For whom the bell tolls: globalisation, social class and South Korea's international schools

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For whom the bell tolls: globalisation, social class and South Korea’s international schools

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This article discusses how in South Korea, English-medium international schools, originally established to educate foreign residents, have recently transformed themselves into private providers of global education for South Koreans. The article explains the social, economic and political circumstances under which the South Korean government has allowed this transformation to take place in response to the forces of globalisation as well as to South Korean elites’ educational demand. The article argues that English-medium international schools are elite-class reproducing institutions. The role of English, one of the major imperatives of global capitalism, will also be discussed, as this language has been impinging on South Korea’s education and labour market.

Keywords: English; global education; globalisation; international schools; social class; South Korea

Introduction

One of the most recurrent topics in South Korea’s news media in 2011 was concerned with English-medium international schools in the country. This topic was – and still is – highly controversial in that it is a clear manifestation of ordinary South Koreans in conflict with wealthy South Koreans (i.e., inter-class tensions). On the one hand, all international schools are legally classified as oikwukin hakkyo, literally meaning ‘foreigners’ schools’ (i.e., open to foreign residents, not to South Korean nationals). On the other hand, international schools grant admissions not only to foreign residents but also to South Korean nationals, more often than not, to the point of the majority of their students being of South Korean nationality. This situation has given rise to the criticism that international schools, particularly English-medium ones, are not for foreign residents but are, in effect, exclusive schools for the children of South Korea’s privileged classes.

This article discusses how in South Korea, English-medium international schools – originally established to educate school-age foreign residents in

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English – have evolved in such a way as to allow the South Korean government to respond to the forces of globalisation and to enable the privileged classes to ensure social reproduction, closure and exclusion in the age of globalisation. In so doing, the article attempts to unravel the social, economic and political circumstances under which South Korea, one of the world’s most developed countries, has come to institutionalise international schools’ practice of granting admissions to South Korean nationals, thereby further widening the schism between the social classes. When globalisation and its impact are examined, especially in the context of South Korea, English must also be brought into the equation, because this language – one of the major imperatives of global capitalism (Neubauer 2008, 41; Spring 2008, 350–2) – has been impinging on South Korea’s education system and labour market as the country makes considerable effort to ‘be competitive within the norms of global capitalism’ (Neubauer 2008, 41; J.S.-Y. Park 2009; Song 2011). (Note that international schools with other foreign languages as the medium of instruction do not attract South Korean students as English-medium international schools do.) For this reason, the focus of this article will be placed on English-medium international schools, not on international schools in general.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. First, a brief overview of globalisation and its impact on education, especially on public education, will be provided as a backdrop against which South Korea’s English-medium international schools will be discussed. Second, the role and status of English in South Korea will be presented as a background to the popularity of English-medium international schools among wealthy South Koreans. Third, the history and status of international schools will be discussed with a view to describing how English-medium international schools, with the approval of the South Korean government, have transformed themselves into private education providers for South Koreans, in response to the educational needs of the global economy as well as to South Korean elites’ demand for global education. Fourth, how English-medium international schools are exploited as a strategy of social reproduction will be addressed with a view to highlighting education as ‘one of the most important loci of class struggle’ (Bourdieu and Boltanski 2000, 917) in South Korea. The article closes with a brief conclusion.

Globalisation, neoliberalism and education

Whether regarded as ‘a mere extension […] of ways in which the world has been integrating economically for centuries (Bentley and Ziegler 2006)’ or as ‘a collection of [recent] changes, rapid and fundamental, that are transforming how the world works, how we perceive each other, indeed, how we make up society’ (Neubauer 2008, 29), globalisation has had an enormous impact on almost all aspects of social life. Indeed, Neubauer (2008, 29) goes so far as to argue that globalisation has set in motion a set of forces as far-reaching as those that characterised the industrial revolution and the resulting political and
economic outcomes. One domain in which the effects of globalisation are palpable is education, which has become ‘a major factor in the world economy, both as a basis for national economic competitiveness, particularly in the race to develop “high-skills” labour, and as a traded good’ (Ball, Dworkin, and Vryonides 2010, 523). There are at least three fundamental ways in which globalisation has been transforming education as traditionally understood, e.g., the education of the mind, the development of the individual as a self and a member of a larger community, etc. (Burbules and Torres 2000, 3–4):

1. education as consumer choice;
2. ‘social polarisation in access to education’ (Schugurensky and Davidson-Harden 2003, 339); and
3. education for the global economy.

First, neoliberals, the most powerful force in the Right’s success in forming what Apple (2000, 59) refers to as ‘the conservative restoration’, hold the view that “[c]onsumer choice” is the guarantor of democracy’ (Apple 2000, 60; also Neubauer 2008, 33). In neoliberal thinking (e.g., Martinez and Barcia 1997), the only powerful kind of rationality is ‘economic rationality’, to be measured in terms of efficiency and cost–benefit analysis (Apple 2000, 59), and the ultimate arbiter of economic rationality is self-regulating market mechanisms (read: an unfettered market) (Apple 2000, 60; Neubauer 2008, 33). To the neoliberal mind, education is just one example of consumer choice. Thus, neoliberalism has, around the world, given rise to the commodification of education as school choice as well as for profit generation (Apple 2000; Apple, Kenway, and Singh 2005; Brown and Lauder 2006; Burbules and Torres 2000; Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Spring 2008). Education, conceptualised as consumer choice, has also led to the heightened participation of private education providers, to the detriment of state schools, in many countries (e.g., Neubauer 2008, 43–4; also Ball 2007, 2012). Thus, while education may continue to have ‘high rhetorical value in policy discourse, the overall state commitment to it [has] even[ed] out or decline[d]’ (Neubauer 2008, 52).

