

**Thematic Session
Children and Youth**

**Why should we worry about
the issue of educational inequality?**

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1. Introduction

Among the most famous documents related to human rights is the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR),” adopted by the Third United Nations General Assembly in Paris on December 10, 1948. This declaration came out of humanity's reflection on the human rights violations that were rampant around the world before and after World War II. In this Declaration of Human Rights, which consists of a total of 30 articles, Article 1 declares that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” making it clear that the concept of equality is strongly incorporated in human rights. Let me also quote Article 26: Right to Education.

<Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights>

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

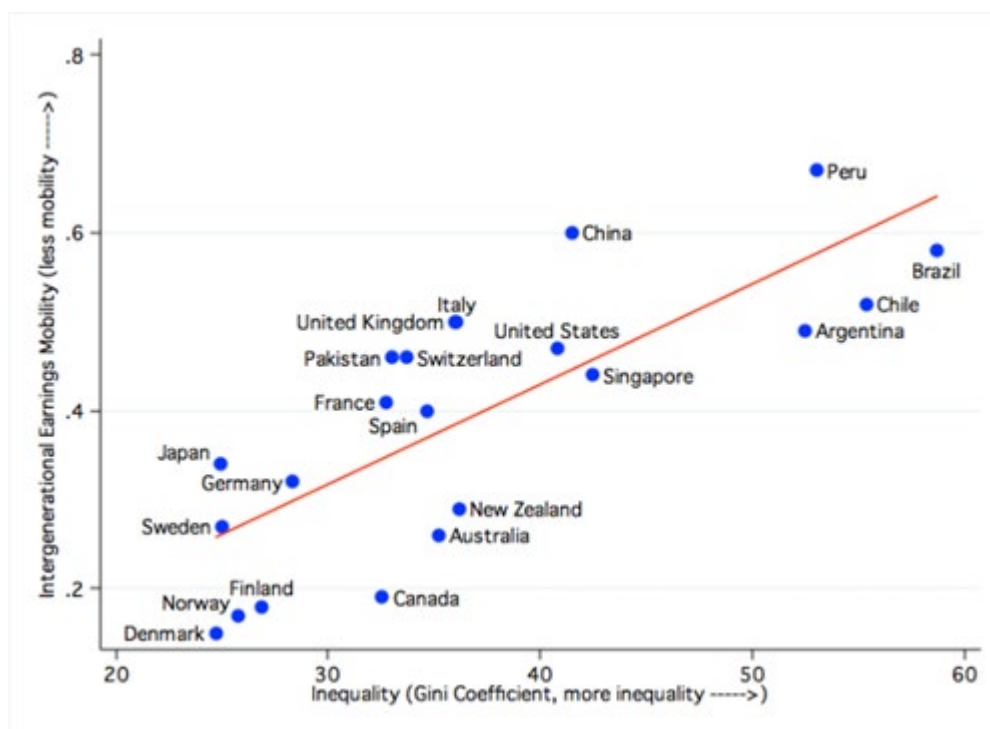
In this way, human rights, equality, and education are closely related to each other. Respect for human rights is based on the idea of equality that everyone should be respected equally. On that basis, educational opportunities should be provided equally to everyone, and as a result, education shall contribute to creating a more equal society.

I am honored to give a keynote presentation today on the topic of inequality in education at the 13th ‘World Human Rights Cities Forum’ held in Gwangju, which has greatly contributed to the development of democracy and improvement of human rights in Korea. As a scholar who majored in economics and has studied education issues, I would like to share my thoughts with you on why we must actively respond to the challenge of educational inequality, and why this issue is especially urgent in Korea.

2. The challenge of global economic inequality

First, let's start with the issue of economic inequality. Among the statistical patterns discovered by economists is the “Great Gatsby Curve”. If you plot the locations of various countries with dots, with the horizontal axis representing current inequality and the vertical axis representing intergenerational income mobility, you can discover strong statistical relationships between them. So, it can be interpreted that the phenomenon of income being passed down from generation to generation tends to be positive and quite strong in countries where inequality is currently high. As shown in the figure, while South American countries are countries where inequality and intergenerational income mobility are strong, Northern European countries, which are widely known as welfare states, do not have high levels of inequality and intergenerational income mobility.

