# In Defiance of School Education:
## *Retrospective Narratives of the New Generation of Dropout Youths in Korea**

LEE Min-Kyung

## Abstract

*Since the mid-1990s, a new breed of school dropout cases has appeared in South Korea. The number of students leaving school of their own volition has increased in defiance of the extremely competitive school culture that is uniformly focused on preparation for the college entrance examination. In general, dropout youth are recognized as off-track individuals; these individuals, frequently labeled as troublemakers, are generally low academic achievers from low-class households. However, this new generation of dropout youth shows post-dropout learning and career trajectories that distinguish them from the earlier generation. Using a case study approach, this study aims to provide a foundation for better understanding of this new generation of dropout youth by examining their motivation to quit traditional school and their post-dropout life trajectories. In other words, this study examines what made these youth decide to quit traditional school, how they came to grips with the various structural and symbolic obstacles surrounding them, and what strategy they took for pioneering their path outside the system. By examining the positions of this new generation of dropout youth and the meaning they ascribe to choosing to drop out, this study provides possible implications for what direction school education should take in these changing times, not only in Korean society but also in other societies.*

**Keywords:** dropout youth, motivation of dropout, post-dropout trajectory, school education

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## Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, a new breed of school dropout cases has appeared in South Korea (hereafter, Korea). Previously, school dropout was mostly attributed to economic hardship or school negligence due to a lack of motivation to learn. However, since the mid-1990s, Korea has witnessed an increase in the number of youths who leave school voluntarily in defiance of the extremely competitive school culture that is uniformly focused on preparation for the college entrance examination even though most of them are from middle income families and have good academic grades (Cho-Han 1997; Chu 2003; M. Lee 2010; Park and Do 2003; Sung 2005). The formation of various forms of alternative learning spaces amidst the democratization of Korea and the subsequent relaxation of the cultural and social atmosphere, both in and outside schools, is also closely connected to this dropout trend.

Even though the dropout rate of youth in Korea is much lower than the average of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, the increase in the number of voluntary dropout youths in defiance of school education is a noteworthy phenomenon when considering the strong social and historical context of education in Korea. Since the early days of Korean modernization, an academic degree has been a major conduit for social mobility, and the competition for entrance into a prestigious university, a guarantee of such mobility, accelerated to where it became an *education war* (Abelmann 2003; J. Lee 2003; Lett 1998; Oh 2008). Koreans' educational fever is so profound that it is frequently referred to in Korea as "education hysteria" (Yim 2001). The Korean attitude toward school education has also been described as a "collective pathological phenomenon" (Yim 2001) or "South Korean melodrama" (Abelmann 2003).

However, the surge in the number of voluntary dropout youths in defiance of school education has been perceived as a symptom of a broader crisis in Korean school education, leading to widespread media reports about the *collapse of school* because the emergence of a new generation of dropout youth has served as a wake-up call to those who share the belief that something may be wrong with Korea's culture of school education.

Even though Korea shows a high enrollment in secondary education, the discourse on the crisis of school education has formed a social consensus. "Sleeping in class, learning in *hagwon* (private cram school)" is an expression that has long been used to describe the Korean education culture. The competitive educational culture in Korea has resulted in a vicious cycle of shadow education that has undermined student motivation in class, thereby bringing about the collapse of the traditional school education system (Cho-Han 2001; Sung and Lee 2014; Y. Lee 2010). In this context, the emergence of a new generation of dropout youths in defiance of school education has been perceived as an active response by students having low satisfaction with their schooling and who therefore chose to quit school rather than enduring with low motivation to learn in class (M. Lee 2010; Seo 2006).

In general, dropout youths are recognized as *off-track individuals*; these individuals, frequently labeled as troublemakers, are generally low academic achievers from low-class households. However, this new generation of dropout youths shows different motivations for dropping out, and post-dropout learning and career trajectories distinguish them from the earlier generation. Therefore, to understand dropout youths via the traditional framework is difficult since such a simple class-analysis perspective or disadvantaged teenager viewpoint is limited: thus, an alternative perspective is needed to consider this new trend.

Accordingly, using a case study approach, this study aims to expand our understanding of this new generation of voluntary dropout youths by examining their motivation to quit traditional school and their post-dropout trajectories. In other words, this study examines what made these dropout youths decide to quit traditional school, how they came to grips with the various structural and symbolic obstacles facing them, and what strategy they took to pioneer their path outside the system. By examining the positions of this new generation of dropout youths and the meaning they ascribe to choosing to drop out, this study provides possible implications for what direction school education should take in these changing times, not only in Korean society, but also in other societies.

## Review of the Literature

As a crucial issue concerning school education, school dropout as a research theme has been greatly studied at both the macro and micro levels. Many studies have been conducted in regard to the motivation for dropout, and a variety of causes have been proposed to explain this phenomenon; family, school, and peers have been the most frequently suggested determinants (Choi 2005a, 2005b; Janosz et al. 2000; Lee and Staff 2007; McNeal 1997; Stearns et al. 2007).

In general, studies on dropout youth have been based on disadvantaged teenagers who have lower school ability and/or motivation. Therefore, they have been considered as having poor academic grades, disengaging from school, adhering to deviant norms, and manifesting behavioral problems (Eckstein and Wolpin 1999; Janosz et al. 2000). Many studies focused on this angle have suggested various types of school education reform to prevent dropping out.

