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# Locked in: understanding the 'irreversibility' of powerful private supplementary tutoring markets

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**ABSTRACT**

Private supplementary tutoring (PST) is a phenomenon growing throughout the world. Looking at regions such as East Asia where it is already vast and comparing with regions where it remains modest but is rising, some authors have argued that countries must act quickly to discourage negative societal implications which arise when PST grows. One underpinning suggestion here is the notion that addressing PST may be *time-critical*. Drawing on insights from political science on the nature of continuity and change, in this paper I explore the possibility that societies could become substantially 'locked in' to complex patterns of dependence on PST. I report on the case of South Korea, drawing on interviews with experts in the Korean education system. I show that parents have been incentivised progressively over time to layer 'shadow education' over public schooling, particularly in times of heightened anxiety. Governments meanwhile have faced disincentives to restrict PST and public school teachers have had to adjust to becoming perceived as offering a residual service.

**KEYWORDS**

Private supplementary tutoring; shadow education; lock-in; South Korea

## Introduction

Growth in private supplementary tutoring (PST) across the world today is a phenomenon raising many concerns. These include the likelihood that it exacerbates unequal educational opportunities and also the possibility that its increasing competitive deployment among affluent groups may lead to ratcheting costs for many. One may also consider here negative impacts on student wellbeing and, at the level of whole societies, disproportionate investments in education which can at times lead to diminishing national economic returns.

One compounding concern has been an idea that addressing the growth of PST may be an issue that is *time-critical*. Drawing on the work of Bray and colleagues, in this paper I explore a suggestion, posited, for example, by Bray (2011), that PST is a phenomenon which, as it grows, becomes deeply entrenched in societies; also that once PST industries reach certain sizes and levels of influence they become difficult for governments to control. Using political science insights on the nature of gradual change (Thelen, 1999, 2003) and also the notion of societal 'lock-in' (Pierson, 2000, 2004), I argue that societies

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can become substantially locked in to complex patterns of dependence on PST. Diverse actors adapt to and over time rely on the presence of PST. It becomes seen as a necessary evil, contributing to a residualising of public education.

In the paper I report on the extreme case (Gerring, 2008) of South Korea, a country with some of the highest spending globally on PST, making it an ideal case for exploring processes by which complex societal dependence on PST may arise over time. While there are many particularities to the Korean case, at the end of the paper I consider aspects identified that may drive lock-in to dependence on PST elsewhere.

## The rise and risks of private supplementary tutoring

PST is a phenomenon which has undergone a 'massive worldwide increase' (Park et al., 2016, p. 232). Academic tutoring outside the formal school day, and for which families pay fees, has become 'commonly a substantial component of household budgets' (Bray, 2017: 469), particularly in East Asia but also increasingly in South and Central Asia, Latin America, Europe, North America and Australasia (Aurini et al, 2013; Bray, 2011, 2020; Bray & Lykins, 2012; Silova, 2010). PST franchises exist throughout the world, marketing services ranging from one-to-one provision in students' homes, through online provision, to larger group tuition inside private institutions (Verger et al., 2016).

PST does, however, carry implications for equality of opportunity. When large numbers pay for PST, there comes a normalising of new financial burdens that can at times be severe for lower-income families. Scholars have furthermore highlighted trends in recent years away from PST being deployed primarily as remedial support for children, towards its being deployed increasingly as a form of competitive accelerated learning (Bray, 2017). In such context, the relative societal value of public schooling on its own becomes diminished. Additionally, even where lower-income parents can afford *some* PST for their children, affluent parents will always be able to afford more and better quality, effectively maintaining inequalities.

Further challenges also exist. Ball (2010) critiques 'hyper-developmentalism' and its risks for health in contexts where children spend substantial amounts of time studying outside the formal school day. Macro-level risks also occur for societies where disproportionate amounts become spent on education. 'Education inflation' can occur where spending on human capital is not well aligned with employers' particular skills demands, often leading to diminishing returns in terms of growth (Chang, 2010; Wolf, 2002).

Despite such risks, governments to date have paid comparatively little attention to PST. Most lack explicit policies for its regulation and some even encourage its growth through, for example, offering tax relief on PST spending (Bray, 2011; Hallsén & Karlsson, 2019). Governments in the US and England have in recent years offered subsidies for PST.[1] Bray (2011) likens this to giving out free samples, warning that these condition families into consumption habits they will eventually need to pay for privately 'if and when government funds prove inadequate' (p. 58).

