

KOREAN CRAM SCHOOLS

GRADES: 9-12

AUTHOR: William D. Linser

SUBJECT: Current Events, Education

TIME REQUIRED: Two to three class periods

OBJECTIVES:

1. Understand the role and popularity of 'cram schools' in South Korea's educational system.
2. Analyze the positive and negative effects of 'cram schools' on South Korean students.
3. Through this understanding of Korean 'cram schools,' students will be able to effectively look at the pressures facing American students to excel academically.

BACKGROUND:

In a semester-long current events course, the students should already have a working knowledge of educational policies and the role of education in a country's society throughout the world including Asia. Thus, student knowledge of educational policies and the role of education in a country's society should be assumed to have been covered in earlier lessons in other units.

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- Handout 1: "At South Korean Cram School, a Singular Focus" (attached)
- "Appetite for Success" Slide Show available at http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/08/13/world/20080813CRAM_index.html
- Handout 2: "Elite Korean Schools, Forging Ivy League Skills" (attached)

PROCEDURE:

1. Introduce the concept of 'cram schools' to students. Explain the university a South Korean high school graduate attends is perhaps the single most important factor in determining his or her life chances. Entrance into a prestigious institution is the focus of intense energy, dedication and self-sacrifice. Those who fail faced dramatically reduced prospects for social and economic advancement.
2. Assign students to read Handout 1: "At South Korean Cram School, a Singular Focus" and Handout 2: "Elite Korean Schools, Forging Ivy League Skills."
3. Answer the following questions from the readings:
 - What are students denied in cram schools? Why?
 - What is the overriding goal of cram schools?
 - What do South Koreans compare to 'war'?
 - Who are 'jaesoo sang'? Why are they called that?
 - What determines a person's position and salary in their 50s?
 - List three top-tier South Korean universities. What does a diploma from one of those universities represent?
 - The life of a South Korean students is shaped largely by what? Why?
 - What is the second most common cause of death among students between 10 and 19?

- Are these cram schools successful? Explain your answer.
 - Describe a typical day for a cram school student.
 - What is prohibited in the hallways and classrooms of cram schools?
 - What were old cram schools like?
 - What kind of economic impact does the tuition of cram schools have on families?
4. Show the slide show “Appetite for Success” on the New York Times website. Students should be taking active notes in order to prepare for a discussion.
 5. Students can choose from one of the two following assignments: 1) Write a newspaper article that describes the pressure on high school students to be accepted into prestigious universities in the United States; the article should be written in a similar style as those written by Choe Sang-Hun. OR 2) Write a two-page reaction paper to the articles by Choe Sang-Hun.
 6. Teacher will lead a discussion with students to compare and contrast pressures that Korean students face to excel academically with those of American students.

EVALUATION: Students will be evaluated on

- Their answers to the questions on the news articles
- Organization, mechanics, and insight of their papers
- The discussion at the conclusion of the lesson on cram schools and their impact on Korean students
- Information from this lesson to be included on a unit test on East Asia

HANDOUT 1: "AT SOUTH KOREAN CRAM SCHOOL, A SINGULAR FOCUS"

by Choe Sang-Hun

The New York Times: June 25, 2008

YONGIN, South Korea — As the sun dipped behind pine hills surrounding this rural campus on a recent Monday, Chung Il Wook and his wife arrived in a car with their 18-year-old daughter, Min Ju. They hugged her before the blushing teenager hurried into the school building, dragging a suitcase behind her.

Inside, Min Ju joined a raucous crowd of 300 teenage boys and girls returning from their two-night leave and lining up to have their bags checked by their teachers.

Here, the students are denied everyday teenage items in South Korea. No cell phones, no fashion magazines, no TV, no Internet, no game machines. Dating, going to concerts, wearing earrings, getting manicures, or simply acting their age - all these are suspended because they are deemed distracting for an overriding goal. Instead, the students cram from 6:30 a.m. to past midnight, seven days a week, in a campus kilometers away from the nearest public transportation, to clear one hurdle that can determine their future - the national college entrance exam.

"Min Ju, do your best! Fighting!" Chung shouted at his daughter's back before she disappeared into the building. Min Jun turned around, and raising a clenched fist, shouted back, "Fighting!"

South Koreans compare their obsessive desire to get their children enrolled in top-notch universities to "a war." Nowhere is that zeal better illustrated than in boarding cram schools like Jongro Yongin Campus, located in a sparsely populated suburb of Yongin, 40 kilometers, or 25 miles, south of Seoul.

Here, most of the students are "jaesoo sang," or "study-again students," who did not get into the university of their choice and are cramming again for the exam next year. Some try again, and again, for three years in a row after graduating from high school.

