and a couple of days in Y girls' high school and G high school. 90,000 Korean words (250 pages) of notes were gathered and 33 interviews (both individual and group interviews) were conducted. A qualitative questionnaire that included the draw-and-tell method was distributed to all the students that the first author met during the fieldwork, yielding 120 questionnaires from S high school, 30 questionnaires from D middle school, 60 questionnaires from Y girls' high

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<sup>6</sup> Mainstream subjects are Korean, Math and English: in South Korea, students normally see non-mainstream subjects as unimportant because they are not primary subjects in the university entrance examinations.

<sup>7</sup> The teaching subjects of interviewees were Korean, English and History. Korean and English are mainstream subjects while History is not. The nature of these particular subjects could have caused biased perceptions. However, subject background did not seem to influence responses much. Rather, differences in age and work experience were more predictive of teachers' understandings and perceptions of students. These differences for teachers are described fully in the first author's PhD thesis (Kwon 2015) – for instance, teachers in the old generation are shocked to see students wearing make-up while teachers of a younger generation do not mind. In the present article, however, the focus is on the daily experiences of students rather than teachers.

<sup>8</sup> The levels of students' academic achievement were measured by students' academic records from their middle school and entrance score provided form tutors. In S high school, students were allocated to classes from Class 1 to Class 10 based on their entrance score.

school and 30 questionnaires from G high school. In addition, letters of self-introduction from students of S high schools (120 copies), study planning diaries from students of Y girls' high school (30 copies), official documents from teachers and some photographs were used as supplementary data.

In order to analyse the data collected, the so-called *thematic coding approach* was applied first (Robinson 2011). Along with it, *reconstructive analysis* and *low-level coding* and *high-level coding* were applied (Carspecken 1996). Given that qualitative analysis is about the representation or reconstruction of social phenomena (Coffey and Atkinson 1996), the coding procedure had first to find a decisive link between the raw data and the theoretical concepts, especially institutionalised violence. In so doing, *low-level coding* with very little abstraction was done first and then *high-level coding* was undertaken in order to move naturally towards the writing stage, focusing on various evidenced aspects of students' experiences.

## **Findings**

The substantial amount of data gathered in this research project was analysed over a period of two years, using standard methods of critical ethnography (Carspecken 1996). The approach adopted here is, however, "critical" only insofar as the researcher approached data with an eye to uncovering processes that typically escape recognition.<sup>9</sup> Some significant themes and sub-themes emerged from this analysis and they are reported on below.

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<sup>9</sup> Critical ethnography has an advocacy perspective on what is observed. Based on this perspective, it examines culture, knowledge and action with a view to changing a society. The critical point here is that it assumes that all research is value-added, challenges the current situation and asks why it is so by linking broader issues to the research context (Carspecken 1996). We plan to make use of the "transformative impulse" of critical ethnography (the aim of changing society), with respect to the data from this study, in a separate article.

### *Cultural Elements of School Daily Lives*

This section introduces and illustrates a number of themes that are based on direct observations of classroom behaviour and interviews with teachers and students.

Teachers tend to implicitly divide students into three broad groups: trouble-makers or maladjusted students, excellent students (ca. 10%) and those who are well-meaning but not excellent (interview, 20121127\_6&7). Likewise, students see their classmates as stratified – high, mid, low – by power relations (interview, 20120614\_KimMinKyung). This stratification seems to track power and academic achievement. These two factors have the most influence on students' daily lives, and these categorisations are crucial in generating their culture. For instance, excellent students, whose achievement ranks high in classes, usually sit in front of the classroom and pay attention to what teachers say. Trouble-makers, on the other hand, usually sit at the back of the classroom and do not have textbooks on their desks. They occupy their time sleeping or using mobile phones. Well-meaning but not excellent students usually sit in between two groups. They generally prepare textbooks for classes and try to study from time to time, but do not concentrate as hard as excellent students. They do other things like the trouble-makers, but they try to hide what they are doing. This tripartite division was made in the second analysis of the interview data in August 2013, based on observations and direct hints from teachers' interviews. The criteria were academic achievement, the location of students' seats and their self-categorisations conveyed in interviews.