## A time-critical issue?

Comparing regions such as East Asia, where PST is already vast, with, for example, Western Europe where spending on PST is lower but rising, Bray (2011) argues that:

> Policy makers in countries where the shadow education system is modest in scale still have opportunities to avert some of the major problems experienced by countries in which it has become engrained in cultures and daily lives. (p. 15)

The above suggests almost that addressing PST is *time-critical* – that major negative implications are not inevitable, but could become so should governments fail to act. Bray and Lykins (2012, p. 72) refer to 'structures and habits' becoming 'entrenched', making them 'very difficult to change'. Sarvi (Bray & Lykins, 2012, p. vi) argues that PST becomes 'a permanent feature' in societies.

Might we consider PST markets as becoming difficult to reverse or out of hand? How might entrenchment happen over time? Next I outline insights from political science on the nature not only of a) when and how societies change, but also b) when and how they can find themselves stuck in particular institutional equilibria.

## Change and continuity

Thelen (1999, 2003) describes change over time in societies as being typically highly gradual and incremental. Thelen also warns, however, that *gradual* change should never be mistaken for an *absence of change* – indeed small changes over time regularly culminate in major societal shifts. Gradual-but-major changes are notably often produced where established older institutions become layered over by newer, rival institutions. The latter grow in power, sometimes achieving dominance over older institutions (Streeck & Thelen, 2005). In such contexts, older institutions often appear unchanged; however they are also necessarily adapting to new social landscapes, which may lead to substantial conversion in their nature, purpose and meaning (Thelen, 2012).

Regarding continuity, many argue that one key reason why societal changes tend largely towards being gradual is that more rapid major changes become possible only during rare critical junctures. Societies are otherwise characterised by periods of relative equilibrium (though gradual changes always occur). One key mechanism described as underpinning equilibrium is the notion of institutional lock-in (Pierson, 2000, 2004). Lock-in refers to instances where actors at some initial formative time point engage in behaviours that set society on a particular path. Over time, macro-level institutional configurations emerge reflecting that path. Such configurations generate positive, self-reinforcing feedback, gradually becoming largely accepted as the way things are. Vested interests emerge around key institutions and possibilities for change become constrained by increasingly complex and interdependent sets of expectations and organisational structures. Increasing returns occur, in that the costs of switching to a different path become greater over time. One key barrier to change becomes a difficulty in co-ordinating collective action when diverse groups have adjusted to, and often become dependent on, an existing set-up. Thelen (2003) summarises such path dependence as:

> '[the] idea that politics … involves some elements of chance (agency, choice) but that once a path is taken, once-viable alternatives become increasingly remote, as all the relevant actors adjust their strategies to accommodate the prevailing pattern' (p. 219)

A final key point is that societies often become dependent on paths even where those paths are inefficient or where most may consider them *sub-optimal* (Liebowitz & Margolis, 1995).

## 'Irreversible' PST markets?

What relevance has the above for considering possible 'irreversibility' of powerful PST markets? In this paper I argue that countries may become substantially locked in to complex patterns of dependence on PST. Such can, moreover, happen even in countries where public schooling is universally available.

Walford (2013) states that 'in practically all countries the division between the private and state sectors of education has never been firmly fixed' (p. 421). One may further contend here that tensions between these sectors in education have long existed. In countries undergoing major social and economic change, one may additionally consider that heightened anxiety among families during these times – anxiety about children's futures and about ensuring any education that children receive will serve them well for the long term – often presents greater-than-average business opportunities for the private sector in education.

In such contexts, parents have incentives to layer PST over public schooling.[2] Public education may expand in response (e.g. through quality improvements or additional offerings for low-income students) as governments seek to address unequal educational opportunities which have in turn become exacerbated. However, as long as parents have strong ongoing incentives to seek positional advantage for their own children, further layering will likely ensue as more affluent groups try to maintain inequalities, offsetting government efforts (Zhang & Bray, 2018). Governments may try to restrict PST supply; however, in a context of aforementioned incentives, companies and parents find ways to subvert regulations.

As PST grows, public schooling, even where universally available, may become perceived by many as being insufficient on its own. This contributes to conversion in the meaning of public education which becomes residualised, detracting from ideals (as exemplified in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights – see Bray & Kwo, 2013) of this as ensuring universal, comparable education for all.