Second, while globalisation has created unprecedented levels of private wealth, it has also engendered widespread poverty – in developed as well as developing/undeveloped countries. Globalisation, as practised at present, is said to be largely responsible for the widening gap between rich and poor. As education, under the mantra of consumer choice, is commoditised, the rich can have greater freedom in choosing the best possible form of private education, while the poor may have no other option but to rely on public education. As state commitment to public education diminishes, state schools may suffer from a lack of resources, financial or otherwise, to the effect that ‘inequalities of income signal relative inequality in gaining access to goods and services including […] education’ (Neubauer 2008, 37). For instance, Schugurensky and Davidson-Harden (2003) report that in Latin American countries,
neoliberal policies have resulted in what they call ‘social polarisation in access to education’, e.g., private education for the rich and public education for the poor. Neubauer (2008, 43) goes on to write: ‘[f]or the most privileged in society, private education becomes another consumption option, one that is consistent with class position and the status oriented consumption strategies thought necessary to succeed in maintaining class position or gaining upward social mobility’.

Third, as the world’s economy is increasingly globalised, neoliberal-minded politicians and business leaders emphasise the need to align the nation’s education with the needs of the global economy (Neubauer 2008, 37–8; Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Spring 2008, 331). For instance, public and private money is channelled to schools only if they agree to implement policies to ‘connect the education system to the project of making [the nation’s] economy more competitive’ (Apple 2000, 62; Burbules and Torres 2000, 20). What this entails is that education must be conceived, formulated and delivered in order to transform students into efficient and competitive workers for the global economy, and also to make the nation competitive in the globalised world. Parents and students, in turn, expect educational qualifications to be recognised not only in their home countries but also elsewhere in the world. In other words, education itself must also be globalised so as to ‘facilitate the international mobility’ (Brown 2000; Cambridge and Thompson 2010, 162).

Globalisation and South Korea’s education

As the remainder of the article will demonstrate, globalisation has had an impact on education in South Korea, particularly on international schools, along the lines discussed in the preceding section. The South Korean government has come to the view that, while South Korean schools, public or private, may not be able to choose English – the language of global communication – as the medium of instruction for socio-political, logistical and other reasons (see e.g., Song 2011, 2012), international schools may provide English-medium education that meets the needs of the global economy. The privileged few, in turn, have come to the realisation that the English-medium curriculum delivered by international schools is a perfect (and much less costly) alternative to cokiyuhak ‘early overseas education’ as well as to South Korea’s examination-based education (cf. Sorensen [1994, 17] on South Korea’s ‘testocracy’). English-medium international schools, as neoliberals may aver, provide South Koreans with a viable consumption option in education, namely, locally available English-medium education that befits the nation undergoing the processes of the globalisation revolution and that at the same time provides ‘students with skills for the global workplace’ (Spring 2008, 337).
English in South Korea

South Korea is basically a monolingual nation, where the ‘majority of South Koreans are rarely in regular contact with speakers of languages other than Korean, and virtually all aspects of their lives are conducted in Korean’ (J.S.-Y. Park 2009, 30), although there are foreign or minority languages spoken on its soil (e.g., Song 2012, 14–23). The most important among these foreign languages has, for the past six decades or so, been English (e.g., J.S.-Y. Park 2009; Song 2001). Evidence in support of the importance of English in South Korea can be documented without difficulty. English has been taught nationwide as a compulsory subject at the primary level since 1997; in 2008, President Lee Myung-Bak (2008–) announced his government’s plan to have all primary and secondary English classes conducted in English alone by 2012; and South Koreans annually spend as much as US$752 million on English proficiency tests (Guardian Weekly, 15 December 2006). South Korea has been spending a large proportion of its national income on English-language education (e.g., nearly 2% of its gross domestic product [GDP] on private English education in 2005 [Chun and Choi 2006]) when the majority of South Koreans have no need or opportunity to use English in all aspects of their lives. South Korea’s pursuit of English has indeed been characterised as ‘obsession’ in academic circles (e.g., J.S.-Y. Park 2009) as well as in the media.

This national obsession, with social, educational and political implications or consequences (Song 2011, 2012, 14–18), can be witnessed in three main areas: (1) private English-language education (i.e., English taught outside the national education system); (2) the role of English competence in employment; and (3) the so-called Official English debate.

First, many South Korean parents enrol their children in private English-language classes (i.e., outside of normal school hours) because they believe that schools are not delivering adequate English-language instruction or because they want to give their children an advantage over other children. Some parents may choose (more expensive) English-language schools that employ native English-speaking teachers because they are of the view that Koreans cannot teach proper English. Well-to-do parents may choose to send their children to (much more expensive) short-term English-language courses in English-speaking countries. The privileged few may even be able to provide their school-age – in some cases, pre-school – children with early overseas education by sending them to Australia, Canada, New Zealand or the USA for full-time education.5

Second, South Korean employers place a great deal of emphasis on their employees’ competence in the English language: the ability to speak English is an important criterion for white-collar employment (J.S.-Y. Park 2009, 42). Thus, major corporations or companies regularly test job applicants and employees for English competence. For instance, Choi (2002) reports that over 90% of employees in large manufacturing and exporting industries are
continuously assessed for their English competence during employment. In reality, however, evidence for little or no active use of English in the workplace is irrefutable (Choi 2002; McTague 1990). This rather incongruous situation has been justified because English skills are regarded as ‘something [...] fundamental to the desired corporate worker in the global age’ (J.S.-Y. Park 2009, 43).

Third, since 1998 there has been a heated debate on English as an official language of South Korea – whether or not English should be adopted as South Korea’s official language (J.S.-Y. Park 2009; Song 2011). English, as much a foreign language to South Koreans as Chinese or Spanish, has thus been ‘touted’ as a possible official language in what is, to all intents and purposes, a monolingual, Korean-speaking nation. The importance of English was recognised officially by President Kim Young-Sam’s government (1993–1998) within the context of South Korea’s seykyehwa ‘internationalisation’ drive, but it was not until the publication in 1998 of Bok Geo-II’s book entitled Kwukcey-e sitay-ui mincok-e [Ethnic languages in the age of an international language] that the idea of English as a possible official language of South Korea was invoked and brought into a public forum (J.S.-Y. Park 2009, 57–95; Song 2011). Bok (1998) claimed that Korean was unsuitable for the age of globalisation. His argument was that it would be extremely costly, even if possible, to access global information and knowledge through local languages such as Korean; hence, the lack of English proficiency in the age of globalisation would be a serious impediment to gaining access to global information and knowledge. Bok’s (1998, 180) recommendation was that English should replace Korean as South Korea’s official language. His book immediately led to debate on the pros and cons of English as an official language, played out in the media for the next three years or so. Worth noting is the timing of the idea of English as an official language; it was floated in the wake of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. South Koreans in support of the idea argue that English has proven to be ‘a critical resource which would allow the country to maintain and further develop the economic advantage it had worked so hard to achieve’, and that ‘English is necessary for the economic survival of [South] Korea within the context of globalisation’ (J.S.-Y. Park 2009, 58, 76). While it may now seem to have all but gone under the radar of the public, the idea of adopting English as an official language is likely to return. This is probably inevitable, as the global influence of English continues to increase (e.g., Blommaert 2010; Crystal 2003, 2008; Park and Wee 2012).