### *Internalised cultures of resistance and conformity*

In classes in all visited high schools, students are expected to stay still and concentrate on what teachers say. However, not all students attempt to meet this expectation. Indeed, students have adopted certain normalised roles with respect to it. The *trouble-makers* sit at the back of

the classroom. Even if their form tutor designates other places for them, they change their seats at other class times. A seat at the back is crucial for any plan of alternative action in class. The choice of seats shows different groupings in the class and represents students' intentions to participate in or reject the lesson. Visible resistance, then, usually appears at the back of the room. Teachers point out misbehaviour and tell students to study but the trouble-makers do not take this seriously and regularly defy their teachers. Being aggressive to teachers is fun.

The *excellent students*, at the front of the class, criticise those actions as pointless and impolite. Invariably, all the students at the front are busy writing down what the teachers say and marking the important content with lines and stars to show what is likely to feature in the examination. The *well-meaning but non-excellent* students mostly behave like excellent students, but not always. They also engage in non-compliance but not as explicitly as the trouble-makers. They are afraid of being punished for misbehaviour and they know that the work they do in class is not always good enough.

The excellent students adapt to what society and school requires of them: behaving and thinking like ideal school students. They will never sleep in the classroom, but may complain to friends about teachers and classes without openly resisting custom and regulation. Thus, *conformity* to accepted norms is a critical cultural criterion among those students. The trouble-makers, in contrast, *resist* what society and school ask students to accept. The trouble-makers also abide by well-entrenched norms, but those norms counter the school's culture.

After 19 minutes, Bongsu said, "If you make any noise after this, I will give you minus points." Having watched a video-clip, Bongsu started the lesson by going through the textbook. Sumi and Minjoo kept talking. Finally Bongsu gave them minus points. Then he said, "You guys are full of minus points. From now, you'll get penalty points." They ultimately got penalty points. Minjoo complained, making the excuse, "I just gave her a comb." Bongsu replied, "You guys know why

you've got penalty points." Sumi immediately said, "Oh, teacher, please forgive me this once!" "You, Minjoo! Don't talk to me." But when Bongsu insisted on the penalty point, she slumped over the desk and said, "Right! I'm going to sleep!" Then she stood up again, "Oh, I won't study, I will sue the teacher for giving me a penalty point!" She said it in fun. But she didn't stop talking. She did not even open her books. I watched her in amazement. (fieldnote\_20120424)

This deeply internalised and widely normalised tripartite division of students is striking. It is noteworthy how even the excellent students show little intrinsic interest in what they are learning (as distinct from going through the motions of learning it) and how the apparent disaffection of the trouble-makers is offset by their designated and "respected" social role as representatives of a counter-culture of non-conformity. Thus, their resistance manifests itself as manufactured resistance, reinforcing rather than challenging the status quo, in line with the standard contours of "counter-culture" (Willis 1977).

*Symbolised helplessness: playing with mobile phones, sleeping and applying make-up in class*

Several behaviours were listed in the category of "helplessness" because many of the teachers categorised students playing with mobile phones, sleeping and applying make-up in class in this way. Surprisingly, almost 90% of the students in class seem to be "helpless" according to this categorisation. For students, mobile phones and earphones are "must-have" items. With mobile phones, they can play games, talk with friends, listen to music, watch video clips or surf the internet. Students even take pictures in class. They know that using mobiles in class contravenes school regulations<sup>10</sup> and therefore use them secretly, dodging detection.

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<sup>10</sup> Each school has its own regulations about: wearing neat uniforms, wearing indoor shoes, no mobiles, wearing name tags, no make-up, not dropping litter and so on. There are two interesting (said Jonghyun and Namsoons) regulations in S high school – getting penalty points if students disrespect teachers and prohibiting "acts of demoralisation" (e.g. holding hands, whispering between boys and girls). However, those regulations are usually not taken very seriously by students.