As the PST industry grows, it becomes a major employer. Governments may also gain credit where family PST spending contributes to strong national performance in international education league tables. Increasing apparent benefits to PST like these may affect government agendas. While policymakers might wish in many senses to restrict PST, they will also face incentives *not* to do this – likely job losses, possible diminishing student achievement and voters being unhappy at having their own spending restricted.

Among teachers, many will spend periods working (or at least considering working) in PST where this industry becomes large, again limiting opposition. Furthermore, while weaknesses in public schooling may in part have driven families' initial PST spending, public school teachers also become demoralised by increasingly being perceived as inadequate. Quality in public schools becomes difficult to advance in contexts where many families assign low value to public education.

Even among families retaining the most competitive advantage, the above scenario may still be considered far from ideal. As indicated above, education inflation can produce macro-level inefficiencies in societies and it also poses well-being implications for children. Societies may well, then, become substantially locked in to landscapes where most may prefer *less* PST, but at the same time collective action problems exist and diverse groups have become reliant on PST.

## The South Korean case

I now report on the extreme case (Gerring, 2008) of South Korea (hereafter Korea). In 2008, Korean PST spending reached a remarkable 3% of the national GDP (Kim & Chang, 2010). 'Edupoverty' – poverty produced by private education spending – affects more than four in ten Korean families (Kim, 2016).[3] Pressure for families to buy PST in Korea has been argued by some to contribute to low fertility rates (Anderson & Kohler, 2013) and, among children, even high suicide rates (Kim, 2016).

'Shadow education' (as PST is also commonly known) in Korea today takes place often in the country's hagwons (cram schools) which children attend after school on weekdays and also on weekends. There are over 100,000 hagwons, though online, correspondence and one-to-one tutoring elsewhere is also popular (Kim, 2016). Governments since the 1960s have aimed to curb PST (Lee et al., 2010); however little success has been noted. Fleckenstein and Lee (2018) describe Korean education today as being characterised by 'pathological equilibrium'. How might such a situation have been reached, and might ideas about change through layering and conversion, also institutional lock-in, help us to understand?

Findings below report on a study of Korean education carried out in 2017. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 28 experts (see Appendix). Interviewees included one former Korean Education Minister and one former Vice Minister, Korean Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) advisers, government researchers, National Assembly politicians, education scholars and representatives from the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education (SMOE) and from Korea's teacher unions, education NGOs and the PST industry itself. Some interviews were carried out in English by the author alone. Others were carried out with the aid of Korean interpreters. In one instance a last-minute cancellation made it necessary to collect a respondent's insights via email.

Formal ethical clearance for the study was obtained prior to fieldwork commencing from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), in line with LSE's Research Ethics Policy and Procedures.[4] All interviewees were provided with an information sheet explaining the study and asked to sign a consent form. Materials were provided in both Korean and English. After fieldwork was complete, interviews were fully transcribed and, using the software package NVivo, data were analysed using a process of thematic coding. Key themes emerging from an initial immersion in the data were used to create a framework of codes and subcodes. Data were then organised in accordance with these codes, and theory was brought to bear in interpreting the codes.

Interview data were triangulated against government policy documents, think tank and secondary academic literature. Triangulation here proved a useful method for ensuring accurate reporting of historical background to what interviewees had to say. Triangulation is generally common in research involving expert interviews, because cross-checking elite perspectives allows scholars to place what are often rather polished assertions of 'fact' in such interviews in the context of research-based knowledge (Natow, 2020).

## Parental dependence on PST

Marked PST growth in Korea began during the 1950s. Following independence in 1948 and the 1950–53 Korean War, the 1950s was a decade of major change in Korea. Of

particular note were substantial land reforms (1948–52) placing restrictive ceilings on land ownership (You, 2014) and driving concern among wealthy families with ensuring ongoing privilege. Concern was exacerbated too by the 1950s beginnings of universal public schooling (Korean Educational Development Institute, 2011) and a growing belief among the populace that upward social mobility might be achieved through education. A longstanding influence of Confucianism drove a focus on higher education credentials – attending 'top' universities within a marked social hierarchy – as being indicative of a person's position in the new social order (Kim & Chang, 2010). Seoul National University (SNU) is Korea's oldest public university. Historically, it was also the most certain route for individuals keen to secure prestigious civil service positions in the emerging developmental state. Competition for entry to SNU, along with two other esteemed private universities – Korea and Yonsei – quickly became extreme.

