

# ***Hakbeolism: A Historical and Curricular Consideration of Korean Test-Focused Education***

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## **Screaming**

He screams a desperate scream  
Holding his head which is tearing his heart

Screaming, not heard only echoed

## **Wailing**

Belated wailing, always  
Wailing soon disappears

Screaming and wailing swallow one another  
Again and again

Screaming is prisoned in his flying body  
A body that suffers from the loss of its soul

My poem laments the death of a sixteen-year-old boy who threw himself off his apartment balcony on March 28, 2013. He left the message, “Mom, I cannot endure this pain any more. My brain nibbles my heart. I am sorry.”

My deepest sympathies are aroused by his memory and to other adolescents who have found the pressures of their lives to be unbearable.

The tragedy of these adolescents killing themselves came home to me, personally and dramatically, in 2006. In the elevator of the apartment building where I lived, every day I met a high school student. One day he was not on the elevator—he had jumped off the balcony of his fifteenth-story apartment. The investigating officer said such an event was not unusual: pressure from parents, teachers, and classmates to do well on academic tests was the culprit. This kind of tragedy affects not only secondary students, however: in 2002, a fifth-grade student jumped off his balcony, leaving this note behind: “I do not understand why I have to study 28 hours and rest 20 hours whereas dad works for 20 hours and rests for 28 hours for two days.”

Korean education is internationally renowned for its students’ academic achievements—in 2011, Koreans scored first in the world in reading and third in math



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(Program for International Student Assessment, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]). Many Korean educators take great pride in such results. But less well known is the high suicide rate among Korean adolescents (S. W. Lee & Y. E. Jang, 2011; Ang & Huan, 2006). Research, mostly sociological, has shown strong correlations between these suicides and adolescents' academic stress (H. S. Juon, J. J. Nam, & Ensminger, 1994; S. Kim, 2008).

The core of this problem, I argue, is Koreans' societal tendency to make obtaining credentials from highly ranked universities their top educational priority. Impressive test scores, especially on university entrance exams, are conceived as determining social status and therefore life-long success in socially stratified Korea (T. H. Kim, 2011; C. H. Lee, 2007; Seth, 2002). Scoring well on university entrance examinations is thus often the main purpose of education. Conversely, fear of failing these university entrance exams may constitute *hamartia*<sup>2</sup> for some students, whose depression leads to suicide.

The problems with standardized tests are universal educational concerns. In Korea, these problems have unique elements that require historical interrogation. Tenth-century Korea provides a clue to this emphasis on testing: *hakbeolism*, a uniquely Korean concept of symbolic capital based on hierarchical status or on the reputation of the school a person graduates from. Those graduating from the same educational institution gain social capital while also helping and relying on each other. *Hakbeol* is thus obtainable, for many, via high-test scores on university entrance examinations.

Korean education continues to emphasize test results while ironically it is believed that societal discrimination based on *hakbeol* is the worst one (T. H. Kim, 2011). This paper introduces the Korean concept of *hakbeolism* and analyzes the ties between the test-focused nature of Korean education and the historical, cultural, and political influences of *hakbeolism*. It concludes by discussing the dire consequences of Korean curriculum.

### What is *Hakbeolism*?

The historical study of curriculum requires consideration not only of “the history of the field” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 69) but also of national context: historical, social, and cultural elements (Pinar, 2013; Tröhler, 2014). In Korea, for example, while educational and curriculum theories have been strongly influenced by those of North America (Y. C. Kim, 2010; Y. Lee, 2003),<sup>3</sup> they have nevertheless retained certain traditions. Some of the traditions point beyond the history of curriculum studies to the historical, social, and cultural context that—although has not yet much emphasized and discussed in the theoretical level of curriculum—have influenced today's curriculum discourses in Korea. That is *hakbeolism*.

*Hakbeolism* is a concept that is indigenous to Korea. A *hakbeol* is a kind of social status people achieve based on a shared academic background. It is “a group of people who help and rely on each other, who are from the same school” (Korean Standard Unabridged Dictionary)<sup>4</sup>. That is, it is a group of alumni who share the “societal status or reputation of their school” (J. K. Lee, 2003, p. 21). Strictly speaking, their university's reputation rather than their ability or knowledge thus determines how others judge them.

While *hakbeolism* is similar to credentialism—in both, people place value on others' credentials—these phenomena are different. In-sook Nahm's (2011) differentiation is helpful for readers in the West:

In the transition from a status society to a credential society, credentials become the most reliable criteria by which to evaluate others' abilities. A credential society is a society in which credentialism functions as a predominant ideology. . . . Credentials are social products and achieving them is an effective way to be successful in the society. This phenomenon functions as a major impetus for the movement in American social status. America is a "functional credential society" since it is focused on the functional attributes and abilities of the credentials, whereas Korea is a "symbolic credential society" in that it values the particular schools from which people graduate (Kim, 1995). . . . To be successful in Korean society, a person must put symbolic credentials above functional credentials. (Nahm, 2011, p. 105, Personal translation)

In its emphasis on symbolic credentials as essential to better, higher status and more social opportunities—indeed, to success in life—*hakbeolism* thus differs from Western credentialism and meritocracy.

Koreans tend to believe that belonging to a better *hakbeol* by earning a diploma from a highly ranked university will provide them with greater, what Bourdieu called, "social capital" (1977). In his problematization of the cultural function of *hakbeolism* as social capital in Korean society, Young Chun Kim (2010) argues that *hakbeolism* has become "one of the most powerful [forms of] social capital in South Korea" (p. 543) because of its influence on individuals' social success. Children from upper socioeconomic families, Kim posits, are more likely than others to enter good universities and obtain *hakbeol*. Sang Bong Kim (2004) states this argument more strongly: "The society of Korea is not stratified into upper class, middle class, and working class; rather, it is stratified by *hakbeol*, with that of Seoul University as the royalty, the *hakbeol* of Yonsei and Korea University as the nobility, and the rest of the subgroups as the plebeians" (S. B. Kim, 2004, p. 30, Personal translation). Without factoring in *hakbeol*, Sang Bong Kim argues, there is no explanation for the social authority and capital enjoyed by those belonging to certain *hakbeols*.