Korean studies also reflect this viewpoint. As mentioned previously, until the mid-1990s, the cause of suspension of school education for youth in Korea was largely attributed to individual economic hardship or school negligence. Thus, research interest in this subject was focused on inequality from a class-analysis perspective or the subject was approached from a youth deviance perspective (Choi 2005a, 2005b; Sung 2005; Yun 2002). In most cases, a correlation between school dropout and economic disadvantage was assumed. This model or perspective was useful in explaining the phenomenon of dropout youth under certain conditions. Furthermore, the correlation between poverty and dropout still exists. However, it has some limitations, most notably in understanding new patterns of school dropout, in which the dropout phenomenon has become more complex through the emergence of different motivations and post-dropout paths.

In the meantime, some studies have focused on new patterns from a different viewpoint, leading to the supposition that the observed substantial voluntary dropout rate indicates that the school system may in some way be responsible for the students' rejection of schooling (Cho-Han 1997, 2001; M. Lee 2010). In other words, this phenomenon has been accepted as

a symptom of a crisis in the overall educational system, which regiments students and puts undue emphasis on preparation for the college entrance examination. However, when it comes to shedding light on the experiences of the dropout youth, research work or literature on the subject is hard to obtain. Some studies have captured in part the daily activities and study aspirations of the new dropout youth (Lee and Park 2006; Sung 2005). Nonetheless, they mostly focus their discussions on dropout prevention and do not actively interpret the meaning of the youth's post-school learning.

Meanwhile, several studies have provided the possibility for a new understanding of the dropout trend. Focused on dropout youths' desire and motivation to learn, these studies have generally emphasized that the new dropout trend, whose position can be summarized as "school is not for me" (Kennedy and Morton 1999), should be viewed from a self-reflective perspective of reevaluating our absolute faith in the modern system of school education (Dorn 1996; Kennedy and Morton 1999; Tanner 1990; Yoneyama 1999, 2000). In particular, research into the phenomenon of school refusal in Japan provides a highly relevant framework for the examination of Korean cases (Yoneyama 1999, 2000). It is remarkable that these perspectives have reconsidered school dropout as a rebellion against the goals and values of education and therefore as a visible reminder of the failings of the modern educational system. This study shares such insight by focusing on new aspects of the phenomenon of school dropout within the Korean sociocultural context.

## The Korean Education Context and the New Generation of School Dropouts

The modern Korean education system, a hybrid of the educational systems of the United States and Japan, established the present 6-3-3-4 educational system consisting of elementary school, middle school, high school, and university. Traditionally, Korea has held education in high esteem. Since its postcolonial inception in 1945, the Korean education system has been characterized by a high degree of educational zeal and extreme competition,

leading to its massive expansion. The sharp increase in the post-independence educational level is a good indicator of the special status of education as viewed by Koreans. According to Statistics Korea, within just one decade, from 1970 to 1980, middle school enrollment increased from 50% to over 90% while high school enrollment increased from slightly less than 30% to above 60%.[1] Today, the enrollment rate at the elementary and secondary levels is nearly 100%. By 2014, 72.5% of high school students in Korea were advancing to higher education, a dramatic increase from just 27% in 1980.

In the meantime, between 1985 and 1995, the dropout figures decreased from 1.2% to 0.8% for middle school and from 3.0% to 2.1% for high school. However, after 1995, the dropout rate began to increase; in 1998, the middle school dropout rate was 1.2% and the high school dropout rate was 2.6%. Beginning in 2000, the rates gradually declined until 2006, when they again began to creep upward. In 2009, the dropout figures are 15,736 (0.8%) for middle school and 34,549 (2.4%) for high school.[2] Since 2011, the total dropout rate has slightly declined.

Even though the total dropout rate has fluctuated over the period in question, the number of voluntary dropout youth in defiance of school education has significantly increased, which implies the emergence of a new generation of school dropouts. As mentioned earlier, prior to the mid-1990s, the principal reason for Korean youths' dropping out of school was economic hardship. However, this traditional dropout path has declined gradually with the rapid economic growth of Korea. Of the dropout youth in 1992, 50.5% of those in middle school and 53.1% of those in high school left because of economic hardship. However, this rate sharply declined to 36.1% in 1996 and 24.0% in 2000 for middle school students and gradually declined to 47.0% in 1996, 37.0% in 2000, 11.6% in 2010, and only 5.2% in 2014 for high school students. In contrast, the number of voluntary dropouts who left school for alternative reasons, such as studying abroad, transferring to alternative schools, or refusing school without any explicit pur-

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1. Statistics Korea, accessed January 12, 2015, http://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtl-PageDetail.do?idx_cd=1520.
2. KESS (Korean Educational Statistics Service), accessed March 2, 2016, http://kess.kedi.re.kr/index.

pose, has increased. In 2014, 82.6% of high school dropouts left school voluntarily for an alternative choice, such as study abroad, alternative school or school refusal without any explicit purpose.[3]

This trend is *new* and significant because these recent dropouts differ from traditional dropout youth in that they dropped out by their own volition, not because of economic hardship. Furthermore, in many cases they continued their learning, taking advantage of the variety of alternative schools that have rapidly developed amidst the democratization of Korean education. In Korean society, where image and social status are determined almost exclusively according to the school from which one graduates, an academic diploma is essential. In this context, it is hard to assume that Korean students quit regular school *voluntarily*, even if they are not satisfied with their schooling, which is why the surge of voluntary dropout youth in defiance of school education has been perceived as a symptom of a broader crisis in Korean school education, leading to the supposition that substantial voluntary dropout indicates that the school itself may in some way be responsible for students' rejection of schooling.