'Education fever' (Seth, 2002) in Korea has continued over time. Intense competition for 'top' university places has been fuelled by an industrial strategy focusing strongly on human resources while governments have provided only residual social welfare protections, so citizens rely heavily on occupational and private welfare (Greve, 2014). Rapid economic growth between the 1960s and 1990s, during which strong education premiums in wage returns were notable, has been described as Korea's 'education miracle' (Korean Educational Development Institute, 2011).

Such an education-focused path rewarding strongly those attending elite universities, and a twentieth-century history involving times of major change and associated anxiety for families, have given Korean PST companies marked opportunities for business. Parental anxieties were stoked particularly strongly during the 1990s, when Korean governments, particularly after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, promoted neoliberal deregulation, leading to rising inequality, falling social mobility and increased labour market dualism in the country (Park, 2010). Kim (2016) notes that, while in 1979 just 6% of Korean school-age students attended hagwons, by 1997 this figure was 59% and, by 2008, 75% (p. 15). In 2012, total real annual spending on hagwons in Korea reached an 'astronomical' estimated 36 trillion won (Kim, 2016). Over several decades, Korean governments have sought through policy to challenge a progressive layering of PST over public schooling. Each time, many argue that reforms have either made little difference or have even induced further layering. Why has participation in PST increased so much despite government efforts? In part this is because strong incentives have always remained for parents to seek competitive advantage for their own children.

A first example can be seen during the 1960s. In this decade, one perceived driver of escalating PST cited by interviewees for this project was affluent parents' anxiety regarding a need (for purposes of securing later elite university access) for children to attend *elite middle and high schools* accessible only through tough entrance exams. The 1968 and 1974 Middle and High School Equalisation Policies in Korea abolished school entrance exams in much of the country with an aim of reducing families' PST spending as a means of entrance exam coaching (Kim & Chang, 2010). Equalisation reforms notably simultaneously 'virtually nationalized' (Kim & Lee, 2002, p. 12) Korea's private schools. Entrance exams were banned in both public and private schooling, and school fees and funding were also standardised across the public and private sectors, largely abolishing 'elite' schooling. Views are, however, mixed on how far equalising Korean schooling ever did reduce families' PST spending. While some (e.g. Byun, 2010) claim that it did, others argue

that this left many actually *more* likely than they had been previously to buy PST, because parents needed alternative ways to demonstrate children's 'edge' in contexts where university admissions remained highly competitive (Kim & Lee, 2010; Lee et al., 2010). Politicians interviewed for this project argued that a PST 'balloon effect' had been produced later in students' education, with efforts intensifying as students reached the later point of taking university entrance exams. A subsequent re-emergence of elite schooling in both the public and private sectors in Korea, however, has *again* been associated with rising anxiety and PST expenditures.[5]

Governments have also tried to curb PST more directly. In 1980 under President Chun Doo-hwan, commercial PST even became banned in Korea. While some argue this reduced families' PST expenditures, one government researcher (Interviewee 4) argued that this is very difficult to know given an absence of reliable data during the 1980s. Family PST spending may even have escalated during this period. Tutors charged risk premiums (Lee et al., 2010) and at the same time access to elite universities remained highly restricted.

The ban on PST in Korea came over time to be viewed as violating parents' freedoms, particularly after democratisation in 1987. It was relaxed in stages and declared unconstitutional in 2000. The 1990s in Korea was a time not only of democratisation but also increased spending power for many (notably Korea joined the OECD in 1996). Such changes, combined with aforementioned anxiety produced by 1990s neoliberalism and resultant growing inequality, may be considered as driving something of a tipping point in mass Korean dependence on PST. The 1990s was the period during which hagwon education alone became a majority phenomenon in Korea, with more than half of all school-aged students receiving this (Kim, 2016). Government wage deregulation and growing labour market dualism (Park, 2010) during this period were fuelling greater than ever concern among parents with children attending top universities. In turn, PST was becoming deemed highly important. One former head of a major PST company even described a 1990s growth of 'anxiety marketing'. This is a technique wherein PST companies consciously exploit parents' fears regarding their children's futures, stoking demand for PST.

Since the 1990s, governments have tried to restrict hagwon fees (Kim & Park, 2010) and in 2006 a national expectation was introduced that provincial governments should impose hagwon curfews. In Seoul today hagwons must close by 10pm; however some claim that many subvert regulations. Interviewees from education NGOs described, for example, hagwons accepting cash payments (Interviewees 24, 25) and also simply teaching outside hagwon walls after 10pm, driven by families' ongoing willingness to pay:

> Some hagwons just turn off the light, or they have students on the bus and they drive on the motorway and do teaching there (Interviewee 22).