‘English Divide’: social schism based on access to English-language education
The most egregious manifestation of South Korea’s obsession with English is what South Koreans refer to as the ‘English Divide’: the schism between the privileged and the other social classes, accentuated or reinforced by the ability
to have access to English-language education outside the national education system. In particular, early overseas education, which only the privileged few can afford to purchase for their children, has engendered a considerable amount of ill-feeling or anxiety among ordinary South Koreans.

This is not just a matter of ‘envy’ or ‘jealousy’, as some may think, but rather something that needs to be put into a proper context. South Koreans place a great deal of emphasis on their children’s education: education has a crucial bearing on one’s career or, more generally, one’s quality of life. The role of education in South Korea is true of many other countries also, but the extent to which it plays a vital role in South Korean society is, to say the least, extreme (Lee and Brinton 1996; Lett 1998; Seth 2002; Sorensen 1994). Indeed, ‘[e]ducation is a national obsession in South Korea’ (Seth 2002, 1). For instance, South Korean parents are completely blasé about forcing their children to spend the bulk of their waking hours studying school subjects in order to be accepted into one of the elite universities in the country. South Korean students typically leave home before 8 am or even earlier and return home well past midnight, with normal and supplementary school work, and private after-school instruction all packed in between. In order to outperform their peers, students have no alternative but to do much more than what is provided by the school system, hence private after-school tutoring (e.g., Kim and Lee [2010] on South Korea’s ‘rampant private tutoring’). South Koreans go to considerable lengths – very often beyond their means – to attain ‘good education’ (read: a degree from a first-class university); ‘the fever-pitch obsession with education has [become] a fixed feature of South Korean society’ (Seth 2002, 224). There is a myriad of examinations, administered both inside and outside the school system, that give a decisive advantage to students who can pay for private tutoring in contrast to those who cannot (for discussion of this situation, known as sihem ciok ‘exam hell’, see Lett [1998, ch. 5]; Seth [2002, ch. 5]; Sorensen [1994]; – cf. Brown [1990] on ‘parentocracy’). The privileged few, however, may have the option of letting their offspring bypass the country’s ‘exam hell’ by sending them to English-speaking countries for full-time education, while the government has so far done little to overhaul, if not eliminate, the ‘testocratic’ education system that has put shackles on students and parents alike for the past several decades (Kim and Lee 2010). This is the very source of ordinary South Koreans’ negative reaction to early overseas education.

Moreover, by adopting English competence as an important criterion in job application and performance evaluation, employers may reserve the option of invoking English competence as a reason for hiring or firing as well as for (not) promoting employees. Thus, employees failing to meet employers’ demand for English competence may be penalised for something not required or used in their work. It has been argued (Song 2011, 47) that South Korean employers’ insistence on English competence in the workplace – in conjunction with the promise of better pay and promotion – is a continuation of the social system
that gives an advantage to those with ‘good education’ over those without. South Koreans successful in gaining employment in major corporations or companies are hired, in the first place, on the basis of ‘good education’ (see Lee and Brinton [1996, 181] for supporting data). Those who perform well in English tests at the time of application and/or during employment have already received the best English-language education that (their parents’) money could buy, e.g., English-language courses in the USA (Song 2011, 47–8).

The Official English debate can also be understood in terms of the schism between the privileged classes and the rest of the society. Imagine a South Korea where English is an official language to the extent that all school subjects are taught in English – as indeed recommended by the Presidential Transition Committee in 2008 but retracted within days of its announcement in the face of public criticism. In this English-dominated society, students who have attained the necessary level of English competence will have (better) access to learning (and do well in school subjects), because as Graddol (2006, 120) points out, ‘failure to master English as a basic skill means failure in other disciplines’, and ‘success in other areas of curriculum becomes dependent on success in English’. Students who have only studied English within the school system will not be able to compete with students who have regularly taken English courses in English-speaking countries or have experienced early overseas education. Students without an adequate command of English will struggle with learning, not being able to cope with the level of English required in the classroom. Thus, academic competence or, more generally, access to education will be reduced to the question of whether or not one has the means to acquire English as a prerequisite for learning.

In recent years, the English Divide has been brought, once again, into the limelight because many English-medium international schools, in violation of the legal quota on South Korean enrolments, have been found to have on the roll more South Koreans – that is, children from wealthy South Korean families – than foreign nationals (Inchon News, 26 September 2011). This has added to the already high level of anxiety or ill-feeling among middle- and low-income families, who are unable to compete with their wealthy counterparts in providing their children with the ‘best’ English-language education.

**International schools in South Korea: history and status**

Traditionally, in South Korea, international schools are owned and operated by foreign nationals in order to provide school education for children speaking languages other than Korean (i.e., school-age foreign residents). This is the reason why in South Korea international schools have always been referred to legally as oikwukin hakkyo ‘foreign(ers’) schools’, although some English-medium international schools call themselves kwukcey hakkyo ‘international schools’. The first international school – with Mandarin as the medium of instruction – was established by Chinese immigrants in 1902. In 1912, the first
English-medium international school was brought into existence by Methodist missionaries to educate children from English-speaking missionary, business and diplomatic communities in Korea. At present, there are reported to be just over 50 international schools in South Korea; as of September 2011, there were as many as 26 English-medium international schools, with a few more said to be in the pipeline (Hankyeyelu Shinmewun, 19 September 2011). The exact numbers of students, let alone South Korean nationals, enrolled at international school are not always made available, but approximate data were retrieved from the International School Information website (www.isi.go.kr, accessed on 27 August 2012; also see note 8). In 2010, for instance, 24% of the 25 English-medium international schools had over 500 enrolled students; 48% had over 100 but below 500 students; 24% had over 20 but below 100 students and 4% had fewer than 20 students. Needless to say, not all students enrolled at these international schools were South Koreans. By comparison, in 2010, South Korean primary, middle and high schools numbered 5854 (with almost 3.3 million students), 3130 (with almost 2 million students) and 2253 (with almost 2 million students), respectively (MEST and KEDI 2010, 20, 31).