Faced with this situation, Korea has been trying to reform its educational system in order to move away from a *one-size-fits-all* education. For example, more diverse types of high schools have been established, curricula have become more flexible, and more emphasis has been placed on extracurricular activities in order to replace rote memorization. Furthermore, the criteria for college admission have diversified with less emphasis placed on the college entrance exam.

However, educational reform in Korea based on a neoliberal focus on individual competition and accountability of schools has not alleviated the negative effects of high pressure in education culture (Y. Lee 2010). Rather, reinforcing competition within neoliberal reform has resulted in a vicious cycle of shadow education, lowering student motivation in the classroom

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3. KESS, accessed March 2, 2016, http://kess.kedi.re.kr/index. According to another source of high school dropout youths, 85.3% in 2013 and 88.99% in 2014 left school voluntarily due to school-related factors, such as maladjustment or opting for alternative learning; and Ministry of Education, accessed May 1, 2016, http://www.moe.go.kr/web/106888/ko/board/view.do?bbsId=339&boardSeq=56566.

and exacerbating the public's dissatisfaction with the overall education system (Y. Lee 2010). For example, the international PISA results have evidenced Korean students' attitudes toward schooling. It turns out that Korean students derive less pleasure from learning; they have much less interest in and motivation for learning than the average student across OECD countries. In particular, Korea was ranked lowest in school satisfaction and student happiness at school, even though Korean students maintained their strong performance in mathematics, reading, and science (OECD 2013). Notably, a recent survey of Koreans' attitudes toward schooling reported that only 49% responded positively about being satisfied with the education provided in school (KEDI 2014). Consequently, a new trend of school dropout has emerged in the flexible and diversified yet hierarchical school system where a highly competitive school culture still prevails.

In the meantime, being a dropout carries with it the negative connotation of *failing to keep up with schoolwork*, which may not be an appropriate description of those who choose to leave the system because of their different attitude toward learning and their future. Basically three types of dropouts appear nowadays in Korea:[4] (1) the traditional dropouts, consisting of those who simply quit learning for economic reasons or ill adjustment; (2) those who quit public schools for alternative learning, such as alternative schools or homeschooling; and (3) those who choose to go to a foreign country to further their education, preferably where English is the language of instruction. Both the first and second categories primarily apply to children from middle-to-upper class families. This article focuses on the second group and tries to find implications based on case studies.

Therefore, it may be more appropriate to refer to the youths examined in this study as "deschooling (*talhakgyo in Korean*) youth." The Korean term *talhakgyo* is composed of two words: *tal* and *hakgyo*. *Tal* means to *deviate* from certain bondage, and *hakgyo* means school. The term *talhakgyo* has been used in Korea to refer to the *new generation of voluntary dropouts* in defiance of school education in place of the term describing traditional dropouts (*hageop jungdan* or *jungdo tallak* in Korean) (Cho-Han

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4. The idea behind this paragraph comes from comments made by an anonymous reviewer.

1997, 2001; Chung and Lee 2008). The phrase *deschooling youth* or *talhakgyo* youth refer to the individuals who refuse or decline to be regular students or those who voluntarily excuse themselves from the school system to seek other learning opportunities.

This terminology differentiates these youths from *dropouts* in general because it does not presuppose the possibility of returning to school (Choi 2005a, 2005b). Furthermore, the *deschooling* (*talhakgyo*) youth in this study differ fundamentally from those with "school phobia" in Japan (Yoneyama 1999, 2000) although they may experience similar symptoms before they decide to leave a traditional school. In the explanation by Morrow (1986), these students are similar to "capable dropout" youth who have competent learning capability but leave school due to the gap between their own objectives and the demands of school.

In the meantime, for the participants of this study, leaving school itself can be considered a kind of "alternative strategy" (Camilleri et al. 1990), as opposed to simply an attempt to escape from regular school due to delinquency or incapacity to learn. In the terminology of Camilleri et al. (1990), an "alternative strategy" aims to solve a problem in a non-traditional or untypical way. According to Bourdieu (1981), who developed the term "strategies" as a means of understanding how people acted in their environment, the practice of actors is neither wholly unconscious nor simply the result of rational calculation of a conscious actor. In the case of our interviewees, the choice to leave school was governed predominantly by a conscious actor who has purposive orientation in defiance of school education for alternative learning. In this sense, the deschooling youths in this study could be said to have pursued a strategy of "non-conformity" in refusing to conform to the accepted dominant rules (Bourdieu 1981; de Gaulejac and Taboada-Léonetti 1994) because they freed themselves from mainstream strategies and chose alternative ways. Such a strategy is somewhat revolutionary in Korean society, where the school from which one graduates almost exclusively determines one's image and social status.

## Methodology

### Date Collection and Limitations

The objective of this study is to understand motivations of dropout youths to quit traditional school voluntarily and investigate their post-dropout experience. For this purpose, between 2007 and 2014, data were collected via in-depth interviews with 13 dropout youths, aged from age 19 to the early 20s, who had dropped out of school at that time of interview. Most of the interviews were conducted individually and one-on-one. In some cases, a group interview was conducted. Initially, in 2007, the participants were chosen with the help of the Seoul Municipal Alternative Education Center and a homeschooling association that introduced voluntary dropout youths to me. More cases were subsequently recruited by snowball sampling so as to interview youth with experiences as different as possible before the data analysis was conducted in 2014. Even though the dropout youths were interviewed at different times during the period of seven years, their drop-out stories are not much difference from each other.