In a 2004 study produced by the Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI), 21.5% of respondents identified *hakbeolism* as the strongest source of discrimination in Korea, well ahead of other reasons for discrimination.<sup>5</sup> Only seven years later, Tae Hong Kim (2011), a researcher at KWDI, surveyed 948 adults and found that 29.6% felt "credentials or *hakbeol*" was the strongest source of social discrimination. These surveys indicate not only that *hakbeolism* is pervasive, but that it is a growing social problem. In fact, 46.5% of respondents in Chong-Hyun Lee's (2007) study feel intimidated in their daily lives by people who belong to a more prestigious *hakbeol*. What interests me about these studies is not the actuality of *hakbeol*—even though its strong impact on society clearly matters—but rather, people's perception of it. The *hakbeol* phenomenon has been acknowledged and criticized in Korea, but ironically, it is also desired and pursued by many.

The prevailing criticism of *hakbeolism*, which is mostly from a sociological angle, focuses on social inequity issues in terms of educational experiences and the centralization of social power. These studies provide highly detailed information about how deeply *hakbeolism* affects social structures and people's psyches. In his *Hakbeol Society* (2004), for example, Sang Bong Kim takes a sociological and psychological stance in critiquing *hakbeol*, arguing that it is a kind of "corruptive collective subjectivity fallen into the

bottomless pit of inauthenticity” (p. 193).<sup>6</sup> According to Kim, authentic collective subjectivity has its rationale when both my subjectivity and yours remain alive and are actualized within our collective identity. In my view, however, subjectivity influenced by *hakbeolism* risks losing its vitality, since within a *hakbeol* collective, individuals likely surrender their power of subjectivity to the collective.

Why is *hakbeolism* at odds with subjectivity? *Hakbeols* are an extended form of family, modernized clans. Historically, Korean society was a clan society, but the notion of clans significantly weakened during the Japanese colonial period, the Korean War, and the subsequent dictatorships (Kim, 2004, pp. 179-183). This modernization process, Kim (2004) argues, transformed the traditional form of family: “People who moved to cities in order to work lost their connections, the clans that used to link them to each other and to their society” (p. 183). Not surprisingly, a person who feels anxious about this process may try to become part of a clan-based community to replace that loss of family (Kim, 2004). *Hakbeols* thus help to reduce what Kim calls the common “regressive phenomenon” that Koreans affected by modernization have felt as their family ties have weakened. Kim’s (2004) point is that *hakbeolism* assuages a kind of social and individual immaturity by submerging individual subjectivities in the “corruptive collective subjectivity” (p. 193) in which subjectivities conform to the collective subjectivity.<sup>7</sup> The root issue here from my perspective is simply the loss of people’s awareness of the void of individual subjectivity in their study and education, a problem that I turn to in the following sections.

### **The Birth of *Hakbeolism***

Jung Kyu Lee (2003), another Korean sociologist studying *hakbeolism*, traces its origins to 958 AD,<sup>8</sup> near the beginning of Korea’s Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392). This date marks the implementation of the *gwageo*, the highest-level state examination used to recruit high-ranking officials. The relationship between examiner and examinee, one which would last for the rest of their lives, was considered as important as that between father and son.<sup>9</sup> Thus, for example, when the examiner (father) became successful, the son shared in that success. The *gwageo* was in that sense also a way to build political parties. In different areas and forms and to varying degrees, this phenomenon lasted almost 1000 years, until the Gabo Reform in 1894.

While the social effects of this system are important, J. K. Lee (2003) points out that the *gwageo* was not the only way that officials were recruited. There were other systems: such as the *umso* (蔭絀), a “protected appointment system” used during the Goryeo and Chosun dynasties to select persons from high-ranking families whose ancestors had made contributions to the country in founding the dynasty and the *chungeo* (薦擧), the system by which officials could recommend a certain number of people for certain official positions. Because of the political struggles between kings and powerful families throughout the dynasties, the *umso* and *chungeo* were used by families to pass on their family power, whereas the *gwageo* was used by the king to reduce the power of these families. Thus, we should not attribute *hakbeolism* to the *gwageo* alone; rather, all three systems contributed to the growth of *hakbeolism* because they all privileged a few not according to merit but to personal connections. Nevertheless, although the *gwageo* was abolished more than a century ago, its basis for selection—recommendations and different types of tests (see the *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture*<sup>10</sup>)—most clearly contributes to today’s *hakbeolism*.<sup>11</sup>

## **The Growth of *Hakbeolism***

### **The End Of The Chosun Dynasty And The Japanese Colonial Period**

The turbulent twentieth century greatly strengthened *hakbeolism* in Korea. Toward the end of the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910), “commoners’ discontent with the exclusive social status formation increased” (J. K. Lee, 2003, p. 91). By this point, it had become possible for commoners to achieve nobility through success on the *gwageo*, so common people increasingly sought to obtain higher social status through education. This growing reason to pursue education was actualized when the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) opened up educational opportunities to all (J. K. Lee, 2003; Son, 1993). Educational background rather than one’s social status started to be critical to finding work and establishing social status. Japanese educational policy during this period was intended to make education a way for Koreans to achieve power: the “appropriate educational background was prerequisite to getting jobs and the Japanese colonial government had complete control over education, which their test system made possible” (Son, 2007, pp. 41-42).