Regarding government spending to curb PST, since 2004 Korean governments have offered subsidised After School programmes which are free for disadvantaged students (Ministry of Education, 2004) and, at high school level, cover academic subjects. The programmes have been popular particularly among lower-income families in rural Korea, and interviewees from MOEST, in addition to National Assembly politicians, local government and education NGO representatives, all argued that, for many, the programmes do reduce PST spending. Interviewees also believed, however, that affluent

groups still prefer 'higher quality' PST institutes (see also Bae et al., 2010; Choi & Choi, 2016), maintaining their own competitive edge. As one Minjoo (centre-left) politician argued:

> the psychology is 'ok, this is for everybody, and I should do something in addition, only for me'. That is the psychology … After School [programmes] don't satisfy that psychology (Interviewee 6)

One last policy example concerns government efforts to tackle perceived gaps between a) standards of curricular content covered in Korea's public schools and b) standards required for students to attain highly on the national annual College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) used by universities to select students. Korean public schools were, in interviews for this project, perceived by representatives from parent-centred education NGOs as failing to prepare students well for elite university access. Notably by international standards Korea is not today a markedly low public spender on schooling (OECD, 2020a), and since the 1990s policy efforts to improve Korean public education have been manifold. A former Vice Minister and also representatives from SMOE defended public schooling, arguing there had been reductions in class sizes, upgraded ICT and, most recently, revisions to a historically densely packed curriculum involving much rote-memorisation (see also Korean Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation, 2017; Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education, 2017). Governments have over time sought correspondingly, too, to ensure that CSAT does not test students on material going beyond the public school curriculum. Historically, given extreme competition for top universities, CSAT has tested students on material going beyond this curriculum, making PST largely mandatory for all seeking elite university access (Lee et al., 2010).

One key problem again, however, has been the fact that parents' underlying competitive incentives have remained. Where CSAT gives less scope for demonstrating 'edge', students must find new ways to stand out. Recent shifts in university admissions towards institutions balancing CSAT scores more against qualitative, holistic assessments of student merit, described by one former Minister of Education as potentially reducing a need for PST, have actually, according to representatives from parent-centred education NGOs, become a *new competitive focal point*. Students today must not only achieve top CSAT scores but also write the best personal statements, secure effusive teacher references and show impressive records in school competitions such as arts projects and science experiments. New realms of competition have led to new services from PST companies promising success in all domains (see also Choi et al., 2012).

Overall, a dynamic has become established wherein parents deem it necessary to layer PST over mainstream schooling, and businesses have both responded to and stoked demand. Governments restrict PST but companies seek 'cracks' in policy (Lee, 2013, p. 181). In the words of one former Saenuri (conservative) Vice Minister:

> The government and business compete, but the private market is more powerful at persuading parents. That's why I think the government cannot control [PST] … They are really powerful. Even though the government introduce[s] policies to curb [PST] … the businessmen are really smart. They know how to defeat government policies

Interviewees furthermore described public schooling as being, for many today, simply not the most important part of a child's education. Education NGO representatives suggested that it has become more of a residual safety net for families unable to afford more:

> If parents have money and time, and there is a desire to have quality education, we cannot prevent private education. It's more that we are hoping, for the people who cannot afford quality education, that there is some kind of safety net (Interviewee 20)

> The public education system, [parents] think they have to do something more … and they see the expensive one and think it's better (Interviewee 18)

## Government and the teaching profession

Despite comments above regarding governments 'competing' with private industry, simultaneous incentives can also be seen for governments *not* to restrict PST. First, linking to points about parental rights and also parents' growing dependence on PST, there is a reality that governments must risk some electoral unpopularity when seeking to restrict PST (even if most may prefer in an ideal world to avoid buying PST). Second, in Korea the PST industry has notably for some years now been a major employer. In 2008, 518,000 people – some 2.2% of the Korean workforce – reportedly worked in hagwons (Korea Research Institute for Vocational Education & Training, 2009) – a figure not even covering people delivering PST elsewhere. According to Kim and Park (2010), in 2009 the PST industry became the biggest employer of all new college graduates in Korea.

Third, PST is also important politically for governments because it is believed to contribute to Korea's strong performance in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). According to one right-leaning education NGO representative/MOEST adviser (Interviewee 19), pro-market advocates of PST in Korea have in recent years been strongly critical of national efforts to restrict PST (particularly a cross-province spread of curfews for hagwons – see Choi & Choi, 2016), blaming these for recent Korean slippage in PISA rankings. From 2012–2015 Korea fell from 5$^{th}$ to 7$^{th}$ place internationally in both mathematics and reading performance on PISA, and from 7$^{th}$ to 11$^{th}$ place on science.