Nonetheless, the study participants certainly do not represent the full spectrum of school dropout youth in Korea. As mentioned previously, the participants in this study tend to come from the more affluent middle class,[5] and none of them engaged in the delinquent behavior typical of those who

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5. According to one study on the middle class in Korea (Hong 2005), it is difficult to explain the middle class in East Asia, including Korea by way of a single stereotyped pattern. To define the classes of Korean society, the author offers two key criteria: objective and subjective. Income, level of education, occupation, and housing determine the objective conditions. The feeling of belonging to a social class plays the role of the subjective criterion. According to these criteria, the middle class in Korea is characterized as follows: ownership of an apartment, college graduate, and stable income for the objective criteria; and a very strong sense of belonging to the middle class for the subjective criteria. As regards our interviewees, their family background belongs by majority to the middle class according to the objective criteria. For the subjective criterion, even though no direct inquiry was made regarding the feeling of belonging to a social class in this study, more than 80% of Koreans have a sense of belonging to the middle class, regardless of objective criterion (Hong 2005).

left school due to economic or family reasons or misbehavior problems. These individuals have gone through the dropout experience and have by now carved out their own path in society. In this sense, this study reflects a sort of successful growth trajectory of voluntary dropout youths. It was expected that they would be able to reflect and provide a perspective on the meaning of their experience.

Regarding methodology, this study employed in-depth and unstructured interviews, which involved "not asking questions by items, but asking major questions to the participants and encouraging the interviewees to actively offer up their ideas and opinions" (Kaufmann 1996, 44). Based on this qualitative methodology, an attempt was made to understand the meaning they attach to learning inside or outside school, their complex strategies, the signification of their experience, and hence, the resulting implications for shaping the future of the school education system in these changing times.

Rather than being used mechanically, the interview questions were used as a guideline to keep the participants on track in order to provide them thematic questions. Interviews were conducted for about one hour and recorded with the consent of the participants. Table 1 shows the categories of the questions asked.

**Table 1.** Interview Questions

| Category | Themes |
|---|---|
| Motivation for dropping out | • Traditional school life<br>• Family background<br>• Dropout process |
| Post-dropout trajectory | • Daily activities after dropping out<br>• Post-dropout learning formation<br>• Obstacles in their own experience |
| Strategy | • Interpretation or self-evaluation of their choice and experience outside of traditional school<br>• Strategy as an outside learner |

For data analysis, various experiences narrated by the youths were cate-
gorized in accordance with common themes found among them via the
"thematic analysis" method (Paille and Mucchielli 2003). This method was
used in order to discover the major themes of the collected data; this pro-
cedure is used broadly to identify common and dominant content among a
variety of narratives. Paille and Mucchielli (2003) point out that in order for
the analysis and interpretation of individual and experiential data to acquire
validity, an understanding of the context is essential because subjective and
individual narratives can reveal their meaning only when there is a context
that binds the disparate stories together and provides a common framework
(Paille and Mucchielli 2003, 13–18; Pineau and Le Grand 2007). Accordingly,
keeping in mind the special nature of the experiences narrated, this study
pays particular attention to the individual nature of the experiences, while
at the same time linking them to the social and cultural backgrounds of the
participants in an attempt to contextualize them.

The principal properties inherent in the diverse experiences of these
individuals obviously vary according to contextual and personal factors but
nevertheless constitute a significant storyline revealing the characteristics of
this new generation of dropout. The decision to leave traditional school, the
process of entering a new environment, and the conflict and strategy in
their post-dropout trajectory are part and parcel of each of these youths'
experiences.

*General Characteristics and Types of the Thirteen Cases*

The participants in this study are categorized into two groups according to
their post-dropout trajectory: (1) those who primarily attended an alterna-
tive school; and (2) those who did not regularly attend any alternative
school but used their homes as base camps, choosing to study independent-
ly, that is to say *homeschoolers*. Dividing the 13 participants neatly into these
two uniform categories was difficult because even the participants who
studied independently with home as a base camp also made much use of
alternative schools, despite the irregularity of their physical presence there.

In the meantime, all of the study participants share a collective and

**Table 2.** Dropout Youth Participants in the Study

| Name | Age | Sex | Trajectory after post-dropout learning | Presence in alternative school | Socioeconomic & academic background |
|------|-----|-----|------|------|------|
| Byeong-gi | 21 | M | Entered a college abroad | Yes | Middle class, dropped out in high school (GED)* |
| Da-rae | 19 | F | Entered a college in Korea | Yes | Middle class, dropped out in high school (GED) |
| Won-hui | 21 | F | Had a job (Working as a film director) | Yes | Middle class, dropped out in high school |
| Yu-bin | 19 | F | Had a job (Member of an artistic performance group) | Yes | Middle class, dropped out in high school |
| Sin-yeong | 22 | M | Had a job (Independent writer and cultural planner) | Yes | Middle class, dropped out in high school |
| Je-il | 23 | M | Had a job (Independent cultural planner) | Yes | Popular class, dropped out in high school |
| Yeo-jin | 19 | F | Entered a college in Korea | Home schooling | Middle class, dropped out in high school (GED) |
| Hui-seong | 20 | M | Entered a college in Korea | Home schooling | Middle class, dropped out in middle school (GED) |
| Yeo-hun | 18 | M | Entered a college in Korea | Home schooling | Middle class, dropped out in middle school (GED) |
| So-ri | 19 | F | Entered a college in Korea | Home schooling | Middle class, dropped out in high school (GED) |
| Eun-su | 20 | F | Entered a college in Korea | Home schooling | Middle class, dropped out in middle school (GED) |
| Hyeong-in | 18 | M | Entered a college in Korea | Home schooling | Middle class, dropped out in middle school (GED) |
| Jin-gyeong | 21 | F | Entered a college in Korea | Home schooling | Popular class, dropped out in high school (GED) |

*GED test: *geomjeong gosi* in Korean. Homeschooling and alternative schools are not considered legitimate, so all children receiving alternative education have to take the Korean GED test as a minimum requirement to apply for higher education.

objective trajectory such that they have common features like having dropped out of school and taking a distinct path from other non-dropout youths or traditional dropout youths. However, at the individual level, they also manifest personal and subjective trajectories that reveal different individual contexts. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of the subjects.