Some sociologists, such as Jong-Hyun Son (2007), ascribe today’s educational fever and test competitiveness in Korea to this Japanese educational policy, because the Korean education system was modernized and institutionalized during this era. Although Son’s argument seems plausible to me as far as it goes, the much older *gwageo* and other selection systems discussed above had already established the cultural norms of *hakbeolism*—the employment of entrance exams and textbooks, and the administrative role of the government in various exams—that these twentieth century changes entrenched.

### **Centralization and efficiency in education after the Korean War**

Notions of centralization and efficiency marked the Korean educational system after the Korean War (1950-1953). Trampled by powerful countries and socially, economically, and ideologically devastated during these years, Korea had to emphasize centralization, nationalism, and universalism in order to revive the nation. Unity in language, in the educational system, and even in ways of thinking was therefore highly valued. Political universalism, aimed at binding all Koreans into one collective, was considered “the only way to break through the national crisis.”<sup>12</sup> Solidarity was promoted as indispensable, regardless of the government in power; and given the country’s strong centralization, “anyone who thought differently or wanted a different kind of education was excluded” (Kim, 2008, p. 149). Justified by the Miracle of the Han River,<sup>13</sup> for instance, this approach saw the achievement of remarkable economic development within a relatively short period of time, a result that commended this approach to many.

To advance national solidarity, Jung Hee Park’s military government (1961-1979) pledged to pursue two policies: anticommunism and economic development. The combination was intended to ensure that the Korean people had clear evidence of the enemy outside of the country and that economic development would legitimize the government’s power. In the name of economic development, then, efficiency in conjunction with political solidarity became Korea’s most important social and educational value. While this solidarity and nationalism certainly were valuable in overcoming the national crisis after the Korean War, they discounted the people’s subjectivities and discouraged educational diversity: variety, differences, and discussions were rejected as inefficient (Y. H. Lee, 2003). These approaches also hampered the development of democracy itself, because political diversity is a prerequisite for democracy.



For the sake of efficiency in education, in the 1960's and early 70's the national Ministry of Education implemented Bloom's taxonomy, Mager's concept of behavioral objectives, Skinner's behavioral psychology, and McClelland's achievement motive theory, all approaches intended to "improve" educational efficiency by optimizing the transfer of knowledge and skills from teachers to students. Also in the 1970s the Ministry of Education introduced Jarome Bruner's (1959) "theory of the structure of knowledge," deciding that "Bruner's theory corresponded to Piaget's psychological schema" (Y. H. Lee, 2003, p. 547). Along with the already well-established Tyler-Bloom-Mager rationale that saw curriculum as a means to an end, the Korean government's relatively narrow understanding and use of both theories<sup>14</sup> effectively ensured that within the Korean test-focused system, curriculum was extrinsically imposed. The notion of "curriculum development," not "curriculum understanding," continues to monopolize thinking in Korea.

In the frame of curriculum development, university entrance examinations are still seen as efficiently summarizing students' previous education; therefore, most educational experiences in and out of school continue to focus on test preparation. Of course Korean students do engage in nonintellectual educational activities—art, musical instruments, sports, elocution, and so on—that are not closely related to tests. But as students progress through school, these activities become secondary and eventually tend either to be sacrificed to improving academic achievement or to become test-driven themselves, components that may enhance university applications.<sup>15</sup>

In Korea, the last three decades have produced some ostensibly democratic changes to improve education, including reduced school hours, additional alternative curricular activities, integrated subjects, the concept of a local curriculum, and a teachers' union that argues for the implementation of the democratic and progressive educational policies legalized during Dae Jung Kim's administration in 1991. Even earlier, beginning in the 1980s, some curriculum scholars in Korea started to question the Ministry's reliance on Tyler, Bloom, and Mager (Y. H. Lee, 2003, p. 548) and to demand an alternative understanding of curriculum. They were interested in alternatives that were based on such notions as Michael Apple's social reproduction theory and William Pinar's *currere*—respectively, a new understanding of curriculum and a mode of understanding one's own educational subjectivity. Over the last decade, these positive steps have brought several different perspectives to the previously unified field of curriculum studies in Korea (Y. C. Kim, 2010). However, these changes in curriculum studies, Y. C. Kim (2010) states, mostly involved new research methodologies and research contexts rather than the fundamentally questioning the purpose or *raison d'être* of education. One promising aspect of the situation, nevertheless, is that some curriculum scholars have turned their attention from "developing curriculum" to "understanding curriculum" (Y. C. Kim, 2010, p. 546). Yet, curriculum is still under the shade of curriculum development in Korea.

However, despite these indications of some change in the field of curriculum in Korea, the 1979 collapse of Jung Hee Park's military dictatorship and the 1988 installation of the country's first civilian president, Dae Jung Kim, had little effect on Korea's strong procedural and scientific curriculum formula, the so-called "Tyler rationale." According to that frame, education is an externally imposed means to a socially engineered end. Today, supported by highly developed internet-based technology, governmental surveillance of the performance of students, teachers, and schools has actually increased.<sup>16</sup>

I want to point out three legacies of the twentieth-century growth of *hakbeolism* that still affect education in Korea: first, the Education Law decrees that "subjects of schools,

colleges of education, and informal schools except for colleges shall be prescribed by a Presidential decree, and courses of study and class hours of those by a regulation of the Ministry” (Korean Education Law, Article 155); second, the government still publishes, examines, and approves all textbooks, so all curriculum reforms have been inescapably bound by the government’s control of publication; and third, university entrance examinations continue to be perceived as the culmination of students’ efforts to that point. While official elementary- and secondary-school entrance exams were abolished in the 1970’s, the ongoing emphasis on unification continues to justify “individual needs and differences being subjugated to the preorganized uniform curriculum” (Y. H. Lee, 2003, p. 546).