The school is so cut off from the outside, the curriculum is so tightly regulated and the distractions so few that students say there is no option but to study.

"Sending Min Ju here was not an ideal, but an inevitable choice," said Chung, a 50-year-old accountant near Seoul. "In our country, college entrance exams determine 70 to 80 percent of a person's future. It's a sad reality. But you have to acknowledge it; otherwise you hurt your children's future."

School background looms large in the life of a South Korean. What university people attend in their 20s can determine their position and salary in their 50s. Top-tier schools like Seoul National, Yonsei and Korea Universities hardly register in the global lists of top schools, but at home, their diplomas pass as a status symbol, a badge of pride both for the students and their parents. On exam day, mothers pray at churches or outside the exam halls.

The life of a South Korean student, from kindergarten to high school, is shaped largely by the quest of doing well in standardized examinations to enter a choice university. That system is often credited with fueling the nation's economic success but is also widely criticized.

When massive anti-government protests shook South Korea in recent weeks, first over President Lee Myung Bak's agreement to import U.S. beef and later over his other policies, many of the demonstrators were teenagers protesting the pressure-cooker conditions at school. Among students between 10 and 19, suicide is the second most common cause of death after traffic accidents.

Lee's trouble started when people accused him of filling many top government posts with people who have ties with his alma mater, Korea University. Still, when he replaced his entire presidential staff this month, all but one of his 10 senior secretaries were graduates from the nation's three best-known universities. When the news media report government appointments, they always highlight the officials' school backgrounds.

It is no surprise that most students in this cram school say they enrolled voluntarily.

"I first felt ashamed. I asked myself what I was doing in a place like this when all my friends were having a good time in college," said Chung Yong Seok, 19, who is trying again for Korea University after failing to win admission last year. "But I consider a year in this place as an investment for a better future."

Woo Ji Woon, Chung's dormitory roommate, also 19, said he came here for the same reasons that would normally dissuade other youths: its isolation and relentless routine, which he said creates "an environment where you have no choice but to study - there is nothing else to do."

"Students here are in the same situation," he said. "We all have tasted failure - so we can understand and sympathize with each other."

More than one-fifth of 600,000 South Korean students entering colleges each year are "jaesoo saeng." They study alone or attend private institutes. Those who believe commuting is a waste of time head for one of the 50 boarding cram schools like Jongro, most of them proliferating in areas around Seoul.

Jongro opened last year. Its four-story main building houses classrooms and dormitories, with eight beds per room. In the spring, pine pollen drifts downhill like yellow mist. In summer, cicadas drench the campus air with hypnotic chirps.

At 6:30 a.m, whistles pierced the dormitory as teachers strode down the hallways, shouting "Wake up!" Amid cuckoo melodies and pop music, students climbed down from their beds and shuffled into a roll-call formation.

After a brief exercise in the playground, breakfast, coffee and brushing teeth, they reported to their classrooms by 7:30, 30 pupils per class. In the back of each classroom there are a few music stands, for students who want to study standing to keep from dozing.

"I snatch a nap between classes and during the lunch break," said Chung, the student. Other boys wolf down their food and race out to play soccer or basketball during the one-hour lunch break.

Another roll call comes at 12:30 a.m., when students can go to bed, unless they want to cram more, until 2:00 a.m.

The routine relaxes a little on Saturday and Sunday, when students are allowed to sleep an additional hour and given two hours of free time when they can watch television or a movie, do laundry, sleep - or study.

Jongro gives students an optional two-night leave every three weeks.

Romance is strictly forbidden. In the hallways and classrooms are notices listing prohibited acts: conversations between boys and girls that are not related to studying, exchanging romantic memos, or physical contact like hugging and hooking arms. Punishment includes several days of cleaning the classroom or the restroom and even expulsion from the school.

"We girls hear which girls boys consider pretty," said Park Eom Ji, 19. "But we don't use much cosmetics, we don't dye our hair, we don't wear conspicuous clothes. We frown upon such things as disruptive. We know what we are here for."

Kim Sung Woo, 32, a graduate of a boarding cram school who now teaches at Jongro, remembered the even more Spartan regimen of old cram schools. In his day, students jumped walls topped with barbed wires at night, lured by neon signs in the distance, and corporal punishment for disruptive students was common.

Such a practice is gone amid parental complaints. Still "this place - metaphorically speaking - is a prison," said Kim Kap Jung, a deputy headmaster at Jongro. "The students come under tremendous pressure when the exam date approaches and their score doesn't improve. Girls weep during counseling and boys run away and don't return." In some cram schools, up to 40 percent of the students drop out.