## Motivation for and Process of Dropping Out

*Escaping from Repression and Competition*

The phenomenon of youth dropping out of school voluntarily is significant in indicating an *escape* from the hierarchical school culture and competitive school environment where *repression* and *competition* prevail. The competition for entrance into prestigious colleges has accelerated since the 1998 financial crisis, and the resulting reinforcement of competitive school environments may have contributed to the increased frustration among students (M. Lee 2007). The following statements illustrate such cases:

> Everyone was becoming a machine, adapting themselves to the rules laid out for them at home, at school, and in society. I felt suffocated, and I needed space to breathe. . . . A friend said to me, "If you die, my ranking would at least go up one notch." I then lost completely any emotional attachment I might have had to the school until then (Hui-seong).

> I expected to experience a more liberal and autonomous school life when I was admitted to a foreign language high school. However, there was no difference. Rather, I felt more suffocated by the competitive atmosphere at school, which was highly focused on the preparation for prestigious universities. I thought that kind of learning was not educational (Byeong-gi).

The above narratives describing the reasons for quitting school indicate that leaving school is a process of confronting and making decisions about conflicts in a person's life. Hui-seong was unable to endure the breakdown of relations that had been caused by profound competition, which was so

extreme that the death of a friend would be primarily interpreted as an opportunity to "move up one notch" in the grade hierarchy, and the normative atmosphere of the school, which focused exclusively on college entrance. Hui-seong's case illustrates that dropping out is a form of resistance or an attempt to escape the hardship one faces in the intensely competitive education system. In particular, Hui-seong's narrative reflects the situation of Korean education, as described in PISA 2012, which shows the difficulty that Korean students experience to make friends at school (OECD 2013).

Byeong-gi's case is similar to that of Hui-seong. He was a high academic performer when he was a student in middle school and then succeeded to enter a foreign language high school, ranked highly as an elite school in Korea. As shown in the narrative, however, he finally dropped out to flee the competitive school culture. Such narratives indicate that traditional school experience continues to be a traumatic one and their dropping out was an escape from this competitive and regimented school culture. In this sense, their motivation reflects a kind of challenge against the dominant ideology that conditions their lives in which they function as conscious actors (Bourdieu 1981).

### Searching for Their Own Orientation

The uniformity of the Korean school system and the regimentation of students are the main reasons for the study participants dropping out, revealing that they did not have the opportunity to follow their own desires. As mentioned earlier, a *one-size-fits-all* school education system focused on the university entrance exam results in a lack of diverse curricula and individualized learning support capable of reflecting the interests and desires of students. Despite Korea's effort to reform its educational system and move away from the concept of *one-size-fits-all* education, the neoliberal approach taken that focuses on individual competition and accountability of the school has not alleviated the high pressure in education culture and has failed to provide school education that takes into consideration the students' talents, desires or academic development (Kim and Kim 2011). The following statements illustrate this condition:

> I was interested in making films, so I wanted to become a movie director. However, I couldn't find a way to orient myself in regular school. Perhaps I could have investigated this possibility after graduating from high school, but I didn't want to waste my time learning things irrelevant to my purpose just in order to enter university. Therefore, I decided to drop out (Won-hui).

> It is difficult to say in a few words why I dropped out of regular school. For me, it was very tough to obey the teacher because I couldn't put up with their control. . . . What was more difficult for me was that there was no time to sincerely think about my future. I was burned out studying at school from 5 a.m. to 12 a.m. I often thought that I was spending my time at school learning something insignificant by rote. I really wanted to have time to think by myself about my future (Jin-gyeong).

Won-hui was frustrated with school education and its focus on college entrance examinations and good grades; her passion was for movies. She aggressively evaluated her options on her own and fought hard to persuade her parents; only after this process was she allowed to drop out. Jin-gyeong's case was similar to that of Won-hui. She decided to drop out of traditional school to avoid the regimented, lock-step structure of the school system, which is based largely on testing and rote memorization. These narratives of dropout youths show that dropping out is a process of confronting and making decisions about conflicts between the extremely competitive, exam-oriented school environment and their desire to pursue their own interests. In this regard, dropping out itself is a process through which youths who have had enough of the extremely demanding and alienating school system attempt to empower themselves by pursuing subjectivity in Korean society.

Interestingly, most of the participants went through a long period of wanting to but not actually quitting school, because of parental opposition. In these cases, many of them first found alternative schools on their own and then succeeded in persuading their parents.

> I wanted to quit school, but my parents were strongly against the idea. So I looked for opportunities to do what I wanted to do outside of the school, while still going to school, and eventually I persuaded my parents,

and I quit (Da-rae).

My grades were not so bad. But for me, school was not where I would find fond memories. . . . For three months before we made the decision, the psychological instability and worries about the future that my family went through were enormous (So-ri).