These educational legacies can be summarized as a continuation of the excessive governmental control exercised through post-Korean War centralization and efficiency. Together, these three crucial consequences continue to support the fallacy that education provides nothing more than the training that can help students prove their achievements on tests. Thus, people who suffer from “education fever” have little curiosity about what students are learning; instead, they are interested only in how students can learn more, and more efficiently, compared to their peers.

### **The Dire Consequences of *Hakbeolism***

*Hakbeolism*’s negative effects can be discussed from societal, curricular, and personal perspectives. First, some argue that *hakbeolism* is the source of the predominant social discrimination and monopoly of power. The research on *hakbeolism* by Tae Hong Kim (2011) explores the concept’s negative impact on Korean society and education and concludes with the statement that Koreans see *hakbeolism* as the predominant source of social discrimination. Sang Bong Kim (2004) provides detailed information about *hakbeolism*’s role in Korea’s power monopolies. People belonging to the *hakbeol* of Seoul University dominate positions in parliament and the highest government offices: from the Korean War to 2003, 283 departmental ministers (43% of all such ministers) had graduated from Seoul University, while only 7% came from Koryo University and just 4% from Yonsei University. Seoul University’s monopoly far surpasses the comparable figures in Japan and the U.S. for top officials having graduated from prestigious universities: in Japan, just 18.5% of government officials graduate from Tokyo University, while in America, no single American university supplies more than 5% of the country’s senators (Kim, 2004, pp. 65-66). Korea’s private sector is not exempt from the effects of *hakbeolism* either.<sup>17</sup>

Some might argue that the people from Seoul University are perhaps better qualified for their high-ranking positions, since they likely know more or are smarter. If indeed these people are better qualified and have made more contribution to the society, people can hardly object to their appointment: greater contributions deserve greater recognition and reward.<sup>18</sup> If socially elite people are *not* better qualified, however, their status is a serious problem. Unfortunately, *hakbeolism* indicates little about the contributions to society that one has made or his or her ability to contribute. Rather, it is a kind of internalized value system that merely rationalizes social stratification on the basis of prior academic achievement.<sup>19</sup>

*Hakbeolism*, I suspect, is a perverted form of “meritocracy” (Macdonald, 1981, p. 168). The rationalization using goals and efficiency as “a tyranny of knowledge and basic skills” (Macdonald, 1981, p. 169) has “the effect of replicating the social structure in terms

of meritocracy” by convincing “the winners and the losers that they deserve the status they achieve” (Macdonald, 1981, p. 168). Lampert (2012) argues that an “educational meritocracy” (p. 50) is based on the ideology of “aggressive competition and social Darwinism” (Lampert, 2012, p. 50). Lampert explains the winner-loser trap that Macdonald criticizes:

[An] educational meritocracy, which focuses on cultivating the excellent and the talented, is a manifestation of the social ideology that education on some level be egalitarian, but is ultimately meant to groom the “excellent” for positions of influence, scientific development, decision-making, and leadership. (Lampert, 2012, p. 51)

Lampert (2012) points out that an educational meritocracy is ostensibly based on an egalitarian viewpoint. While not forgetting to mention individual students’ backgrounds (family, cultural, and financial), Lampert (2012) criticizes “its underpinning argument that ‘anyone can’ as long as they work hard” (p. 51). What an educational meritocracy undergirds is the thesis that educational success is a matter of each student’s effort since all students have so-called “equal opportunity.” Not to mention the differences of students’ backgrounds, the corollary of this ideology blames academic failure or students’ difficulties on their lack of effort and hard work. Of course this is the issue of economic hierarchy and social reproduction. The essential problem of this proposition is that it obfuscates the key curricular question, *what knowledge is of most worth?* (Pinar, 1978, 2009, 2012).

The state of *hakbeolism* today boils down to an “obsession with tests” because students cannot enter a highly ranked university in Korea unless they achieve good university-entrance examination results. When such standardized high-stakes tests become the ultimate purpose or culmination of study, schools turn into cramming institutions and teachers become workers exploited only for “banking education” (Freire, 1970, pp. 71-73). Immediately obvious in the literature is the fact that this situation in Korea has caused test corruption to become pervasive not only among students but also among teachers and administrators, problems that have been well documented (Ang & Huan, 2006; Hong & Youngs, 2008; Jung & Lee, 2003; Juon, Nam, & Ensminger, 1994; Kandel, Raveis, & Davies, 1991; Kang, 2011; C. W. Kim, 2011; S. W. Lee & Jang, 2011; Son, 2007).

A second negative effect, from my curricular perspective besides the societal one I have discussed, is that *hakbeolism* has shaped and strengthened the test-focused system based on the assumption that educational content can be/should be provided, transmitted, and assessed for the purpose that the providers intend. Thus, it is necessary to point out the problems of standardized tests. I raise the following questions. What kind of knowledge do these tests evaluate? That is, knowledge that tests measure is not free of gender, ideology, politics, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and other issues. How well do tests actually measure what they intend to measure?<sup>20</sup> Are the current tests fair to students?<sup>21</sup>

Some critics, for example Pinar, dispute the assumption that education is a means to an end. Pinar agrees with Willmann that the real content of education is not externally given matter but rather “an organic power contained in the content itself, which has a determining influence on the conceptions and thoughts during assimilation by the mind, bringing them into conformity with itself, and thus effecting internal organization” (Willmann, quoted in Pinar, 2011, p. 66). Pinar elaborates on Willmann’s claim, pointing out that the primary elements of education include “self-determination, freedom, emancipation, autonomy, responsibility, reason, and independence” (p. 66)—all of the characteristics which test-focused educational systems are hard-pressed to measure. Of



course tests may be useful on certain occasions, but tests should be no more than a tool that may be used in education, rather than education being merely a means of improving test scores. When tests that are used to increase one's *hakbeol* by demonstrating certain knowledge and skills become central to education, these tests are almost certainly unlikely to raise the fundamental question that Pinar urges us to ask repeatedly: *what knowledge is of most worth?* Instead, tests like these focus students' and educators' attention on the "mandated knowledge" that Doll (1972) calls "predetermined and externally imposed [educational] ends" (p. 309). Twentieth-century education, not only in Korea but also in the West, has experienced countless so-called failures of students, teachers, and education in general, as judged by traditional, scientific, and neo-liberal perspectives and that the phrase "intellectual banking education" might summarize well. Empirically speaking—the way that is preferred by those who want to quantify educational outcomes—isn't it enough to say that these failures "prove" or "argue" that "intellectual banking education" is a poor system? In scientific research, the assumptions that are made initially can be modified or changed as the research progresses. Why can the assumption that educational content is given not be modified similarly according to the demonstrable failures of "intellectual banking"?