The majority of the English-medium international schools came into existence in the late 1990s and thereafter. Originally, only foreign nationals were legally permitted to establish international schools, but this restriction was later relaxed to the effect that South Korean educational foundations (read: private providers) were also allowed to set up and operate international schools. While the first South Korean-owned/operated international school reportedly opened its doors in September 2000 (Choi 2004, 332), it was not until February 2009 that the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) formally announced a new policy on foreign schools (Presidential Decree No. 21308: Establishment and Management of Foreign Schools and Foreign Kindergartens), legally allowing South Korean nationals to establish and operate international schools (MEST 2009). Note that the term ‘foreign school’ is used in the Presidential Decree (and other official documents). The term ‘international school’ has no legal status in South Korea; irrespective of their founders’ nationalities, all international schools are legally classified as oikwukin hakkyo ‘foreign(ers’) schools’.

There are two important things to note about the 2009 Presidential Decree on Foreign Schools: (1) the maximum number of South Korean students allowed; and (2) the MEST’s recognition of international schools’ curriculum. First, the legal quota on South Korean nationals is set at 30% of the total enrolments, although in consideration of the ‘educational environment’ of his/her city or province, the Superintendent of each Metropolitan, Municipal or Provincial Office of Education has the discretion to raise this quota by up to 20% (MEST 2009, 10). (It is not clear from the Presidential Decree on Foreign Schools exactly what is meant by the ‘educational environment’.) Put differently, international schools may, with government approval, be allowed to accept students of South Korean nationality up to 50% of the total...
enrolments. Thus, although international schools are legally classified as foreign(ers’) schools, up to half of their student population can potentially be made up of South Koreans. Not all South Koreans, however, are able to apply to international schools for admission. Prior to the 2009 Presidential Decree on Foreign Schools, South Koreans were required to produce evidence of having resided for a minimum of five years in a foreign country when applying for entry into international schools. This minimum period of overseas residence was reduced to three years in 2009 (MEST 2009, 2). Note, however, that three-year-long overseas residence is not required of applicants for entry into international schools located in so-called Free Economic Zones (FEZ) or Special Economic Zones (SEZ) – namely, Inchon City (FEZ) and Jeju City (SEZ). Thus, international schools operating in these two cities, by special dispensation, may accept as many South Korean students as they wish (e.g., 100%).

Second, South Koreans graduating from international schools are now regarded as having completed the equivalent of South Korea’s national curriculum, provided that they have also undertaken Korean language and social studies (e.g., Korean history) for no less than 120 hours per annum (MEST 2009, 11). This means that South Korean graduates of international schools can have their school qualifications recognised not only by overseas universities (e.g., in the USA, Canada, etc.) but also by South Korean universities. This also enables them to apply for direct entry into South Korean universities. Thus, South Korean graduates of international schools may have the option of entering local universities not only under the normal admissions category but also the special admissions category – the latter if they also hold foreign passports (e.g., dual citizenship) (Taycapo Internet News, 30 April 2008).

There are two different ways of typologising international schools in South Korea. First, depending on who establishes an international school, it can be one of the three types: (1) international schools established by foreign nationals; (2) international schools established by South Korean nationals; and (3) international schools established by schools domiciled in foreign countries (i.e., offshore campuses). Old international schools, which came into existence well before the beginning of South Korea’s economic boom in the 1980s, belong to the first type (e.g., Seoul Foreign School [SFS], established in 1912). New international schools, which sprang up in the late 1990s and thereafter, belong to the first or the second type. The third type of international school is a very recent phenomenon. Such international schools all opened in 2010 and thereafter (i.e., subsequent to the appearance in 2009 of the Presidential Decree on Foreign Schools), primarily targeting South Koreans who seek English-medium education from within South Korea. This is why they are all located in FEZ or SEZ, where international schools are allowed to accept students irrespective of nationality.
Second, depending on whether admission restrictions apply to South Korean nationals, international schools can be grouped into two different types: (1) schools subject to admission restrictions on South Korean nationals; and (2) schools subject to no such restrictions. International schools in FEZ or SEZ belong to the second type, whereas those operating outside FEZ or SEZ belong to the first type. Among those subject to admission restrictions, old international schools, as opposed to new ones, maintain a much lower quota on South Korean nationals. For example, SFS, the oldest English-medium international school, has its own policy to accept South Koreans only up to 10% of the total enrolments, but in reality, it has a considerably smaller number of South Koreans on the roll (e.g., only 0.2% of its total enrolments in 2011). In contrast, one new international school was reported to have (illegally) accepted South Koreans to almost 91% of its total enrolments (Dong-A Ilbo, 12 April 2011) (see Table 1).

Transformation of international schools: English-medium education for locals

There are three issues that need to be discussed in relation to the sudden increase in the number of international schools. First, why has the government changed its traditional policy on who will be granted permission to establish an international school? Previously, as already mentioned, only foreign nationals were allowed to open and operate international schools. Second, why has the government decided to allow South Korean nationals to be accepted into international schools when the latter are still legally registered as foreign(ers’) schools? Third, why has the government decided to accept international school graduates’ qualifications as equivalent to South Korean school graduates’ qualifications? This has effectively brought the international school curriculum into the fold of South Korea’s national education system, even though the former does not coincide with the latter.

Who can open and operate international schools?

The intention behind South Korea’s original policy on foreign schools was that foreign residents should be given an opportunity to establish their own schools to give their children the same education as found in their home countries; that kind of education could only be provided by foreign nationals themselves. There are, however, reasons why the South Korean government has amended its original policy.