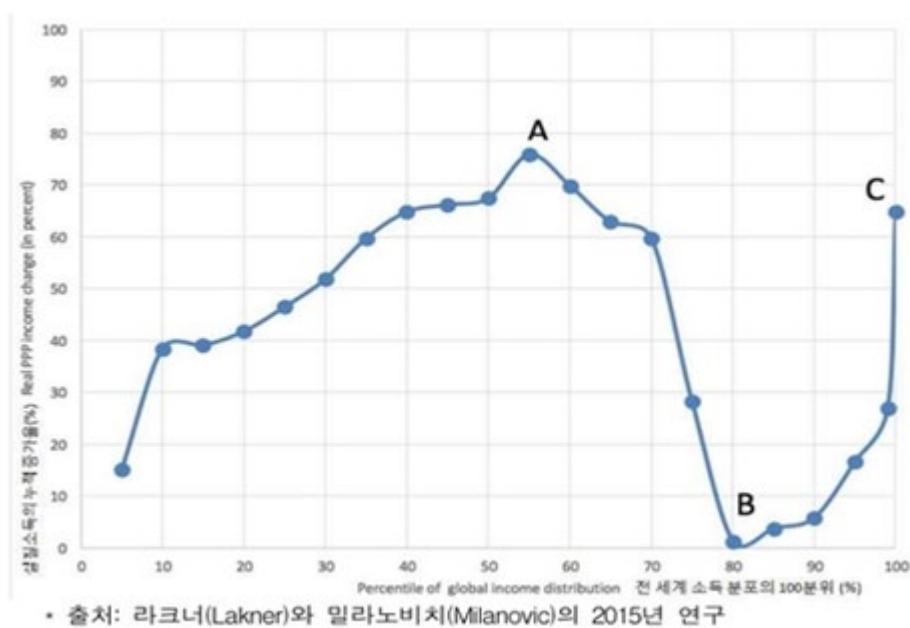
<The Great Gatsby Curve>



This phenomenon shows that current inequality is likely to lead to future inequality. And a strong candidate for reason behind this phenomenon is educational inequality. The difference in educational opportunities according to income, and the resulting difference in income of the next generation, is the cause of the phenomenon known as intergenerational income mobility. What we expect from education is exactly the opposite. Education should play a role in reducing the gap in opportunities based on income and, as a result, reducing the income gap in future generations. Perhaps education is the only way to overcome the gloomy prophecy of the Great Gatsby Curve.

Another well-known fact related to income inequality is the “elephant curve.” The elephant curve is named so because the shape of the graph resembles an elephant. Although the derivation process is difficult, the content itself is not difficult to understand. Professor Milanovic of New York University lined up people around the world by income level from 1988, when the Olympics were held in Korea, to 2011, and showed how real income growth rates differed depending on income level over a period of about 20 years. As a result, real income has continued to rise from the world's lowest income people to those with slightly higher income levels. This is a phenomenon that has occurred due to high economic growth in countries such as China and India. However, the wealthier people saw their incomes increase less, and once they reached the top 20% in the world, their real incomes rose very little. Instead, the world's richest people have seen very large increases in their incomes.

<Elephant Curve>



Regarding the elephant curve, it can also be interpreted that inequality has decreased between countries globally, but inequality within countries has worsened, mainly within developed countries. So, the problem is that many Koreans fit between points A and B in the figure above. Looking globally, inequality within Korea is likely to worsen in the future. In fact, Korea showed an exemplary case in the past of achieving economic growth while lowering inequality, but there is no guarantee that such exemplary economic growth will continue in the future. After all, Korea faces strong challenges.