In my view, the "failure" to accept that knowledge cannot be given is the reason, as Pinar (2006a) suggests, that "intellectual education does not speak to many children, and, in failing to engage children's interests, alienates them, leaving many a child behind" (p. 118). The failure of banking education as a means to an end, as Gert Biesta (2013) elegantly puts it in *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, might not actually be a failure but rather a kind of "beautiful risk" (p. 1): a possibility, not a weakness. The risk is there, Biesta continues, "because education is not about filling a bucket but about lighting a fire. . . . Education is not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings" (p. 1). Biesta's point is, on the one hand, an ontological one about the nature of our being and the unpredictability of our existence: there are educational outcomes, which cannot be predictable, measurable, quantifiable, or standardizable. On the other hand, Biesta's point is that there is no necessary connection between "inputs" and "outcomes." "Any connections between teaching and what it effects are," Biesta (2013) contends, "*weak connections* [emphasis is mine], connections established through interpretation rather than through causation" (p. 120). The causation takes away the interpretations of teachers and students in their study and "overrule[s] [the] professional judgment [of teachers]" (Biesta, 2013, p. 120).

Blame for the fallacy that educational content can be given lies not only with instrumental rationality itself, but also with our educators' "culpability for their faith in instrumentalism [which has]. . . provided a green light for applied social science with its emphasis upon measuring outcomes quantitatively" (Pinar, 2006a, p. 118). I agree with Pinar that we teachers are caught within an "intellectual and political trap" (p. 120): an intellectual trap because students depend on their teachers in order to learn and a political trap one because responsibility for learning falls on teachers rather than on their students.<sup>22</sup>

The third, the stultifying effects of test-focused education on educators and students are multi-dimensional, which I try to understand through reading Pinar's (1976) *The Trial*, in which he analyzes Joseph K.'s situation in Kafka's *The Trial* as having three dimensions: political, psychological, and metaphysical. Politically speaking, in this kind of system students are told what to study and teachers are told by their prescribed curriculum what, how, and when to teach. Testing inspects how well both students and teachers have met

these externally prescribed standards. In the meantime, an “omnipresent bureaucracy which exercises a political control as mystifying as it feels complete” (Pinar, 1976, p. 38) censors the whole process. Having been raised in this kind of outer-directed culture, I feel and recognize how tests signified and intensified others’ objectifications of me.<sup>23</sup>

From a psychological viewpoint, students in such a system are always being evaluated by that system and their teachers and compared to other students. Not recognizing their subjectivity, those involved in the educational system—that is, teachers and students—become “nearly exclusively social” (Pinar, 1976, p. 38). As Pinar explains,

The ego [specifically, the nearly exclusively socialized ego] is incongruent with its unconscious to the extent it is primarily social in nature, a construction of social conditioning. It limits severely the information it can assimilate, just as it limits what it can externalize. Such an ego is always beleaguered, always “accused” in some sense; it is arrested. (Pinar, 1976, pp. 38-39)

The ego that is concerned only with external factors most likely fails to listen to, recognize, or reflect on its inner forces. This failure may be caused by fear of a looming test (and thus be related to studying), by shame of family or self (and thus be related to pride), or by anxiety (and thus be related to a conscious or unconscious belief that one’s value is always measured by others). A student’s fear, shame, or anxiety might be linked not only to test results but sometimes also to a fear of study itself, arising from the tendency to decipher experience through exterior filters—others’ objectification. To maintain its psychological stability, the ego thus arrested must rely on outer evaluation, and consequently work continuously to satisfy perceived examiners or judges. This psychological stasis is an “intra-psychic corollary of political arrest, of social authoritarianism” (Pinar, 1976, pp. 39).

From a metaphysical viewpoint, the problem with the ego’s being in this immature stage is the failure to ask metaphysical questions properly. In *The Trial*, Joseph K. asks himself, “What is the nature of this case, [this life]?” and “What are the means of absolution, if any?” Pinar would say that here the character is directing his questions the wrong way, outward instead of inward, because Joseph K. thinks that only the outer world—not himself—can answer these questions. The problem for people in highly outer-directed cultures—and my problem, as a student and an educator in such a culture—is not only the *presence* of these questions, but also the *absence* of curiosity. To raise the questions properly and to be conscious of being trapped in this situation is hard for those whose psychological development has been stopped. I wonder if this dilemma explains why, even though Koreans realize it is problematic, *hakbeolism* continues to grip Korean education and society. When I was in the system that I am harshly criticizing here, I was almost completely unaware of these issues; instead, I found that the system’s clarity of direction provided a certain comfort, what Pinar (1976) terms an “intra-psychic corollary of arrest, of social authoritarianism” (p. 39). Because escape from this system might feel uncomfortable, those within it are highly vulnerable to stress, related both to their own uncertainty about their personal aims and to their unexpected experiences. In other words, their “arrest is signified by [their] exclusive attention to the social world, [and their] denial and ignorance of the ‘lived world’” (Pinar, 1976, p. 52). The evaluation frame within *hakbeolism*, I argue, functions as arbitrary social conditioning and psychological constraints which should not be reflected in our educational activities. The test-focused system in

Korea is, as Macdonald (1981) might describe it, a “tyranny of cognitive knowledge and skills in our schools”(p. 169).