First, as expatriates began to arrive in large numbers in the 1990s, the South Korean government and business community came to the view that one essential component for attracting foreign capital to South Korea was to provide expatriates with comfortable living conditions, including educational facilities for the expatriate community (Choi 2004, 331). The shortage of
international schools was recognised as one of the major deterrents to foreign capital investment. Second, South Koreans returning from their long-term overseas postings (e.g., diplomats, trade representatives, etc.) prefer international schools to South Korean schools because their children have already received a different ‘style’ of education while living abroad. These children, having been exposed to a very different education system, particularly in English-speaking Western countries, tend to find it very difficult to cope with South Korea’s examination-driven education system, motivating the parents to seek alternative, preferably Western-style, education. Third, politicians and business leaders argue that South Korean-owned international schools, with their high tuition fees (US$25,000 and upwards per annum)\(^6\), go some way towards addressing the country’s trade deficit in education because far more South Koreans go abroad for education every year than foreign nationals study in South Korea (Choi 2004, 331).

**South Korean students in international schools**

In revising its policy on foreign schools in 2009, the government made it possible for international schools to accept South Koreans to 30% of the total enrolments, with the caveat that this quota can be raised up to 50% at the discretion of the Metropolitan, Municipal or Provincial Office of Education. Thus, international schools are no longer reserved for foreign residents only. There are three factors that have contributed to this situation.

First, in May 2009, President Lee Myung-Bak’s government (2008–) announced a master plan to upgrade South Korea’s ‘service industry’ to the world’s highest standards. The master plan identified 10 target service areas, including health care, telecommunication and education. Within this master plan, the quality of South Korean schools, in particular, was to be raised through competition with international schools, the number of which the government also intended to increase. Such competition was predicated on the assumption that South Koreans would be allowed to enrol at international schools — if only for the sake of comparison. This would certainly meet the demand made by South Korean neoliberals, who had all along argued, under the mantra of consumer choice, that South Koreans should also have access to international schools (Choi 2004, 331). Their argument was that South Koreans, as consumers in a democratic nation, must be allowed access to international schools or to any kind of school for that matter; it is not up to the government, but up to individual parents, to decide to send their children to local or international schools. Moreover, in a globalising world, as the neoliberal argument continues, South Koreans must have an opportunity to acquire English (i.e., the global language) and to have exposure to cosmopolitan cultures (Choi 2004, 331). English-medium international schools are claimed to provide what the globalising world demands of South Koreans.
In other words, they are South Korea’s ‘free market response to a global need’ (Pearce 1994, 28).

Second, wealthy South Korean parents have voiced their view that international schools present themselves as a viable alternative to ‘the current practice of treating a child’s schooling as preparation for the [university] entrance exam’ (Choi 2004, 332). They have argued – with little regard for ordinary South Koreans who do not have the means to enrol their children at international schools – that South Korea’s examination-driven educational system ‘will deprive a student of the critical thinking and creativeness that are essential for competing in the global economy’ and international schools will provide parents with ‘more options for their children in the international arena in the global age’ (Choi 2004, 332). On a practical level, it must be pointed out, wealthy South Koreans have also come to recognise English-medium international schools in South Korea as a much less costly – financially and otherwise – and much ‘safer’ alternative to early overseas education, which involves several years of overseas residence and has in the past witnessed many students going ‘astray’ (e.g., delinquency, behavioural problems and even unlawful activities), usually in the absence of parental guidance and supervision. 7

Third, as already discussed, there are South Korean children returning to South Korea with their parents who were posted abroad as diplomats or trade representatives as well as South Koreans returning home after years of early overseas study. Some of these children find themselves unable to integrate (back) into South Korea’s education system. Therefore, there is, as some have argued, a genuine need for international schools to accommodate such South Korean returnees.

**Recognition of international school qualifications**

The 2009 Presidential Decree on Foreign Schools allows academic qualifications from international schools to be accepted as equivalent to those from South Korean schools on condition that qualification holders from international schools have also completed the required amount of the Korean language and Korean social studies. This is a most remarkable development in the history of South Korea’s national curriculum. The national curriculum has always been under the direct control of the government (through the MEST) (Song 2012, 28). The recognition of international school qualifications, however, brings international schools’ curriculum – modelled on the US education system or the International Baccalaureate system – into the fold of South Korea’s national education system, although the South Korean government has little control over it. This may be interpreted in two different ways. Some may argue that the curriculum delivered by international schools is as good as South Korea’s national curriculum, and if the medium of instruction is English, it may be even more suitable for South Korean students preparing themselves for employment in the global economy. Others may argue that
South Korea’s national curriculum is globally competitive enough that students who have gone through it can be thought to be on a par with those with international school qualifications. The recognition of international school qualifications does not actually come as a surprise when it is taken into account that South Koreans make up a large proportion of the student population at many international schools around the country.

**English-medium international schools as elite-class reproducing institutions**

In view of the foregoing discussion, the question arises as to whether international schools are primarily for foreign residents or not. It seems that they are for the benefit of both foreign residents and South Korean nationals, and that is indeed the official position of the South Korean government, as reflected in the 2009 Presidential Decree on Foreign Schools. There are, however, strong indications that the majority of international schools, especially new ones that have sprung up since the late 1990s, serve the needs of South Koreans more than those of foreign residents. Many international schools, especially those owned and operated by South Koreans, accept children from wealthy South Korean families even when they do not meet the admission criteria. For instance, it has been reported in the media that some South Koreans enrolled at international schools hold foreign passports purchased from so-called ‘Third-World’ countries (USA Choong Ang Daily, 2 February 2010). (Foreign passports will, needless to say, obviate the need to produce evidence of at least three years of overseas residence and also allow their holders to apply, upon graduation, for entry into local universities under the special admissions category.) As alluded to previously, many international schools have been found to flout the official 30% quota on South Korean enrolments. Table 1 provides data on South Koreans enrolled at major English-medium international schools in the Seoul Metropolitan area as of March, 2011 (with the school names replaced by A, B, C, etc., with the exception of SFS, already mentioned on more than one occasion, and with the ‘violating’ schools and their enrolment data in shaded areas). 8

Why do wealthy South Koreans choose to send their children to English-medium international schools, in some cases, by using even dubious or unethical means? While multiple answers to this question may be possible, this section will argue that the decision to enrol children at international schools is, in essence, classed. In other words, international schools are elite-class reproducing institutions, because they are drawn upon exclusively by the privileged classes in (re)drawing and protecting what Ball (2003, 8) calls ‘the borderlines of class’. Moreover, the non-privileged classes are well aware of this function of international schools. While not the only basis of analysis (e.g., Pakulski and Waters 1996), class is put forth here as the ‘bottom line’, as it were, to the issue of (educational) inequalities (Ball 2003, 17). In order to
support this class-based analysis, the ensuing discussion will make use of news articles, Internet postings and blogs selected from the material collected for the purposes of the present article.

