

Hakwons: Parents' trap for kids?

By Shinah Chang

Every day, thousands of Korean moms dutifully arrive in a bevy of minivans to drop off their unwilling children to the hundreds of *hakwons* [tutoring academies] dotted around the Los Angeles area. And every day, those children sit in their SAT verbal classes and ponder rebellion, grumbling that life isn't fair.

Why do Korean American parents do it? *Hakwons* cost a lot of money, typically ranging from \$30-\$60 a class; each class meets once or twice a week and most kids take at least two, SAT math and SAT verbal, with SAT vocabulary usually thrown on top. All taken, sending one student to a *hakwon* costs up to \$720 a month. And most Korean American parents have two or more children attending *hakwon* for 1 to 5 years. (I calculated it all one time: if my parents had spared my sister and me the *hakwon* experience, I'd be driving a big fat Beemer right about now.)

Then there's the rebellion factor. Most teenagers don't just give up four hours of their weekend to SAT drills without a fight. Every other week, I'd erupt into an argument with my mom about how she was controlling my life, how her dreams weren't necessarily my own, how I knew what I needed and that *hakwon* was not it.

But Korean American are obsessed with education. It comes from a long legacy, my mom would answer, dating back 500 years to the Yi dynasty in Korea. Success equaled education back then. And now, education = SAT scores = Ivy League school = success. And in light of the fact that Koreans are fairly new to the US, we've decided that educational prowess is the only way to earn respect and success in a new country.

But is it healthy for the children to be told from childhood that a good college is the only way to success? To be forced to spend hours doing something just to make parents happy, instead of pursuing activities they really love? To sap the fun out of the life of a teen-ager? Looking more closely at the *hakwon* culture, the answer isn't so black and white.

There are extremes. Some parents who send their kids to *hakwons* for 8 hours a day, who turn to

hakwons whenever an exam, AP exam, standardized test, or bad grade comes up, who start their kids at *hakwons* at age 9. It is disturbing to hear a 10-year old spout SAT vocabulary words and declare that her lifelong dream is to go to Harvard. (Isn't she supposed to be an aspiring astronaut or superhero at that age?) When I asked the fifth grader why she wanted to go to Harvard, she gave me the most puzzled look. To her, it was so self-evident that she had never really considered the reasons. I wondered what she would do once she got to college and could no longer rely on *hakwons* to get her good grades.

But there is the healthier side too. Children who turn to *hakwons* for the extra help they need to keep up in geometry class; children who really do want to work towards a good college; children who would be loitering with gangs if they weren't honing their reading comprehension skills.

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Kang Kim of San Fernando Valley, California runs one of these healthy kinds of *hakwons*. He doesn't cram his classes full of students, he likes to focus on other subjects like biology and calculus, and he urges parents to push a healthy, holistic emphasis on education, rather than a

narrow obsession with SAT scores. "I want to motivate students to think of education as a way of life, not just a means to college entrance," Kim says. At his institution, most of the kids really do want to be there and they turn to Kim for advice on both academic and non-academic issues in their lives.

Kim once had a 16-year old student who knew he wouldn't live to see 18. Despite his illness, the student came to the *hakwon* every Saturday for 4 hours to work on his SAT scores. When asked why, the student answered that this was what he was supposed to do. He didn't want to lead a different life from any other 16-year old.

Some may say it seems "wrong" that the idea of education and success was so deeply ingrained that he couldn't give it up, even with only 2 years left to live. But his goal was to get into UCLA, and it was something that he himself truly wanted.

His acceptance letter arrived a month too late. Although he didn't live to see his success, I doubt that he would have regretted his decisions.

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