Researcher: I saw a thing in the paper the other day that if you don't do kakao talk chat, high school students can be bullied .... Is this true?

Gaeun: Well, if we use kakao talk, we don't need to pay and many students use smart phones, so they all use katalak. We share a lot and talk a lot through katalak. So if we don't do this, we feel isolated ... (interview\_20120613\_OhGaeunGaeNari)

Girls, in particular the “naughty” girls at the back, enjoy making themselves up in class. Once a teacher starts the lesson, the girls at the back arrange their make-up items on the desk. Unlike mobile phones, applying make-up does not make them feel guilty or ashamed although both break school rules. However, make-up raises controversy among students. Boys hate the smell of make-up and some say they think they are in a beauty-academy class. Some “good” girls say they cannot understand why students use make-up and claim the naughty girls are disrupting their study. If students are too tired to do anything, they simply sleep in the class. Officially, teachers must wake them up, but students will continue to sleep unless teachers threaten punishment. Some teachers leave them to sleep, in any case. Moreover, students who have no interest in doing anything often seem to be in a daze. They do nothing.

All these daily “activities” in class can be classified as *helplessness* because the students are putting in little effort to study, and they seem alienated from the professed aims of school education without replacing them with any purposeful aims of their own. Symbolically, however, these are not just forms of anomie but rather represent resistance to teachers and to schools. Students engage in these behaviours as if habitually. In other words, the “helplessness” is routinised and normalised.

#### *Study but no interest in controversial issues*

S high school students spend 8 hours a day in school, expected to be devoted to studying in



class. For successful study, students need to absorb substantial amounts of knowledge. For example, students in classes 6, 7 and 8 in S high school had one semester in which to study the whole Korean history textbook from ancient to contemporary times. While students are expected to spend extensive time and energy on memorising large blocks of knowledge, they are not taught to think critically about what they learn or about current social problems. Almost every student considers such controversial issues to be “political” and therefore, superfluous. They also think that the knowledge that comes out of textbooks is irrelevant to contemporary issues, as those have nothing to do with examinations.

Avoiding controversial issues influences the learning and teaching process and seems to contribute to impersonal and inhumane relations between students. Most students in the observed high schools prefer to study individually and students worry about what “benefits” they would gain from participating in a collaborative learning process and having discussions. This way of studying leads students to think only about themselves: in other words, to cultivate atomistic self-concepts. This is particularly noticeable in an Asian culture that textbooks in sociology would, until recently at least, have characterised as “collectivist”.

### *Internalised culture of “dealing”*

Go through question number 2. Shall we do an O or X quiz? Some students in front say “Yes” but Sohee cries “No”. The rest of them keep quiet. Anyway, the quiz starts. Someone says, “Give us something if we answer them right!” Bongsu says, “I will give you candies!” Then Sohee gets up suddenly and participates actively. (fieldnote\_20120518)

As can be seen from this fieldnote, students rarely present their opinions in class unless a teacher makes an announcement that they will be rewarded for doing so. It can be interpreted as a strategy for managing his class, but Bongsu feels sad that students always want

something in return and suppose that they do things, such as presenting their opinions or answering questions, *for* teachers. From the students' perspective, however, it is considered reasonable to ask for an extrinsically motivating reward.

From excellent students to trouble-makers, all seem used to thinking and behaving on this basis. From the students' standpoint, it is not a negative phenomenon, while teachers think that rewarding students in order to elicit participation is a problem. These different views of the culture of "dealing" cause conflicts between teachers and students, but, as the teachers correctly assume, students have learned how to "deal with" teachers in the classroom. "Dealing" constitutes an internalised culture among students that many teachers hardly understand but nevertheless participate in, so as not to rock the boat.

### ***Institutionalised Violence***

This section introduces and illustrates themes that, while based on observations and interviews, attempt to penetrate deeper into the structural mechanisms at work in the classrooms in terms of institutionalised violence.