In South Korea, the education market has over the decades become a very, if not the most, important locus of class struggle (cf. Bourdieu and Boltanski 2000; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Education, ‘as a field of distinctions and identities’, plays a crucial role ‘in changing and reproducing the borderlines of class and distributing unevenly and unequally forms of social and cultural capital’ (Ball 2003, 8). Thus, access to elite education (i.e., economic capital) leads to highly sought-after academic credentials (i.e., cultural capital) and participation in powerful networks (i.e., social capital), which can both be utilised to reproduce or increase economic capital and so on. The role of education in capital reconversion is identified in one blogger’s comment:

Education is an important strategy for eliminating social polarisation and terminating the inheritance of poverty. The new government [i.e. that of the President Lee Myung-Bak] must make every effort to ensure that no one be excluded from education because of poverty [instead of doing what it has proposed to do, e.g. opening the education market to private providers or relegating education to a consumer choice]. [translation by JJS] (Source: http://blog.daum.net/hjh042/15606692)

Note that what the blogger implies here is that education is also an important strategy in creating or maintaining social polarisation and the inheritance of poverty (‘no one be excluded from education because of poverty’).

Evidence for the class struggle in South Korea’s education market comes from the fact that an enormous amount of money (and time) is invested in

Table 1. Enrolment composition at major international schools in Seoul.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>International schools</th>
<th>Total student no. (X)</th>
<th>Foreign nationals</th>
<th>South Korean nationals (Y)</th>
<th>Ratio of Y/X (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SFS</td>
<td>1481</td>
<td>1478</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>842</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>40.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>49.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>90.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>71.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education, as reported by Dong-A Ilbo, 12 April 2011.
children’s education. While South Korea’s state expenditure on education accounts for about 4% of the gross national product (GNP), the actual costs are considerably higher, when private tutoring is taken into consideration, i.e., 12% or up to 15% of the GNP (Seth 2002, 187; Sorensen 1994, 22). In fact, as much as 30% of total household income is estimated to be spent on education (Seth 2002, 184, 187). Indeed, South Korea spends a larger share of its income on education than any other nation in the world (Seth 2002, 5). Thus, it does not come as a surprise that the retention rates from primary to middle school and from middle to high school are nearly 100%, and around 80% of high school graduates proceed to undertake tertiary education (MEST and KEDI 2010, 13). South Korean parents rationalise this high level of investment in their children’s education (in particular, private tutoring) by saying that it is their responsibility to maximise their children’s chances of gaining access to elite universities. This is perfectly understandable, ‘[g]iven the fact that elite higher education is perceived to have great returns’ (Kim and Lee 2010, 262), and in South Korea elite higher education does indeed produce great returns (e.g., Lee and Brinton 1996). What parental responsibility has also given rise to is fierce competition in the education market as well as what Kim and Lee (2010, 262) refer to as the ‘rampant private tutoring’. In order to curb the demand for private tutoring and alleviate the competition for access to schools dominating admissions into elite universities, the government introduced and implemented the so-called school equalisation policy in the 1970s and 1980s, initially at the primary level and subsequently at the secondary level – i.e., the elimination of competitive entrance exams and the random allocation of students within their school zones (Kim and Lee 2010, 264–5).9 However, the school equalisation policy has merely intensified the already fierce competition in the education market and the level of private tutoring (Kim and Lee 2010, 265–8); South Korean parents have always been keen to mobilise additional resources to ‘fill in for the shortcomings of school provisions and ensure a surplus of performance which distinguishes [their children] from others’ (Ball 2003, 95), because ‘ability or talent is itself the product of an investment of time and cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1986, 244). In this kind of positional competition, not unexpectedly, it is the privileged classes that outmanoeuvre the other classes owing to their superior resources or strategies. The failure of the government’s school equalisation policy and its aftermath are commented on in the following Internet posting:

The only way [to tackle educational inequality] is to revoke the school equalisation policy. Do you think this will create educational inequality? If so, do you think the current system is fair? The school equalisation policy can only increase educational inequality. In the past [when schools were ranked and students had to sit competitive entrance examinations], children from poor families could gain access to elite universities provided they entered good middle or high schools [on the basis of their ability or talent]. Now that is impossible unless they receive an enormous amount of private tutoring or even early...
overseas education. [...] The school equalisation policy does not lead to educational equality. What it does is to conceal inequality. Hidden inequality is inequality of even greater magnitude, and it smashes children’s souls, personalities and self-awareness. [translation by JJS] (Source: http://www.newdaily.co.kr/news/article_print.html?no=105814)