3. Issues regarding educational inequality in Korea

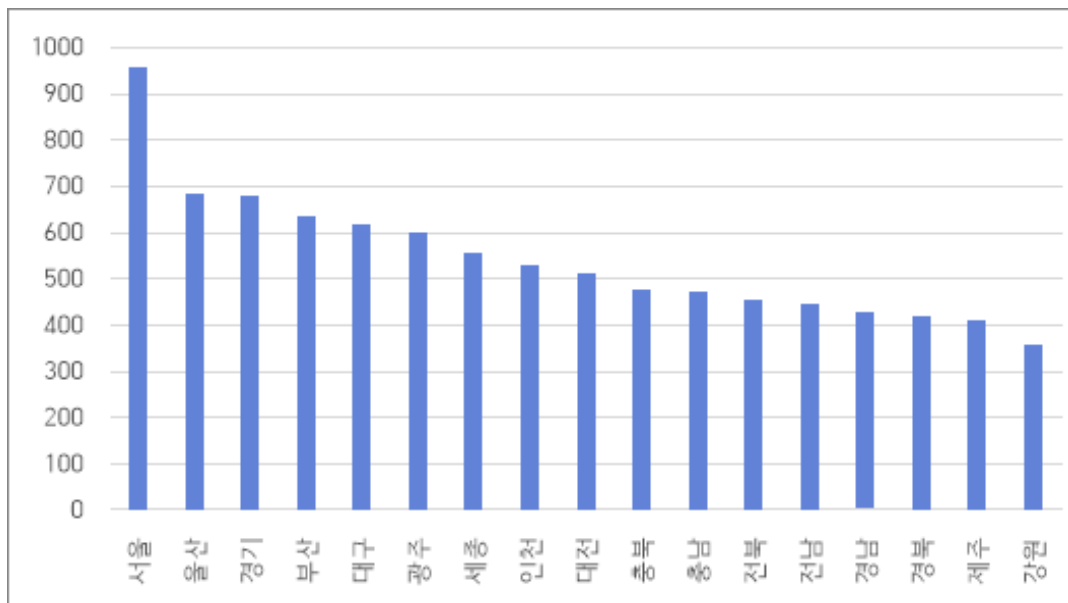
There is no need to emphasize Korea's well-known enthusiasm for education. Even when the school classrooms were burned to ashes due to the war, classes continued in the burned classrooms. Korea has also been very successful in its educational policies that support such passion for education. Quantitative expansion of education occurred in the order of elementary, middle, and higher education, and by the 1970s, almost all children and adolescents of school age were able to graduate from high school. By the 2000s, Korea showed one of the highest higher education enrollment rates in the world. In the process of achieving this quantitative expansion, Korea was the country in the world that distributed public education expenses most evenly. At least in elementary and middle school education, there are no regional differences in public education expenses.

However, despite these efforts, Korea has become a country that must seriously worry about educational inequality somehow. While there is no regional difference in public education expenses, per capita private education expenses show large differences by region. The graph below is the calculation of the private education expenses per high school student by region based on last year's data on private education expenses from Statistics Korea released this year. Private education expenses reflect regional differences in Korea like a mirror.