### ***Mechanisms of control and penalty points***

Based on fieldnotes and interviews, we assert that teachers and students are held in thrall by an invisible, institutionalised control mechanism, in diverse ways, as they enter school. Teachers typically mention "basic rules" to observe (see footnote 7 above). Teachers use the term *control* but they strongly believe that what they do and think is a matter of visible, formal regulation and management for the school community's good. Moreover, teachers urge that students must learn about following rules and getting rewards or punishments accordingly in order to learn to live as adults in society. The control mechanisms link to actual classroom

teaching and learning practices, too, but there they are more hidden and covert.

Students think that a good teacher is one who highlights crucial points in the textbook, which will then appear in examinations. A teacher who does not observe this covert “rule” is seen as a perpetrator of implicit violence against students. Even though some students say that they prefer non-oppressive teachers and enjoy “entertaining” classes, they still consider a pedagogy of oppression a better atmosphere for most students. Paradoxically, non-oppression is thus seen as oppressive. It is likely that this way of teaching and learning is ultimately conditioned and controlled by the examination system. This regime of control has been complicated by the recent penalty-point system, introduced into schools with the Students’ Ordinance for Human Rights to replace corporal punishment. Interviews suggest that many teachers feel helpless, having not yet figured out other means than corporal punishment to control students. Hence, they now feel controlled in their work by the state.

Meanwhile, many students consider corporal punishment less cruel than the new system, because penalty points can lead to students being expelled from school altogether. Replacing physical punishment with indirect punishment does not change the nature of the control mechanisms. Such mechanisms appear systematically in diverse forms, yet students and teachers seem accustomed to control and they both perceive efforts to tone down overt control mechanisms as even more oppressive.

#### *Abusive and extremely violent language used in everyday school life*

Many students’ daily language in school is very abusive. For example, boys and girls often put “nyun” (something like “cow” or “bitch” in English) at the end of almost every word.

Observations showed that, while the trouble-makers and some of the excellent students are accustomed to routinely using abusive language, other good students feel

uncomfortable about it, yet they lack the courage to ask their peers to stop. More surprising is that some students, the trouble-makers in particular, express all their feelings, irrespective of apparent intensity, via violent and cruel language. They say “I want to commit suicide”, “I will kill them”, “I would rather go blind” and so on, without hesitation. It could be argued that they do not take these words seriously but simply enjoy using them or have got into the habit of doing so. Yet this language use is arguably conducive to a general ethos of institutionalised violence permeating the observed high schools. According to Bongsu, a poor family background affects children in this regard. That is, their habitus is reflected in their vulgar use of language. This tendency to explain violence away as caused by forces outside the school’s control was common in interviews with teachers.

#### *Explicit school violence and delinquent/deviant behaviour*

According to rumour, S high school is notorious for violence and high rates of expulsion. Surprisingly, however, the teachers and students reported in interviews that school violence is not very serious. It seemed at first that there was a stark difference between media reports and the evidence; yet, gradually school violence could be observed in more oblique ways.

Generally, those bad students who are involved in school violence are called *iljin*. *Iljin* lexically means a group of military personnel – “a squad” – but it is often used in school contexts.<sup>11</sup> Usually, *iljin* is understood as groups of youths (both students and teenagers who dropped out) using overt forms of violence like hitting. However, what *iljins* do has become more and more structuralised. In this research, we discovered that *iljins* do not just use overt

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<sup>11</sup> The common use of military language to describe violence in South Korean schools deserves a study of its own. It might be argued that some of the violence found in this study is explicable with reference to facts about the recent militant history of the country and that it is still, officially, in a state of war with its neighbour, North Korea (Kwon 2015). Such conjectures, however, lie outside our present purview.

forms of violence like bullying and stealing, but they have developed their power systems, norms and regulation, forming a *culture of iljin* within which use of violence becomes more symbolic than overt in school. The *culture of iljin* is formed via close relations between seniors and juniors with senior *iljin* taking care of juniors and juniors showing excessive loyalty in return by giving money or expensive goods. Seniors can beat juniors if they are in a bad mood or not satisfied with what the juniors have given. Students feel more scared of senior *iljin* than teachers. In general, the culture of *iljin* shows how thin the dividing line is between overt/physical and covert/symbolic violence.