Lobbying power for PST companies, and for bodies such as the Korean Association of Hagwons, emerged as clear. The Korean MOEST notably has a 'Public Education Promotion' division; however one former Education Minister expressed frustration at difficulties he had personally faced while Minister in seeking National Assembly approval for policies that would restrict PST. Representatives from one left-leaning education NGO (NGO 1) further argued that major difficulties had been faced in 2015 under President Park Geun-hye among actors seeking to advance PST regulations that would limit students' learning of public school curricula 'in advance' outside of school. Industry resistance was, interviewees argued, instrumental in Park's government weakening proposed reforms.

Regarding teachers, in Korea today it is first worth noting that most teacher graduates go into the private sector. Public school jobs are competitive to secure and, while governments carefully restrict numbers of elementary school teacher trainees, this is less true for post-elementary trainees. In turn, only one fifth of the latter teach in mainstream schools (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2020). Moreover, even

for public school teachers, temptations exist to go private. Unlike in countries such as Cambodia, where poor public sector salaries drive many towards PST (Robertson & Dale, 2013), in Korea public school teachers are comparatively well paid (Choi & Choi, 2016). Nevertheless, one scholar/ex-government researcher (Interviewee 8) argued that, at least for senior teachers, salaries still often fail to match what teachers might earn delivering PST. Incumbent public school teachers in Korea are not legally permitted to deliver PST while in post. However, one NGO representative argued that many still spend periods outside the public sector, or at least consider this:

> Some teachers who taught in prestigious high schools, they quit and . . . advertise their past career. They go into private education and earn lots of money (Interviewee 18)

Temptations to work in PST may also occur at particular points in teachers' careers, for example, every few years when they must rotate between schools (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2020).

Union representatives did highlight that Korea's teacher unions today still oppose the PST industry's growth. Nevertheless, one politician (Interviewee 6) also argued that, for governments looking to restrict PST but also retain support from the education profession overall, a 'numbers game' exists in that growing numbers have some interest in PSTs being sustained. A former Education Minister additionally argued that interests in a thriving PST industry have long been aligned between 1) heads of PST companies, 2) politicians and senior bureaucrats who must remain mindful of government popularity (and indeed whose own children often receive expensive PST), and 3) professors in university schools of education who are keen to advertise good prospects arising from teacher training degrees they offer. These closely networked sets of actors come together in Korea to form what the former Minister argued is an 'iron triangle' limiting challenges to PST:

> Education bureaucrats, education professors, private tutoring industry, they are three parts of an iron triangle that holds the private tutoring industry growing. They are all graduates of the same colleges . . . they actually have no incentive to reduce private tutoring

What about wider impacts on public education? Building on the notion that public education has increasingly become perceived as being 'for those who cannot afford more', public school teachers were notably described in some interviews for this project as being poorly placed today to respond to families' needs compared with a hyper-responsive PST sector. One scholar argued that public teachers in Korea have extensive professional security once a licence is secured, and that this leads to there being less need than in the PST sector for teachers to continually prove themselves (see also Kim, 2016, p. 187):

> In Korea the teacher system is quite static . . . if they get their license, they don't have to do more (Interviewee 8)

Similar sentiments were expressed by representatives of one parent-centred NGO:

> Hagwon teachers really make the effort . . . but public education teachers, they are almost in a greenhouse, warm and stable . . . they don't really want to make more effort (Interviewee 25)

> [Governments] introduce new curriculums, but teachers do not actually reflect that in their class. But you can learn from the hagwons (Interviewee 23)

Absence of 'passion' in Korean public education, described (perhaps predictably) by one PST company CEO, has often been blamed on traditions of highly standardised schooling. Public school teachers may, however, also experience PST 'backwash effects' (Zhang & Bray, 2018). Union representatives interviewed highlighted difficulties for teachers in managing public school classrooms, let alone fostering improvement, where young people study for long hours during evenings and in turn struggle to engage during the day. Such is not helped by many assigning little value to 'cheap' public education, and union representatives further reported difficulties where students make differential progress because some receive more PST than others. One politician (Interviewee 6) claimed that some in Korea learn public school curricular material as much as five years in advance of its being covered in school. Union representatives argued that public school teachers become demoralised, and this may lead to what Pierson (2000) terms 'adaptive expectations' on teachers' part:

> Prior learning in the hagwon caused conflict between teachers and students. It was very difficult for public school to become better and it leads to teachers feeling helpless (Interviewee 16).