Ironically, however, this intensification of positional competition has also made it increasingly difficult for children from the privileged classes to outperform those from the other classes, ‘[b]ecause private tutoring is more accessible to households that are willing and able to pay for it’ (Kim and Lee 2010, 263). Note that private tutoring is ‘more accessible’, not because it has become more affordable, but because there is no shortage of South Koreans willing to pay for it, even by making enormous financial sacrifices (e.g., selling homes or taking out loans). In South Korea, private tutoring is not something that only the wealthy can purchase but rather something that even low-income families are prepared to invest in, the difference being the quality and cost of the private tutoring purchased (e.g., English-language instruction with South Korean teachers or native English-speaking teachers). What this entails is that there may be ‘no certainties of a smooth and uneventful process of social reproduction’ (Ball 2003, 149). In other words, the intergenerational transmission of class position is far from automatic. South Korea’s high participation in tertiary education – e.g., with just over 3.6 million tertiary students in 2010 (MEST and KEDI 2010, 31) – is bound to cause what Bourdieu (1988), 163) calls ‘a generalized downclassing’. This is known to be ‘particularly intolerable for the more privileged’ (Bourdieu 1988, 163). The generalised downclassing motivates the privileged classes to work even harder ‘to dispute the process of the weakening of classification or to assert the need for stronger classifications’ (Ball 2003, 77; cf. Bourdieu [1986, 479–81] on ‘the classification struggle’). Indeed, ‘[t]he response of [wealthy South Koreans] to the increase in insecurity and risk involved in their established strategies of reproduction has been an [even greater] intensification of positional competition’ (Ball 2003, 20). Thus, wealthy South Koreans develop or discover new or different ways to stake claims to elite education and career opportunities for their offspring. For instance, South Korean private schools, whether existing or newly developed, may not necessarily meet their ‘need for stronger classification’ in the context of a globalising world. What the privileged classes want is a type of school education that offers globally recognised academic qualifications that ‘maintain a level playing field beyond [South Korea’s] national boundaries’ (Brown 2000, 645–6). Equally importantly, access to this type of school education should also be so limited that the non-privileged classes are precluded from taking advantage of it and thus from challenging the position of the privileged classes in South Korean society.

English-medium international schools provide the kind of education that the globalised world seems to demand (producing an English-speaking,
globally competitive workforce). In South Korea, the privileged few purchase English-medium education from international schools with the understanding that what they purchase will prepare their offspring well, or at least better than Korean-medium education, for career opportunities in the global economy. Thus, the recent large increase in the number of international schools in South Korea can be best explained as ‘a response by local elites to a stiffening of the local positional competition on the one hand and a globalisation of that competition on the other’ (Lowe 2000, 24), and also as the government, in turn, meeting the social elites’ educational demand. Moreover, English-medium international schools provide the kind of education that is beyond the means of the majority of South Koreans – e.g., international school tuition fees being 45 times as high as local school tuition fees (The Naeil News, 27 September 2011). The role of economic capital in this newly developed strategy of reproduction is not lost sight of in the following blog and newspaper column:

The majority of [South Koreans] worry about high tuition fees. There is no hope that they will go down. This is because there are people who want tuition fees to stay high. [. . .] The wealthy are in favour of high tuition fees. Astronomically high tuition fees are a very efficient way of excluding have-nots from competition. [translation by JJS] (Source: http://blog.daum.net/chamjisa/3329)

Foreign schools are all lies. They don’t separate South Koreans from foreigners. Instead, [they] have the function of separating the wealthy few from the masses in South Korea. There is one thing that cannot be the same [between the wealthy and the rest], even if the academic qualifications from [South Korean] and international schools are recognized as equivalent. It is MONEY. [emphasis original; translation by JJS] (Source: Taycapo Internet News, 3 July 2012)

To wit, English-medium international schools have presented themselves to South Korea’s privileged classes as an optimal solution to the latter’s need to ensure social reproduction, closure and exclusion in the age of globalisation.

Moreover, the South Korean government’s decision to allow international schools to accept South Korean nationals can be seen as a policy to give the elite classes an opportunity to exercise their market power effectively – that is, to the exclusion of the other classes (e.g., Ball 2003, 18). This is precisely how one blogger interprets the decision in question:

That is, [the government’s new policy on foreign schools] is intended to relax the [legal] conditions on the privileged classes sending their children to foreign schools, and to give local private providers an opportunity to create ‘exclusive schools’ for the privileged classes or ‘noble-class schools’. In the final analysis, this new policy on foreign schools is just another educational policy that President Lee Myung-Bak’s government has formulated and implemented solely for the benefit of the privileged few. [translation by JJS] (Source: http://blog.daum.net/ccdm1984/170443782)
The neoliberal government of the day has painted its new policy on foreign schools as nothing more than a consumer choice, embedded within its master plan to upgrade the country’s service industry to the highest standards. More than three decades ago, Parkin (1979, 47) described what he called the ‘permanent tension’ between ‘the preservation of openness of access’ (to educational opportunities, for instance) and ‘the desire to reproduce itself socially by resort to closure’. As Parkin (1979, 66) went on to point out, there is ‘nothing reprehensible in exclusionary closure per se, provided that it is grounded in a genuine and uncompromising individualism [...]’. Thus, consumer choice presents itself as a good justification for opening the local education market to international schools, and this has been promoted by the government as the rationale for its policy decision or for the strengthening of consumer-centred competitiveness as the core of its overall education policy.

True, it is an individual choice whether to send children to South Korean or international schools. However, the reality, ‘cloaked by the celebration of individual responsibility embedded in choice policies’ (Ball 2003, 54), is that only a small number of South Koreans can afford to pay the high tuition fees demanded by international schools, as one newspaper commentator writes:

This [i.e. the government’s new policy on international schools] means that if you want to free your child from the ‘hellish’ national education system, you should be able to spend one hundred million won [about US$88,000] to purchase a ticket [to an international school] (three years of early overseas education + tuition fees). [Ordinary South Koreans], who do not have that kind of money, have no option but to send their children to ‘hellish’ local schools. International schools will transform [South Korea] into a nation where education functions as a device for discriminating children [on the basis of their parents’ (lack of) wealth]. [translation by JJS] (Source: Taycapo Internet News, 3 July 2012)

Purchasing a ‘ticket’ to an international school may be as much a consumer choice as purchasing a movie ticket, but when the price for the first ticket is beyond the means of the majority of South Koreans, it is not much of a choice.