The participants in this study tended to come from the more affluent middle class. In these middle-class families, the children's education is under the expert planning and management of mothers having the universal goal of ensuring that the children enter a prestigious university (J. Lee 2003; M. Lee 2007; Oh 2008). Furthermore, to these parents, a good college alumni association is the most crucial component of the legacy parents can leave behind for their children (Lett 1998; M. Lee 2007).[6] Therefore, quitting school and not being on the normal track to earn a school diploma can only mean deviation from necessary competition and certain failure. Given this social context, dropping out of school certainly entails conflict with one's parents.

As these narratives illustrate, the decision to leave school is usually a long and painstakingly drawn-out process of persuading and negotiating with people around them, in particular family members. In cultures like that of Korea, where family cohesion is very strong, an adolescent making a decision alone is nearly impossible, especially on an issue as important as quitting school, without resorting to running away from home or taking other drastic measures to sever ties with the family.

## Post-Dropout Experience: Exclusion and Strategy

*The Obstacles and Conflicts in the Post-Dropout Trajectory*

School dropout youth must pioneer a life course distinct from their non-

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6. The so-called *education poor* has been coined as a new term, referring to Korean parents who go through financial hardship because of overspending on their children's private education.

dropout peers while at the same time going through adolescence a period in the life cycle in which youth experience rapid physical and emotional changes. The obstacles faced by dropout youth can be categorized into internal elements, such as enervation and emotional slumps, and external elements, such as the jaundiced attitudes of the people around them and lack of resources. The following narratives illustrate the difficulties that the dropout youth face in their post-dropout period.

> I didn't know what to do and was surprised to find that I had so much time on my hands. I didn't know how to have a good time even though I wanted to. Immediately after dropping out, I didn't know anybody, and I didn't know how to do anything (Eun-su).

> I thought that once I quit school I would become such a well-disciplined person that I would manage my daily activities well; that I would be completely free yet disciplined; that I would be diligent in looking for what I wanted to pursue immediately. But for the first month or two, I gnawed away at my time at home in front of the computer, the TV, and reading books (Hyeong-in).

> I planned that I would take and pass the GED test immediately after dropping out of school. For the first year while I was preparing to take the test, my daily schedule was relatively regular, thanks to my concrete goal. Problems emerged after I passed the test. I didn't have any concrete goal any more, and I didn't know what to do next. . . . The future was uncertain, and each day was too long (So-ri).

Most of the 13 study participants showed a strong desire for learning outside regular school, but at the same time, they also experienced a loss of direction and an emotional slump due to psychological burdens. Eun-su and Hyeong-in confessed to experiencing such internal struggle during their post-dropout period. Their narratives show that the post-dropout period was a time in which their fantasy was shattered and reality set in. In particular, Hyeong-in's narrative illustrates that his dropout identity did not sink in for him, and he had difficulty in managing his time in a disciplined way on his own and confessed that in the beginning he was enervated for a

while. So-ri dropped out of school to acquire different experiences outside of school and to study more efficiently than in school. However, once she passed the GED test, she "didn't know what to do" with the free time she had; she confessed that she experienced a slump, due to the sense of burden and insecurity about her decision to quit traditional school. Thus, it is easily observed how the youth respond when they feel the burden of their decision; they made a decision different from their non-dropout peers and consider their desire to *prove* themselves to have failed.

In the meantime, in the case of youths who attend an alternative school immediately following their dropping out, a relatively stable *landing* and a relative absence of some of the early conflicts that other dropouts show is initially manifest. Won-hui, Da-rae, Byeong-gi, Je-il, and Sin-yeong belong to this category. However, even in the cases of this category, in time and without exception, they all feel uncertain about their *abnormal* choice, alienated in their solitude, and burdened by the uncertainty of their future. Their narratives show that their aspiration to maintain the identity of a learner largely influenced their decision to enter alternative schools, whereas the lack of reliable information functioned as a barrier to participation.

Though different in timing, this experience of an emotional and psychological slump is a common thread among all 13 participants. In the case of Won-hui, she went to an alternative school immediately after quitting her traditional school and immersed herself in learning the art of filmmaking. She has since made her own short film and debuted as a film director. However, she confessed she feels structural alienation—burdened, lonely, and unstable about having to take responsibility all by herself. Because she has to make all decisions on her own, and because she alone is responsible for everything she does, she said she "gets mentally tired very quickly" (Won-hui).

If insecurity and a lack of self-discipline were internal obstacles that dropout youth had to overcome, social prejudices and public disdain were the biggest external obstacles they faced. Although the Korean public's recognition of alternative education has been changing superficially in some social circles, the stigma remains strong in Korean society.

> Some people think I dropped out of school because I lacked persever-
> ance, and others couldn't understand my parents allowing me to quit
> school. There were times when I felt uncomfortable going out and about
> during regular school hours, because there are people who cast a suspi-
> cious eye on young people like me for not being in school during school
> hours, even though I was doing nothing wrong (Yeo-jin).

> Life after dropping out was not easy. I could not get the benefit of being a
> regular school student. I felt completely excluded by society. . . . What
> was more embarrassing, I didn't have anyone to rely on. And it was not
> easy to get information on how to manage my post-dropout learning
> (Jin-gyeong).

These narratives show that these youth were painfully aware of the homog-
enized prism through which people looked at them, and this social disdain
emerged as a new form of repression and exclusion for them. If listlessness
resulted in *gnawing away at time,* public disdain and the psychological bur-
den caused by it resulted in gnawing away at their own self-pride.