> The problem is that students, because they already learned [material] in the hagwon, when they go to school, there is lots of damage in the class, they cannot concentrate. It's very difficult . . . so in a way private education is damaging public education (Interviewee 13)

## A 'pathological equilibrium' (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2018)?

Even given extreme PST spending in Korea, youth unemployment has grown and in 2020 one in ten were unemployed (OECD, 2020b). Education inflation and skills mismatch can be noted – oversupplies of graduates in, for example, the social sciences, relative to employer demand (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2018). High PST spending has fuelled 'edupoverty' and potentially also exacerbated demographic challenges. Korea has the lowest fertility rate in the world (World Bank, 2020) and some argue this is partly due to the (un) affordability of 'education fever' (see e.g., Anderson & Kohler, 2013). Many older people experience poverty following high PST spending on children during their working lives. Even among families faring comparatively well in such times (namely those retaining strong advantage in the race for elite university access), interviewees for this project highlighted that children study for long hours, reporting unhappiness, sleep deprivation and low interest in learning (see also Choi & Choi, 2016).

Korean PST spending has levelled off somewhat in recent years after peaking during the late 2000s. One former Education Minister attributed this to policy success, though National Assembly politicians and government researchers alternatively emphasised sluggish economic growth and decreased birth rates which have affected parents' PST spending. NGO activism can clearly be seen on the PST problem in Korea, and almost all interviewees highlighted that recognition of PST as a salient national concern has become evident across the political spectrum. Cultural normalising of PST does however also seem clear. Collective action problems and the sheer complexity that would need to be

addressed in order to remedy a 'socially inefficient equilibrium' (Choi & Choi, 2016) suggest substantial societal lock-in to dependence on PST in Korea. This is highlighted in the following quotes from one NGO representative and one scholar:

> Even if we change one [aspect of the current education] system nothing will change really. Because it's about parents, students, quality of schools, teachers, it all has to change at the same time, otherwise nothing will change (Interviewee 18)

> Most people hate [PST] but believe they have to have it (Interviewee 8)

## Discussion and conclusions

Gerring (2008) characterises an 'extreme case' as being one that, while not normally representative of other cases, enables exploratory within-case analysis and the generating of new hypotheses due to its being 'prototypical . . . of some phenomena of interest' (p.653). In Korea, gradual layering of PST over public schooling has been driven by parental anxieties, and by private companies' responding to/stoking of these anxieties, over decades. Governments have in many respects sought to curb PST. However, there has arguably been a strong focus on post hoc regulations at the expense of a greater recognising of ways that wider economic landscapes have contributed to families' anxieties and in turn to their ongoing demand for PST. Governments have furthermore become in various ways locked in and disincentivised from providing strong opposition to the PST industry – an industry with a vast role today in providing services and jobs in Korea, not to mention its likely aiding of the nation's strong PISA performance. Public education has become viewed by many as constituting a residual service despite being universally available – a conversion (Thelen, 2012) in its nature and meaning. Public school teachers have had to adjust to the impacts of PST in their classrooms – impacts that render improvement difficult.

Notions of 'lock-in' and 'irreversibility' are, importantly, not phenomena we should consider as being entirely absolute. Thelen (2003) reminds us that societies are always changing gradually, and we know too that major shocks can at times in societies produce sudden, path-departing change (Pierson, 2004). Given these facts, it is still possible that we may one day see marked shrinkage of PST in Korea. Nevertheless, what the concept of lock-in suggests to us is that the more PST industries grow, the harder it becomes to reverse their size and power. Diverse groups become invested, establishing dependencies (however happy or unhappy) on PST, and over time collective action for change becomes more complicated and costly to engender. In light of what we know about negative consequences that can be produced by large PST industries, then, we may well conclude that a need for government action on PST, wherever this is growing, is indeed time-critical.

Whether PST lock-in as seen in Korea might be observed elsewhere is a matter beyond the scope of this paper, though it would be an interesting avenue for future research. Certain aspects of the Korean case will not apply everywhere – for example, a markedly strong historic focus on the importance of university ranking in determining life chances; also PST having been a clear societal presence in Korea ever since the country's

(comparatively recent) beginnings of universal public schooling. One may additionally consider a particular ease by which private providers have been able to supplement mainstream education in contexts (and there are many in East Asia) where rote-memorisation pedagogies have historically dominated. Strong Korean demand for PST likely further relates to the country's particularly compressed twentieth century developmental path (Chang, 1999), involving periods of rapid change.