**Conclusion**

In South Korea, English-medium international schools, albeit initially established in order to provide school education to foreign residents, have recently transformed themselves into private providers of global education for South Koreans. The South Korean government regards international schools as ‘a free market response to a global need’ (Pearce 1994, 28), whereas wealthy South Koreans recognise them as a consumption option in education, namely, locally available English-medium education that trains their children to acquire requisite skills for the increasingly globalised labour market, and as a much less costly and safer alternative to early overseas education in English-speaking...
Western countries. Ordinary South Koreans, in contrast, view this commodification of education as yet another manifestation of the rapidly widening schism between themselves and the privileged members of the society, mediated by government policies. In South Korea, English-medium international schools have become exclusive schools for the privileged classes. Not surprisingly, English-medium international schools have come to be popularly known as *kwuicok hakkyo* ‘schools for the noble class’. This name captures well what Schugurensky and Davidson-Harden (2003, 339) call ‘social polarisation in access to education’. Indeed, the social polarisation that international schools would inflict on the South Korean education system and on South Korean society at large was forewarned about in one newspaper column that appeared in anticipation of the 2009 Presidential Decree on Foreign Schools:

[...] They [i.e. President Lee Myung-Bak’s government] tell us [i.e. South Koreans] that we need foreign schools. But [they also say that] these schools can be attended by South Koreans. This is the point where the national education system begins to go belly-up. Why do South Koreans go to foreign schools? [...] This idea [i.e. the deregulation of international schools] is for those who can afford to go to the USA and pay high tuition fees [for their children]. This amounts to the segregation of the [privileged few] and ordinary South Koreans. [...] The children [from wealthy families] will receive ‘special education’ while the children [from ordinary families] will become fools stressed out by the examination-based school education and completely overwhelmed by competition. Moreover, their [international school] qualifications will be recognised. What’s next? It will be easier for them [i.e. South Korean graduates of international schools] to get into top universities under the special admissions category because of their English-language competence. [...] Public education is basically the nation’s universal education. If the rich and the poor begin to receive different kinds of education, universal education will disappear into oblivion. The society will be dominated by the noble class. The day when international schools [that accept South Korean students] become a reality, as President Lee’s government has proposed, will be the day when they will become the detonator of the bomb that shakes South Korea’s national education at its roots. [translation by JJS] (Source: Taycapo Internet News, 30 April 2008)

The present article has put forth a class-based analysis of South Korea’s English-medium international schools, validating the view that the education market is a very important locus of class struggle (Bourdieu and Boltanski 2000). The privileged classes (need to) develop new strategies or recruit additional resources in order to reproduce or enhance their advantage over the other classes, because ‘social reproduction is a risky business’ (Ball 2003, 149). To wit, the privileged classes have to up the ante when it comes to social reproduction, but, unlike the non-privileged classes, they have the resources to do just that. One of the latest class strategies adopted by South Korea’s privileged few involves English-medium international schools, which have
restrictive admission criteria and demand very high tuition fees. While the privileged few have the means to allow their children to satisfy these requirements, the majority of South Koreans are excluded from considering English-medium international schools as a consumer choice, which the current neoliberal government claims it to be. South Korea’s English-medium international schools are nothing more or less than elite-class reproducing institutions, masqueraded as a ‘consumption option, one that is consistent with class position and the status oriented consumption strategies thought necessary to succeed in maintaining class position’ (Neubauer 2008, 43).

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Notes
1. The well-known Digital Divide is another such imperative (Neubauer 2008, 41).
2. In the school year of 2005–2006, for instance, more than 35,000 primary and secondary students are reported to have gone on early overseas education (J.-K. Park 2009, 53–5; Park and Abellmann 2004).
3. Lee and Brinton (1996) provide a brief comparison of South Korea, Japan and the USA in terms of the prestige of one’s university (education) and its socio-economic consequences, demonstrating with statistical data that ‘a university’s prestige and the social capital it generates may play an even greater role in income and social status attainment’ in South Korea than has been reported for Japan or the USA (Lee and Brinton 1996, 179). Moreover, ‘the benefits bestowed by [a degree from a first-class university] may be cumulative [and self-perpetuating]’ (Lee and Brinton 1996, 182) in that it will lead to a better-paid job and a marriage partner from a well-to-do family among other things. Many studies have shown that educational attainment is regarded as ‘the first or second factor in determining the suitability of a spouse’ (Seth 2002, 249).
4. South Korea’s top three universities are referred to collectively as SKY (i.e., Seoul National University, Korea University and Yonsei University). The metaphor invoked by this acronym could not be more revealing.
5. The South Korean government has recently begun to enforce a ‘curfew’ in a desperate attempt to curtail South Koreans’ reliance on private tutoring: students are not allowed to study at hakwén ‘private after-school academies’ after 10 pm. However, this curfew does not seem to be working, because government inspectors are sent around, after 10 pm, to crack down on hakwén schools that do not abide by the curfew rule and because even rewards are offered to people who report violators to the authorities (Time, 25 September 2011).
7. In some cases, mothers travel with their children to live abroad for early overseas education, with fathers staying behind to work in South Korea (New York Times, 8
June 2008; Korea Times, 22 February 2009) and ‘fly[ing] over the ocean seasonally to visit their families’ (Lee and Koo 2006, 534). This kind of ‘globalised’ family is popularly known in South Korea as a kileki ‘wild goose’ family, and the father of such a family as a kileki ‘wild goose’ father. For discussion of such a globalised family strategy, see Lee and Koo (2006).

8. Statistical data on South Korean enrolments at international schools are not readily available to the public. News reports indicate that statistical data such as presented in Table 1 tend to be made public by opposition members of parliament, who have the legal authority to obtain them from government departments or agencies. Moreover, International School Information (www.isi.go.kr), a public website managed by the MEST, does not provide total or foreign vs. South Korean enrolment figures for every international school.

9. From 1961 to 1993, South Korea was ruled by three generals-turned-presidents in succession. The first two each came to power by staging a military coup d’état, and the last by somewhat undemocratic means. The development and implementation of the school equalisation policy may have been motivated largely by their desire to generate public support for their regimes.

References


Dong-A Ilbo. 2011. (Swutokuen) Hankwuk haksayng-i 40% ... Oikwukin hakkyo macnayo? [(Capital city area) Korean students 40% ... Foreign schools, right?]. April 12.


Inchon News. 2011. Chengla oikwukin hakkyo, iphaksayngcwung naykwukin 59.4% [59.4% of Chengla Foreign School students are South Korean nationals]. September 26.