"It's a big financial burden for me," said Park Hong Ki, 50, referring to the 2 million won, or \$1,936, a month that he has to spend on his son at Jongro.

The percentage of South Koreans' private spending on education, 2.8 percent of their nation's gross domestic product in 2004, is the highest among the member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Students wrote pep-talk notes on pieces of colored, sticky paper and kept them on their desks. "I may shed tears of sadness today, but tomorrow I will shed tears of happiness," one said. Another common note said: "Think about the sacrifices your parents make to send you here."

HANDOUT 2: “ELITE KOREAN SCHOOLS, FORGING IVY LEAGUE SKILLS”

by Sam Dillon

The New York Times: April 27, 2008

SEOUL, South Korea — It is 10:30 p.m. and students at the elite Daewon prep school here are cramming in a study hall that ends a 15-hour school day. A window is propped open so the evening chill can keep them awake. One teenager studies standing upright at his desk to keep from dozing.

Kim Hyun-kyung, who has accumulated nearly perfect scores on her SATs, is multi-tasking to prepare for physics, chemistry and history exams.

“I can’t let myself waste even a second,” said Ms. Kim, who dreams of attending Harvard, Yale or another brand-name American college. And she has a good shot. This spring, as in previous years, all but a few of the 133 graduates from Daewon Foreign Language High School who applied to selective American universities won admission.

It is a success rate that American parents may well envy, especially now, as many students are swallowing rejection from favorite universities at the close of an insanely selective college application season.

“Going to U.S. universities has become like a huge fad in Korean society, and the Ivy League names — Harvard, Yale, Princeton — have really struck a nerve,” said Victoria Kim, who attended Daewon and graduated from Harvard last June.

Daewon has one major Korean rival, the Minjok Leadership Academy, three hours’ drive east of Seoul, which also has a spectacular record of admission to Ivy League colleges.

How do they do it? Their formula is relatively simple. They take South Korea’s top-scoring middle school students, put those who aspire to an American university in English-language classes, taught by Korean and highly paid American and other foreign teachers, emphasize composition and other skills crucial to success on the SATs and college admissions essays, and — especially this — urge them on to unceasing study.

Both schools seem to be rethinking their grueling regimen, at least a bit. Minjok, a boarding school, has turned off dormitory surveillance cameras previously used to ensure that students did not doze in late-night study sessions. Daewon is ending its school day earlier for freshmen. Its founder, Lee Won-hee, worried in an interview that while Daewon was turning out high-scoring students, it might be falling short in educating them as responsible citizens.

“American schools may do a better job at that,” Dr. Lee said.

Still, the schools are highly rigorous. Both supplement South Korea’s required, lecture-based national curriculum with Western-style discussion classes. Their academic year is more than a month longer than at American high schools. Daewon, which costs about \$5,000 per year to

attend, requires two foreign languages besides English. Minjok, where tuition, board and other expenses top \$15,000, offers Advanced Placement courses and research projects.

And, oh yes. Both schools suppress teenage romance as a waste of time.

“What are you doing holding hands?” a Daewon administrator scolded an adolescent couple recently, according to his aides. “You should be studying!”

Students do not seem to complain. Park Yeshong, one of Kim Hyun-kyung’s classmates, said attractions tended to fade during hundreds of hours of close-quarters study. “We know each other too well to fall in love,” she said. Many American educators would kill to have such disciplined pupils.

Both schools reserve admission for highly motivated students; the application process resembles that at many American colleges, where students are judged on their grade-point averages, as well as their performance on special tests and in interviews.

“Even my worst students are great,” said Joseph Foster, a Williams College graduate who teaches writing at Daewon. “They’re professionals; if I teach them, they’ll learn it. I get e-mails at 2 a.m. I’ll respond and go to bed. When I get up, I’ll find a follow-up question mailed at 5 a.m.”

South Korea is not the only country sending more students to the United States, but it seems to be a special case. Some 103,000 Korean students study at American schools of all levels, more than from any other country, according to American government statistics. In higher education, only India and China, with populations more than 20 times that of South Korea’s, send more students.

“Preparing to get to the best American universities has become something of a national obsession in Korea,” said Alexander Vershbow, the American ambassador to South Korea.

Korean applications to Harvard alone have tripled, to 213 this spring, up from 66 in 2003, said William R. Fitzsimmons, Harvard’s dean of admissions. Harvard has 37 Korean undergraduates, more than from any foreign country except Canada and Britain. Harvard, Yale and Princeton have a total of 103 Korean undergraduates; 34 graduated from Daewon or Minjok.

This year, Daewon and Minjok graduates are heading to universities like Stanford, Chicago, Duke and seven of the eight Ivy League universities — but not to Harvard. Instead, Harvard accepted four Korean students from three other prep schools.