Meanwhile, the fact that they are dropouts does not alone grant that
they are *socially excluded*, given that they themselves made the choice. Fur-
thermore, the concept of social exclusion can be controversial in terms of
establishing the criteria and scope of the category. However, the various
issues of minority groups in society are not articulated by traditional ap-
proaches, such as class analysis (MacDonald and Marsh 2005). Under these
circumstances, school dropout youths have no status in society, as opposed
to their peers inside the established school system, and they can therefore
be included within the category of social and structural exclusion. More-
over, school dropout youths face prejudices, such as being abnormal and
*special cases*, and suffer tangible and intangible exclusions. These exclusion-
ary mechanisms contribute to the double-marginalized status of dropout
youth in Korea.

In particular, the human question of belonging can be understood as a
means of legitimacy and social recognition (Loader 2006). When an indi-
vidual cannot find a place for him or herself, it means "social and psycho-
logical death" for the individual involved (de Gaulejac 1996). Thus, the

resulting social disdain often imparts an identity crisis to the youth. The narratives of the youths interviewed reveal, without exception, that social prejudice against school dropout youth acted as a visible and invisible form of violence against them. The narratives of Yeo-jin and Jin-gyeong exemplify such situations. The current social structure and culture oriented toward *school students* serve as social and symbolic exclusionary mechanisms that omit the dropout youth directly or indirectly.

### Strategies for Dropouts: Empowering Themselves or Negotiating with Reality

As previously mentioned, the participants dropped out of school voluntarily to refuse the *one-size-fits-all* curriculum geared for students to pass the college entrance examination in Korea. Even though the 13 participants exhibited different post-dropout trajectories, especially due to their personal and familial resources, most of them faced direct and indirect restrictions as they struggled to take charge of their lives at all levels and in all directions. In the process, they also identified social exclusionary mechanisms and went through a process of *objectification*, in which they examined their position in life from a distance; finally, they found a strategy of their own to carve out their own places. Their coping strategies and learning paths have the following two elements: self-empowerment by searching for their own path and (or) negotiation with reality. The following narratives illustrate the former case:

> I was uncomfortable being called a dropout youth, and I don't think that the term *homeschooler* can define an outside school learner like me. I did not study at home. So, I could not accept that these notions were adequate to identify myself and my friends who dropped out voluntarily. This is why we named ourselves road schoolers. That sounds more liberal and powerful (Jin-gyeong).

> Whether you are in school or not, the question of what you experience as an individual and how you live your life remains. Broadly speaking, there is not much difference. . . . I made a decision on how I want to live and, since then, I've got a lot more diverse things to do and I have become freer (Je-il).

The narratives of the participants attest that overcoming insecurity and confusion in the wake of dropping out of school was a process of learning how to be self-responsible, and that the major difficulty they faced was not unlimited freedom to use their time any way they could once freed from the repressive school system. Jin-gyeong's narrative is interesting in that she tried to distinguish her position from social prejudice by renaming it. Very often, naming is crucial because it enables "social representation" (Moscovici 1994). Jin-gyeong's discomfort with being called a *dropout youth* is based on her perception that dropout youth are marginalized in Korean society.

In addition to self-empowerment and strategies to avoid marginalization, after their post-dropout studies, whether in alternative school or homeschooling, the youths followed one of the following two paths: reentering the established educational system by being admitted into a college either in Korea or abroad after taking the appropriate qualification test, or working as a freelancer in the cultural industry, such as an independent filmmaker or a performance artist. Of the 13 participants interviewed, nine followed the first path and four the second. The four participants who did not go to college built up their experience and career independently in the field of arts and culture as they sought to establish their life courses while staying in the informal service sector to develop their professional careers. Sin-yeong, Je-il, Yu-bin, and Won-hui belong in this category. Je-il chose to work as an events planner, which he says would give him economic independence and the satisfaction of doing what he enjoys. He says that he has become freer since having made the decision. Sin-yeong works at a jazz bar to make ends meet while her day job is magazine planning. Yu-bin is a member of a performing arts group. Won-hui is an independent filmmaker. All of them share a similar sentiment with Je-il.

Notably, reentering the establishment or attending college in Korea or abroad is the main strategy to relieve their anxiety about lacking social recognition. The following narratives show why they reentered an established educational institution, like a university:

> I enjoyed my life outside school. However, I experienced discrimination
> because I don't have any institutional identification. I worked as a part-

time photographer, but I could not be respected as a professional. So I decided to enter the university to get a diploma for my professional life (Jin-gyeong).

I thought about it a lot. I left school and acquired social experience that the school could not have afforded me. But still, my experience was very limited. I left school because I thought school was absurd. But once I left school, I saw that the world outside of school was even more absurd. I did not need a college diploma, but I needed a place to study and think anew (Yeo-hun).

Jin-gyeong's narrative illustrates that her choice to enter university is a sort of *pragmatic strategy,* a combination of strategic choice and pragmatic response, defined as a "coincidence of varying interests" for her career (Lucas and Ralston 1996). However, reentry into the established system means more than a simple return to the *fold* of mainstream education; for them it means another step in seeking a new path. Yeo-hun's choice also illustrates this perspective.

In summary, all human beings employ *strategies* to carve out their place in a given condition (Charlot 1997; de Gaulejac and Taboada-Léonetti 1994). One can assume that school dropout youth in Korea, while facing conflicts of double-marginalization in society despite having chosen their paths, also employ unique strategies to carve out their positions in society, coming to grips with their situation and using available resources (Camilleri et al. 1990, 31; de Gaulejac and Taboada-Léonetti 1994). Consequently, we can understand the strategies of dropout youth in this context.