The trouble-makers interviewed seemed to have been involved in *iljin* but they typically did not say that they were *iljin*. Rather, they claimed that media reports about *iljin*-related violence were exaggerated. However, as they talked and gradually became more open, it seemed that much of what the media said is true, but that the trouble-makers put a positive spin on it. As described by themselves, the trouble-makers find entertainment by immersing themselves in the culture of *iljin*, for example, by smoking, drinking, cheating and stealing. As they smoke and drink, mugging, harassment and bullying ensue.

The interviews revealed some interesting cases of students who seem to have “graduated” from *iljin*. Despite having *iljin* friends, they nevertheless differentiate themselves from them. The major explicit difference between *iljin* and “graduate” *iljin* is the possession of penalty points. Haerim, Namsoon and Heungsoo, all “graduate” *iljin*, were proud of never having had penalty points. While still lacking intrinsic motivation for education, they “face the facts” and acknowledge school as a place to prepare for a better life. The process of graduating from *iljin* indicates some degree of social mobility between classroom sub-cultures. However, even this mobility is strictly governed by symbolic norms, and the ex-*iljin* members retain a standing of power (over and above those who have always conformed) as individuals

who have shown in the past that they are capable of committing explicit violence, although they have now chosen to refrain from it.

Researcher: Did you want to go to another high school far away from here?

Namsoon: I wanted to leave this area and go where no one knows about me.

Researcher: In order to start a new life there?

Namsoon: Yes. But ... well ... I don't have a choice now.

Researcher: Right ... but do you think it was a successful way to start a new life here?

Namsoon: No, I don't think much has changed.

Researcher: Really? So is the way you behaved in middle school different from what I see you doing in high school?

Namsoon: In middle school I sat at the back of the classroom and made a noise.

Researcher: But you changed your mind when you got to high school...

Namsoon: Yes, kind of ... Well, I am the eldest son in our family ... and I will become an adult soon now I've entered high school... I was a bit scared about what would happen.

Researcher: As you began high school?

Namsoon: Yes.

Researcher: Like, how should I live in the future ... and so on?

Namsoon: Yes. Everything seems vague to me, so I thought I should at least listen and take part in classes. (interview\_20120614\_GoNamsoon)

## **Discussion**

In the Background section, three themes were introduced that emerged from previous research (mostly quantitative) about problems inherent in South Korean education. Our findings have

shed some further light on those themes. First was the issue of *private education*. Although private education itself is not a key question in this study, students busy doing assignments from private institutions were observed from time to time, and some students said that they attend private tutoring after classes. Above all, it was clear that high-stakes testing forms the core of school life with access to university being highly prized among students. Private education implies educational inequality in South Korean society; “good students” usually take part in private education while “bad students”, whose socio-economic background is lower, rarely do. Second, *human-rights issues* were identified. As mentioned, the concept of human rights has recently acquired a controversial status in schools. Despite the undoubted good intentions behind the Students’ Human Rights Ordinance, teachers tend to think it causes chaos in schools and consider it symptomatic of an oppressive state ideology; more surprisingly, students do not like it either. The new penalty-point system is thus written off by both parties, albeit for different reasons, as a vehicle of violence.

Third, the militant culture of *iljin* explored in this article adds a new dimension to discussions of explicit *school violence*. The relationship between seniors and juniors resembles that of gangs. Their use of abusive language and power-infested relationships involving both genders reflect how the culture of *iljin* has been feminised and brutalised at the same time, like putting “nyun” at the end of each word. Although students said school violence was not so serious in S high school, this claim was not borne out in observations. The socio-economic background of *iljins* is not uniform although most of them have adverse family histories, such as parental divorce and family violence. A lot of *iljin*-related violence is not explicit, and is not conceptualised as “violence” by either the victims or the perpetrators; hence, it may easily be missed in research relying on self-report questionnaires alone.