“That was certainly not any statement” about the Daewon and Minjok schools, Mr. Fitzsimmons said. “We’re alert to getting kids from schools where we haven’t had them before, but we’d never reject an applicant simply because he or she came from a school with a history of sending students to Harvard.”

South Korea's academic year starts in March, so the 2008 class of Daewon's Global Leadership Program, which prepares students for study at foreign universities, graduated in February.

One graduate was Kim Soo-yeon, 19, who was accepted by Princeton this month. Daewon parents tend to be wealthy doctors, lawyers or university professors. Ms. Kim's father is a top official in the Korean Olympic Committee.

Ms. Kim developed fierce study habits early, watching her mother scold her older sister for receiving any score less than 100 on tests. Even a 98 or a 99 brought a tongue-lashing.

"Most Korean mothers want their children to get 100 on all the tests in all the subjects," Ms. Kim's mother said.

Ms. Kim's highest aspiration was to attend a top Korean university, until she read a book by a Korean student at Harvard about American universities. Immediately she put up a sign in her bedroom: "I'm going to an Ivy League!"

Even while at Daewon, Ms. Kim, like thousands of Korean students, took weekend classes in English, physics and other subjects at private academies, raising her SAT scores by hundreds of points. "I just love to do well on the tests," she said.

As bright as she is, she was just one great student among many, said Eric Cho, Daewon's college counselor. Sitting at his computer terminal at the school, perched on a craggy eastern hilltop overlooking the Seoul skyline, Mr. Cho scrolled through the class of 2008's academic records.

Their average combined SAT score was 2203 out of 2400. By comparison, the average combined score at Phillips Exeter, the New Hampshire boarding school, is 2085. Sixty-seven Daewon graduates had perfect 800 math scores.

Kim Hyun-kyung, 17, scored perfect 800s on the SAT verbal and math tests, and 790 in writing. She is scheduled to take nine Advanced Placement tests next month, in calculus, physics, chemistry, European history and five other subjects. One challenge: she has taken none of these courses. Instead, she is teaching herself in between classes at Daewon, buying and devouring textbooks.

So she is busy. She rises at 6 a.m. and heads for her school bus at 6:50. Arriving at Daewon, she grabs a broom to help classmates clean her classroom. Between 8 and noon, she hears Korean instructors teach supply and demand in economics, Korean soils in geography and classical poets in Korean literature.

At lunch she joins other raucous students, all, like her, wearing blue blazers, in a chow line serving beans and rice, fried dumpling and pickled turnip, which she eats with girlfriends. Boys, who sit elsewhere, wolf their food and race to a dirt lot for a 10-minute pickup soccer game before afternoon classes.

Kim Hyun-kyung joins other girls at a hallway sink to brush her teeth before reporting to French literature, French culture and English grammar classes, taught by Korean instructors. At 3:20, her English language classes begin. This day, they include English literature, taught by Mani Tadayon, a polyglot graduate of the University of California at Berkeley who was born in Iran, and government and politics, taught by Hugh Quigley, a former Wall Street lawyer.

Evening study hall begins at 7:45. She piles up textbooks on an adjoining desk, where they glare at her like a to-do list. Classmates sling backpacks over seats, prop a window open and start cramming. Three hours later, the floor is littered with empty juice cartons and water bottles. One girl has nodded out, head on desk. At 10:50 a tone sounds, and Ms. Kim heads for a bus that will wend its way through Seoul's towering high-rise canyons to her home, south of the Han River.

"I feel proud that I've endured another day," she said.

The schedule at the Minjok academy, on a rural campus of tile-roofed buildings in forested hills, appears even more daunting. Students rise at 6 for martial arts, and thereafter, wearing full-sleeved, gray-and-black robes, plunge into a day of relentless study that ends just before midnight, when they may sleep.

But most keep cramming until 2 a.m., when dorm lights are switched off, said Gang Min-ho, a senior. Even then some students turn on lanterns and keep going, Mr. Gang said. "Basically we lead very tired lives," he said.

Students sometimes report for classes so exhausted that Alexander Ganse, a German who teaches European history, said he asked, "Did you go to bed at all last night?"

"But we're not only nerds!" interrupted Choi Jung-yun, who grew up in San Diego. Minjok students play sports, take part in many clubs and even have a rock band, she said. Ambassador Vershbow, who plays the drums, confirmed that with photographs that showed him jamming with Minjok's rockers during a visit to the school last year.

There are other hints of slackening. A banner once hung on a Minjok building. "This school is a paradise for those who want to study and a hell for those who do not," it read. But it was taken down after faculty members deemed it too harsh, said Son Eun-ju, director of counseling.