## Discussion and Implications

This study provides significant evidence about why Korean students choose to quit traditional school voluntarily and how they pioneer their path outside the system. The new generation of dropout youth in the current study has in most cases successfully continued their learning, taking advantage of a variety of learning opportunities, such as alternative schools or home-

schooling, even though they went through a process of struggling with symbolic and social exclusions. Through self-reflection, and by mobilizing various tangible and intangible resources available to them, they employed strategies of their own to deal with the exclusion as they sought paths of learning and growth outside of the established school system. Thus, their growth paths can be summarized as a process of building their own networks and living an equal life to their peers through a variety of human relations and experiences. Thus, their experiences illustrate the formless learning that takes place through experiential learning (Han 2001, 142). Furthermore, the interpretation of leaving school as a voluntary decision led them to empower themselves from the dominant social perceptions applied to them. In doing so, they challenge dominant ideologies as conscious actors undergoing a constant struggle with the social and political ideologies that condition their lives (Bourdieu 1981). In this sense, one might say that they experience a certain transformation of the subject through outside learning experience.

Accordingly, the trajectories glimpsed herein provide us with a new perspective for understanding the voluntary dropout youth in defiance of school in Korean society. One might surmise that the new generation of voluntary dropout youth is in fact "epochal beings" who "bear with their bare existence the brunt of a society that is maladjusted" (Cho-Han 1997, 2001). Therefore, a self-reflective perspective needs to be used to reevaluate the absolute faith in the modern system of school education (Dorn 1996; Kennedy and Morton 1999; Tanner 1990; Yoneyama 1999, 2000).

Notwithstanding some limitations, such as sample size, lack of variety in interviewees' family backgrounds, and the representativeness of dropout youth, voluntary dropout youths in this study present some significant implications about the new pattern of dropouts, not only in Korean education culture, but also in many other countries. Many studies have proposed that students reject school because of the meaning of education for them within their own society (Chiland and Young 1990; Morrow 1986; Yoneyama 2000). Therefore, school dropout patterns vary according to similarities or differences in cultures compared. Thus, the voluntary dropout youth cases in this study are unique, indicating the emergence of a new model of

the school dropout in the Korean social and cultural context. Nonetheless, this study raises some important implications for what direction school education should follow or how to redefine learning in these changing times, not only in Korean society but also in other societies. Based on the study findings, the following implications are presented:

First, the interviewees' narratives urge restructuring the role of *school education* in the challenging modern paradigm of school education. The cases detailed suggest that the existing school system may be incapable of providing the best possible education for some (or even most) individuals. The modern school system based on *one-size-fits-all* education is like a factory system that has played a key role in providing successful human resources to modern society. However, new challenges have revealed its problems and limitations. Postmodern discourse on education, which criticizes the standard educational system of modern industrial society, is related to this dilemma (Morin 1992, 2000; Touraine 1992). These perspectives have reconsidered the phenomenon of *deschooling* as a visible reminder of the failings of modern education. Therefore, alternative perspectives are needed to establish student-centered education to meet various needs of youth.

Second, the post-dropout trajectory of this new generation offers implications for redefining the notion of *learning*. This trajectory outside the school demonstrates that learning is broader than simply the formal sector, as argued by Illich (1971), and this revelation undermines the classical hegemony of schooling. The out-of-school growth trajectories observed in this study indicate that such youths may be engaged in an active redefinition of the very meaning of the term *learning* because their growth is predicated on the use of various tangible and intangible resources outside the mainstream school system, on the application of out-of-school experiences, and on the enhancement of responsibility and self-control. Their trajectory illustrates that the accumulation of dynamic experiences allows for self-organized learning not just as a method of learning but also as *lifelong learning*, in other words, a mode of living. Although the term *lifelong learning* is widely used, its meaning remains unclear; it acknowledges that learning is not confined to childhood or the classroom but takes place throughout life and over a range of situations (Fischer 2000; Han 2001; Torres 2002).

Instruction that emphasizes the relationship between life and learning, the resurrection of humanity, and the rejection of *one-size-fits-all* education is reflective of lifelong learning (Fischer 2000; Han 2001). By shedding light on the learning experience of youth dropouts and its relevance to the field of lifelong education, this study illustrates the need for greater attention paid to a new generation of school dropout youth as lifelong learners.

Lastly, this study offers implications for educational renovation, which shall play a key role in shaping the future of Korea's school education system. The Korean educational system has gained much international attention because of the high academic achievement of Korean students, for example in PISA. However, this assessment of the Korean education system remains controversial because the PISA 2012 showed ambivalent results (OECD 2013). While Korean students maintained a top-five performance in mathematics, reading, and science, the assessment found that Korean students take less pleasure in learning and have less interest in and motivation for learning, compared with those in other OECD countries. The results indicate a negative view of Korea's education system despite its academic success, which can be explained by its high-pressure system that places heavy burdens on students, excessive competition for college entrance, long study hours as a result of academic competition, and a monotonous, teacher-centered instruction style that does not motivate students (Y. Lee 2010, 389). Thus, the primary challenge facing Korea is to determine how the overarching purpose of the country's educational system was established. In other words, the reorientation of educational values, school culture, and social environment may be one of the keys to reforming school education for the life and wellbeing of the students, not only in Korea but also in many other countries that have suffered from a crisis in school education.

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