In other words the state of students and teachers in the learning and teaching can be conceived as subjectivity-in-danger. Subjectivity is an essential and fundamental constituent of learning and teaching, and thus education. Information and skill practices should be carefully chosen, organized, and provided in ways, which benefit students. Without the consideration of subjectivity teaching is reduced to procedural and systematized implementation and learning is dead act of mimicking whatever teachers or subject specialists choose for students; there is only intellectual submission, and the substitution of subjectivity for numbers, which is a camouflaged form of political and psychological oppression.

Coupled with the productivity of 20<sup>th</sup> century industrialization, and consolidation for the sake of nationalism and anticommunism after the Korean War, the obsession with tests has increased rather than diminished in South Korea. Suffering from the influence of the history, culture, and politics in schools, “Teachers may become increasingly identified with their professionalized role as educators, less attentive to educating and to learning” (Pinar, 1976, p. 57). The teacher, Pinar continues, gives up “his or her own voice, and nearly exclusively relies on others. . . [and] judges severely the artless attempts by students to articulate in their own words issues long ‘resolved’ by serious scholars” (Pinar, 1976, p. 57). There is no need for the teachers’ voice; their entire reliance is on the national curriculum; the emphasis is on others’ judgment. Teachers have hardly been considered “reflective practitioners” (Phelan, 2005; Schön, 1991) and have been forced to do the “dirty work” (Pinar, 1981, pp. 164-171). One possible explanation for the current situation is “repression, unconsciousness role-identified behaviour, [and] intellectual and psychological arrest” (Pinar, 1976, p. 57).

What renders dormant the status of subjectivity in Korean education can be better understood by studying the strong societal tendency to put obtaining credentials from a highly ranked university at the top of the educational goal. What one gets from having certain university credentials is “*hakbeol*.” *Hakbeolism* is the prevalent belief that academic performance, especially on the university entrance exam, shapes one’s entire life because it most powerfully influences one’s social status. It has led to “the worst stratification in Korean society” (S. B. Kim, 2004; Kim, 2011). The harmonized political oppression and cultural malady, I argue, strengthens the psychological trap in teaching and learning. The frozen structure of education (the national curriculum, censoring textbooks and school performances for example) and the deep embeddedness of the culture (a cultural tendency that people care much more about others’ objectifications than about themselves and care more about test results than about any other aspects of learning) make it difficult for people to recognize that they are in those traps. What is most dangerous is that those from this background lose their sensitivity to their subjectivity.

It is my belief that our urgent task is to recover our sensitivity and agency toward our subjectivity, and in turn to cultivate our ability to reconstruct our educational experiences and thus our society. This task for us as teachers on the one hand, means proclaiming our independence from politicians and including our voices in making educational decisions and on the other hand awakening in ourselves and our students the dulled, or numbed, awareness of our ability to negotiate, deconstruct, and reconstruct our educational experience and thereby our society. Teachers face a political trap in that the national curriculum in Korea functions as a way to control the information sets<sup>24</sup> and

sensors educational activities through tests and in various other ways with the help of highly developed technologies. Students face psychological arrest in that their subjectivity remains dormant.

## Conclusion

Study is the site of education. While one's truths cannot be taught, they can be acquired through the struggle of study, for which every individual has the capacity, but not necessarily the will or the circumstances.

—William F. Pinar (2006a, p. 120)

To solve or at least reduce the problems associated with *hakbeolism*, critics have suggested structural or institutional changes: the “abolition of Seoul University” has been much discussed, as well as the abolition of university entrance examinations and the establishment of more democratic university-entrance processes, such as a lottery system. Certainly the hierarchical prestige of universities is a problem, but I doubt if these suggestions would work or are even possible because while they might succeed in addressing the current problematic situation, they would fail to address the fundamental educational issues discussed above.

Unfortunately, even if Koreans understand its nature, history, and consequences, *hakbeolism* will not likely disappear any time soon, given its complex and deep embeddedness in Korean society. Institutional changes certainly need to be investigated, but if we continue to allow students and teachers to assume that prescribed education should be unquestioningly accepted, such changes will most likely fail. Teachers and students will remain caught in *hakbeolism*'s political and intellectual trap, and education will continue to be a process in which “parents and politicians exploit their anxieties over their children's future” (Pinar, 2006a, p. 120).

What can we—*must* we—do as educators to prevent the *hamartia* suffered by the students who gave rise to my poem, to spring them from the test-based trap, and to fight against the governmentalization of education? How can Koreans come to understand the relationship between their educational lives and the fallacies of *hakbeolism*? What educational questions should we educators raise? The answers to these questions lie in Pinar's entreaty that we teachers rehabilitate education by forcing “the teaching genie back into the bottle” (2006a, p. 120), by throwing away the mystic belief that only what we teach our students matters: we have to break the unnecessary causation between “inputs” and “outcomes.”

John Dewey (1916) tells us that “no matter how true what is learned [is] to those who found it out and in whose experience it functioned, there is nothing which makes it knowledge to the pupils” (p. 378). In other words, the knowledge that tests evaluate is possibly always secondary and instrumental to a person's own act of thinking. Knowledge is not definite, stable, fixed, and value- and context-free. Rather, it is in a state of flux, ongoing, changing, challenged, converted, and modified, as students live with it, reflect on it, deconstruct, and reconstruct it. Knowledge that simply satisfies tests cannot be the end of learning. It should, Dewey (1916) tells us, fructify in individual students' own lives (p. 378).