As has been noted elsewhere, however, PST *is* a phenomenon growing globally. While other societies are less Confucian and may have older public education systems, parents are still spending increasing amounts on PST. What should governments do? One first lesson is perhaps the importance of avoiding *short-sightedness* and what seems at times like active government encouragement of an industry that we know can become tough to manage once entrenched. Governments should cease tax relief on PST and they should be wary, too, of time-limited subsidies on PST which risk creating consumption habits that many families will struggle to afford long-term. In England, following recent Covid-19-related school closures, a £350 m National Tutoring Programme[6] has been introduced to help disadvantaged children catch up on schoolwork. Subsidised PST is being offered from 'an approved list of tuition partners', but for 15 hours only per student. Here it is worth noting, too, that public education funding in England has been decreasing in recent years (Perrera et al., 2017). A quarter of all state secondary school teachers in England already work as private tutors (Sutton Trust, 2019).

Policy experiences in Korea additionally teach us the importance of addressing – and at the earliest opportunity – what are the root causes for PST growth in different societies and particular incentives that families are facing to buy PST. These will vary across regions (see e.g. Bray, 2020, for a recent analysis), though broadly we might note as a starting point that in Western societies today, powerful discourses emphasise that investing in education is key to social mobility and to retaining social status. Writing on middle-class families highlights that private spending on education, layered over public education, has increasingly become part of families' neoliberal risk management (Ball & Nikita, 2014) in post-industrial times. Such spending is believed to help insure children against uncertain futures and, within this, there is an anxious focus on securing access to 'world-class' universities (Kupfer, 2011; Wolf, 2002).

How might parents' anxieties about uncertain futures be addressed? Relevant policy domains here extend beyond the realm of education. Governments must engage in joined-up thinking, considering first how far countries are offering good jobs and opportunities for all, not only those attending elite universities. Governments might also consider how far parents can be confident that there will, for the long term, exist strong social protections should their children ever fall on hard times. Making such joined-up thinking a reality will, however, first require recognition globally that PST spending is becoming a problem. One Korean politician (Interviewee 6) expressed scepticism that such recognition would happen any time soon:

'I had a chance to talk. [about PST] with a Western researcher … For us it's a real headache … maybe the most serious social problem … But the Western researcher, he kind of envied Korean parents. They are willing to spend money for their children, and

that increases the level of human resources in the country, so what a desirable phenomenon! But that researcher doesn't understand this really serious social problem in Korea.'

## Notes

1. In England public 'Pupil Premium' funding has been spent on PST (Jerrim, 2017). In the US, 2001 No Child Left Behind legislation mandated that students in the lowest performing schools, where schools did not improve, must be offered supplemental education services. Under Every Student Succeeds legislation this is no longer mandatory.
2. Many will also separately pay for mainstream private schooling.
3. Including also fees for high schools – historically charged in both Korean private and public schools.
4. https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/services/Policies-and-procedures/Assets/Documents/resEthPolPro.pdf
5. See e.g., the rise of special purpose, autonomous private and private international schools (Exley, 2020).https://nationaltutoring.org.uk/

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## Appendix – Interviewees

(1) Former (Saenuri) Minister of Education
(2) Former (Saenuri) Vice Minister of Education
(3) MOEST Policy Adviser
(4) Government Researcher
(5) Government Researcher
(6) National Assembly (Minjoo) Politician (Education Committee Member)
(7) National Assembly (Minjoo) Politician (Private Education Task Force Member) – *via email*
(8) Scholar/ ex-Government Researcher
(9) SMOE Representative
(10) SMOE Representative
(11) SMOE Representative
(12) SMOE Representative
(13) Union 1 Representative
(14) Union 2 – Representative
(15) Union 2 – Representative
(16) Union 2 – Representative
(17) NGO 1 – Representative
(18) NGO 1 – Representative
(19) Head of NGO 2/ MOEST Adviser
(20) Head of NGO 3
(21) Representative – NGO 3
(22) Representative – NGO 3
(23) Representative – NGO 3
(24) Representative – NGO 4
(25) Representative – NGO 4
(26) Representative – NGO 4
(27) PST company ex-CEO
(28) PST company CEO