The present research project was conceived in the hope that qualitative methods,

involving extended observations, could add new layers to existing accounts of the “dark shadows” of South Korean schooling. We consider this hope to have been borne out in our findings; for although the above three themes, on which the previous literature has focused, were all evident in our data and cast light on some of our findings, the themes that emerged from our analysis add layers of complexity to the existing research. They do so in particular by turning its focus towards the extent to which various incarnations of institutionalised but covert violence permeate the South Korean high-school system.

According to the data presented above, educational traditions in South Korea have created certain systematic norms which seem infused deeply into students’ everyday school lives. *Overtly*, the school is recognised in South Korean society as a place where all children can (in principle) have equal opportunity to study and secure themselves a better future. Indeed, school gains authority from embodying this high-minded ideal. Under this ideal, students’ behaviours and attitudes become a critical standard for judging them and forecasting their futures. A student who behaves and does well in school is assumed to have a good personality and bright future; hence, such students accommodate easily the prevailing *culture* of “dealing” with peers and teachers.

The high schools observed seem to be locked in a cycle of *covert* violence. Even the best students, who might gain most extrinsically from the system, are required, even forced, to become conformist. Good students in S high school, for example, are certain that studying diligently will guarantee a better future, because they will prepare themselves for entry into a prestigious university. They study not because they enjoy it intrinsically but because of forces systematically imposed upon them. This must be accepted by students while they are in school. Even the best students hardly question whether teachers should have power or authority over them.



“Compete-and-study” also emerged as an ideology justifying the use of punishment. Nevertheless, teachers say that they can no longer control students because they cannot use corporal punishment. The irony of the present situation is that it legitimises covert violence. Even good students have accommodated the mindset that indoctrination and oppression constitutes the most effective pedagogy for the purpose at hand. These data suggest that pedagogy is critical in perpetuating indirect mechanisms of control and restraint. Here, once students get used to indoctrination masquerading as pedagogy, it then justifies the examination system, which basically aims to train students to become actively complicit in the perpetuation of societal control mechanisms.

Having (arguably) misrecognised the purpose of education, students in S high school become violent in various ways, both explicitly and covertly. In order to advance the dominant culture, the apparent counter-culture of the *iljin* becomes instrumental, as it is also heavily role-governed and normalised. The *iljin*, who see themselves as representing resistance, take on a social role that is given to them rather than self-chosen. They provide an outlet for anger which, in the end, strengthens rather than weakens the whole system, like in the often-cited research on “lads” exuding masculinity and physical strength (Willis 1977). The abusive language and explicit school violence, therefore, can be seen as the objective structure of oppression, reproduced in the internalised dispositions and needs of human actors, reflecting social roles (Giroux 1981). Underneath the explicit currents, violence appears in covert forms to oblige each individual to become either a conformist achiever or an equally conformist rebel.

As explored and discussed in this article, the actual experiences of students in the observed high schools reflect how South Korean schools have covered up violent structures by internalising and normalising them: making them covert rather than explicit. That seems to

be the truth behind the trombones about the achievements of South Korean education. A sceptical reader might ask whether this research has unearthed anything new apart from the platitude that a large portion of high-school students in the developed world – wherever you go – are disaffected, disengaged and badly behaved. We would strongly resist such scepticism. The fieldnotes and interviews gathered by the first author provide compelling evidence that there really is something *unique* and *deeply disturbing* about representations of covert violence in South Korean schools (for example, the *iljin*-culture and the culture of “dealing”) and that the abysmally low subjective well-being level of pupils is no coincidence. Two obvious questions beckon, then, as antecedents and consequents: “*Why* is that the case (historically, culturally)?” and “*What* can we do about it (educationally, politically)?” However, addressing those further questions must remain a topic for another day.

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