As teachers, we must remember that what a teacher brings into a classroom conversation is no more important than a student's interpretations on them and what a

student brings to classroom conversation. Teachers provide educational experiences, and students benefit from them if they want to, no more, since *more* would be political oppression. Accepting the limitations of our responsibilities and of our abilities to support our students in their studies, while at the same time keeping in mind that what we teachers do with our intellectual and practical wisdom and judgments does have value, might provide us with a way to demystify the educationally destructive assumptions that have dominated in Korea since the birth of *hakbeolism*. The consequences, I imagine, might free the soul of the boy in my poem. Macdonald argues that “essentially any change in consciousness or practice that moves one step closer to freeing ourselves from arbitrary domination by social structures or other persons (past or present) may be counted as a legitimate step toward liberation” (1981, p. 170). Changes in consciousness or practice for liberation can be manifold. One of the ways for teachers, I suggest, is self-understanding through autobiographical inquiry.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> [dalinwill@hotmail.com](mailto:dalinwill@hotmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>The day following the 2002 Korean SAT, a girl committed suicide after hearing that since the exam had been easier than the previous year's, the mean score would be raised 10-20 points. Her provisional mark had been 20 points lower than she had hoped for. The next day, the media and the SAT institution announced its error: the mean score would be *lowered* rather than raised, because the test had been harder, not easier, than the previous year's.

<sup>3</sup> Young Chun Kim (2010) well documents how South Korean curriculum studies have been influence principally by U.S. curriculum studies. The first Korean curriculum scholar Bummo Jung, Kim explains, was a former advisee of Ralph Tyler and wrote *Curriculum* based on Tyler's (Tyler, 1949) *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. Thereafter Jung's students and followers had lead the field in Korea and “promoted Tyler's rationale for South Korean curriculum studies in the 1960s and 1970s” (Y. C. Kim, 2010, p. 534). Providing detailed and chronological influence of North American curriculum on that of South Korea, Young Chun Kim (2010) states, “the major theme of curriculum studies in Korea has been “curriculum development”...since the 1950s” (p. 534). Kim lists the major texts on education and curriculum introduced into Korea. All of them on the list are from North America. There is another influential figure in this regard, although Kim does not list and he is not from North America, is Paulo Freire, whose books have been introduced to Korean readers in fourteen volumes.

<sup>4</sup> This is an online dictionary published by National Institution of Korean

<sup>5</sup> Other bases for discrimination that respondents identified as socially dominant were homosexuality (16.0%), people's physical appearance (11.7%), disabilities (6.8%), nationality (6.2%), and being an unmarried mother (6.0%), along with ethnicity and skin-colour (6%).

<sup>6</sup> The phrase “collective subjectivity” sounds a bit problematic to me since I don't see how subjectivity can also be collective. I think that “collective subjectivity” might be better termed “identity.” But the use of terminology is not my point in this paper. My conception of “subjectivity” is from Pinar (2009): By subjectivity he means:

the inner life, the lived sense of “self”—however non-unitary, dispersed, and fragmented—that is, associated with what has been given and what one has chosen, those circumstances of everyday life, those residues of trauma and of fantasy, from which one reconstructs a life. (Pinar, 2009, p. 3)

My discussion on subjectivity with regard to *hakbeolism* continues in the section of The dire consequences of *hakbeolism*.

<sup>7</sup> In what way can *hakbeol* be an alternative to a clan? Kim (2004) explains that “the immutability, exclusiveness, and class homogeneity of *hakbeol*, which are the innate qualities of clans, are what make *hakbeol* an alternative for a clan” (p. 185, Personal translation). However there is a difference between family and *hakbeol*. While the *raison d'être* of a family is the existence of the members and it does not change, the *raison d'être* of *hakbeol* is distorted: *hakbeol* is a group from the same school whose *raison d'être* is studying and building communities for study. It has nothing to do with the *raison d'être* of its origin.

<sup>8</sup> The *gwageo* was a concept that came from China. In 958 AD, the 4<sup>th</sup> king of the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392), Gwang Jong (光宗), inaugurated it by accepting the recommendation of Ssanggi (雙冀), a Chinese scholar who had become a Korean citizen (author's translation). The *gwageo* was the dominant selection system used by the government throughout this and the following dynasty, the Chosun (1392-1910) (retrieved from <http://chang256.new21.net/board/board.php?db=536&no=683> on September 10, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Retrieved from <http://chang256.new21.net/board/board.php?db=536&no=683> on September 10, 2013, *The Digital Encyclopedia of the Ethnic Culture of Korea*.

<sup>10</sup> This encyclopedia was published in 1971 and is updated by the Korean government periodically. Now it is published online (<http://encykorea.aks.ac.kr>).

<sup>11</sup> I abbreviated the history of selection systems in the early history of Korea. See *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture* (<http://encykorea.aks.ac.kr>) for the entire historicity of *gwageo* and other systems.

<sup>12</sup> In *Symbolic Violence and Pre-modern Academic Clique Society*, Suk-Soo Kim (2008) traces governmental unification policies in Korea after the Korean War.

<sup>13</sup> The “Miracle on the Han River” refers to South Korea's highly accelerated export-fueled economic growth, including rapid industrialization, technological achievement, the country's education boom, the exponential rise in living standards, rapid urbanization, the “skyscraper boom,” modernization, the successful hosting of the 1988 Summer Olympics and the 2002 FIFA World Cup, rapid democratization, and globalization, all of which

seemed to miraculously transform the country from the ashes of the Korean war to the wealthy and highly developed country it is today. Retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miracle\\_on\\_the\\_Han\\_River](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miracle_on_the_Han_River) on August 10, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> The application of Bruner's theory of the structure of knowledge and Piaget's psychological schema is more than mere misunderstanding, given the complex and powerful legacy it has left. These scholars and their theories were combined extremely effectively along with the theories of Tyler, Bloom, and Mager. The fallacy is not exclusive to Korea, however: Deweyan pragmatism, the basis for the work done by Bruner and Piaget, among others, has been misunderstood in America also, as William Doll (1986) observes in *Prigogine: A New Sense of Order, A New Curriculum*:

American educators and psychologists have been able to focus on the correlational aspects of stages—the measured age aspects. But the heart of Piaget is the process of internal, transformatory development. “Life is essentially auto regulation.” The measured curriculum has no place for autoregulatory systems. . . . Both Dewey's notion of experience and Piaget's notion of development have a sense of internality and duration; both are progressive and transformational, coming out of themselves and leading back into themselves, but always at higher, qualitatively different planes. (p. 12).

Identifying Newton's scientific stance as a closed-system paradigm and Prigogine's as an open-system one, Doll (1986) further argues that Piaget's and Bruner's ideas, along with Dewey's educational model “would be a transformative curriculum, with the individual and his or her structures or levels of understanding being transformed” (p. 14). Dewey is not a positivist, as he was understood by many to be because of his positive perspective on the scientific method. Rather, Doll continues, Dewey's philosophy constitutes a way to overcome the limitations of rationality while at the same time questioning the predetermined ends of experience. For Dewey, as Biesta (2013) insists, “rationality is about intelligent human action and human cooperation, ultimately motivated by an attempt to restore rationality, agency, and responsibility to the sphere of human action” (p. 22). Duration, internality, and transformativity are in this regard central to Dewey's philosophy.

<sup>15</sup> On this, see Young Chun Kim's (2007) *Secrets of Academic Success of Korean Students: Stories of Hakwon*. *Hakwon* are private educational institutes, so-called “cram schools” or “shadow education.” Kim's research probes the nature of *hakwon* and reveals its mechanisms for improving academic achievement: its emphases on learning by repetition, tracking systems, continuous assessment, and sharing ideas and information regarding students' progress between *hakwon* and parents.

<sup>16</sup> There is a very powerful technological surveillance system at work in Korea today, the National Education Information System ([http://www.neis.go.kr/pas\\_mms\\_nv99\\_001.do](http://www.neis.go.kr/pas_mms_nv99_001.do)), which continually asks teachers to do “computer stuff” to report to the government what is planned and happened in the schools and classrooms. It is not difficult to assume that the reports are often produced for the sake of report. The purpose of the system is to collect complete information about information (individual and collective) on students and what happens in schools (not only curricular information but also information for parents, as well as fiscal information) according to MOE's policies, all of which require the involvement

and responsible work of teachers. I can argue from my 10 years of experience, observation, and conversations with colleagues that most of the work which needs to be provided on the system is not necessary for students' study.

<sup>17</sup> For detailed relevant data, see Jung Kyu Lee's *Hakryuk and Hakbeolism in Korean Society* (2003) and Sang Bong Kim's *Hakbeol Society* (2004). According to a survey conducted by hakbooki.com in July of 2013, 39.5% of CEOs in the top 1,000 companies in Korea graduated from three universities: Seoul (20.4 %), Koryu, (9.8 %) and Yonsei (9.3%) universities. Retrieved from <http://weekly.hankooki.com/lpage/sisa/201307/wk20130711092514121210.htm> on August 25, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> To show their similar superiority—in their case, their greater sacrifices for the empire—heroes in ancient Rome wore mesh clothing that revealed the sword scars on their bodies.

<sup>19</sup> Those with an impressive *hakbeol* are, I think, unlikely to retain what they have learned, and of course their achievements during their long years of education are also questionable. As Nichols and Berliner (2007) observe that the current overemphasis on testing is causing corruption as well as waste. “Not only is there more student cheating but there are also more cases of cheating by sympathetic teachers and desperate administrators” (Noddings, 2007, p. 71). There were many cases of test corruption during the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392) and the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910). Nam Hee Lee (2008) explains in her study on the shadow of Gwageo that often “the only reason that students learned was to pass the exam. Practices such as cheating, the exchanging of answer sheets, and payments further corrupted the exam results” (pp. 130-131). This kind of corruption, seen nowadays also in test-paper theft and inappropriate testing practices, is not limited to schools in Korea, however. An instructor in a private American SAT preparation institution, for instance, was accused of leaking SAT test papers and answers (Retrieved from <http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=102&oid=003&aid=004308250> on August 12, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> In his study of whether the standardized test in New York State measures what it intends to measure, Reich (2013) argues, “The content tested by an item is not always obvious at first glance, and selecting the correct or incorrect answer does not necessarily mean that a test-taker knew, or did not know, the material”—a conclusion suggesting that the results tended to over-estimate test-takers' knowledge.

<sup>21</sup> The 500 total points on the university entrance examination in 2013 broke down as follows: 100 for Korean; 100 for math; 100 for English; 50 each for social studies, science, and vocation; 50 in total for a second foreign language and Chinese characters. Each year, this test is made, organized, and supervised by the Korean Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation. Retrieved from <http://www.kice.re.kr/contents.do?contentsNo=29&menuNo=215> on August 26, 2013. Although the inauguration of the admissions officer system is bringing some changes in the university student selection system, the results of the SAT are important criteria. Thus the problems that I mentioned in note 15 still exist.



<sup>22</sup> Perhaps more importantly, however, the more students work at storing the knowledge deposited with them, the less they can develop the critical consciousness that could lead to their making positive contributions to their world because in the control frame, students are conceived of as objects of intervention, not as subjects of encounters.

<sup>23</sup> I explain how the objectification has happened in the second chapter of my PhD dissertation which is in progress.

<sup>24</sup> I deliberately use “information,” which is not knowledge, and lacks ethical and intellectual interpretation and judgment.

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