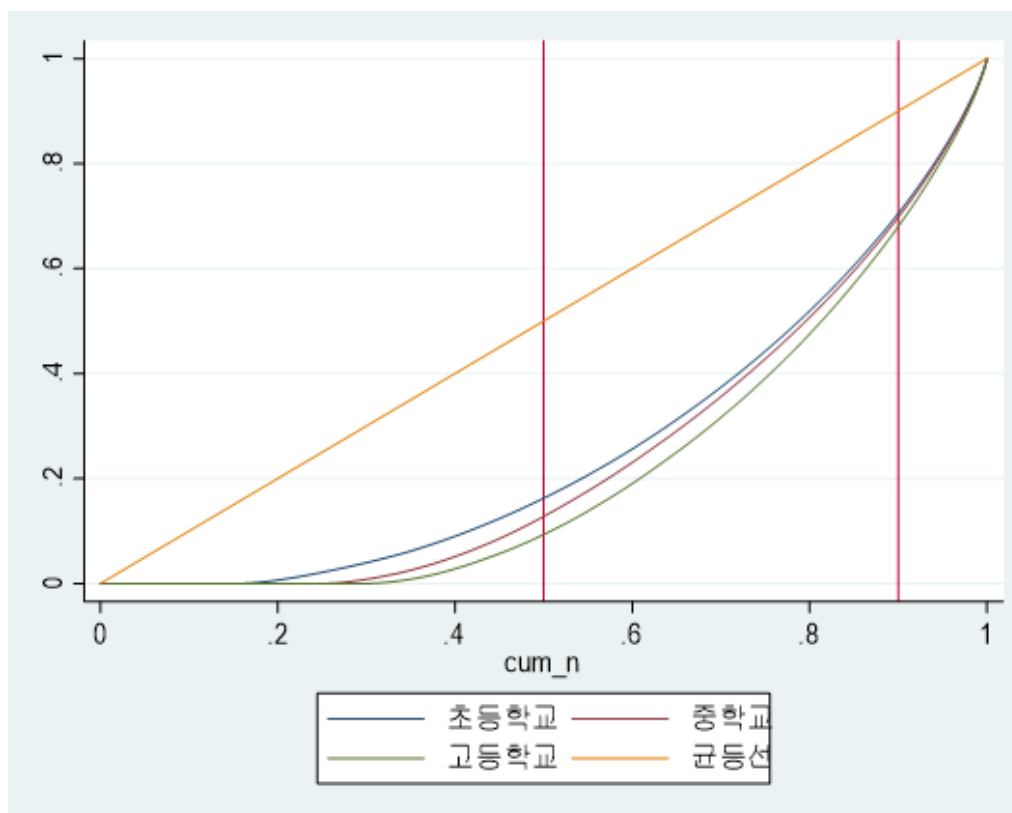
There is great inequality in spending on private education expenses. If you look at the total amount spent by the half of students who spend less on private education expenses by school level, it is only 16% for elementary schools, 12% for middle schools, and 9% for high schools. On the other hand, the 10% of students who spend the most account for over 30% at each school level. This calculation does not even take into account students rewriting college entrance examination who spend enormous amounts of money on private education expenses.

<Average monthly private education expenses per high school student by region, in 2022>

(unit: KRW 1,000)



<Lorenz curves for private education expenses>



Although the data is not properly published, inequality in educational expenditures also appears as inequality in results. Let's look at just one indirect case. National scholarships given to college students mainly go to students from low-income households. So, it can be said that the proportion of students receiving national scholarships is the proportion of students from middle- to low-income households. However, the proportion of beneficiaries at junior colleges, where about 22% of all students are enrolled, is about 28%. This is indirect evidence that relatively more students from low-income households are enrolled in junior colleges. The proportion of the amount is higher, and in light of the fact that the lower the income, the larger the scholarship amount, this reflects the fact that relatively low-income students are enrolled in junior colleges even among students receiving scholarships. On the other hand, in national and public universities, where about 23% of all students are enrolled, the proportion of students receiving national scholarships is 18%, which can be inferred that there are relatively few students from low-income families in national and public universities. It shows that fewer low-income people are enrolled in public universities with relatively higher grades. On the other hand, we can also find a contradiction in that more students from high-income families are attending national universities, which receive government subsidies and have lower tuition fees than private universities.

<Proportion of national scholarships to junior college - 4-year university>

(unit: people, KRW 100 million, %)

Year	4-year university		Junior college		Sum		Proportion of junior college	
	Student	Amount	Student	Amount	Student	Amount	Student	Amount
2018	750520	25178.1	290280	10466.5	1040800	35645	27.9%	29.4%
2019	740384	24184.1	286422	10107.5	1026806	34292	27.9%	29.5%
2020	752383	24279.5	285703	10126.1	1038086	34406	27.5%	29.6%

Source: Korea Student Aid Foundation

Note: It is the sum of type 1 and type 2 national scholarships.

<Proportion of national scholarships to national and public university
- private university>

(unit: people, KRW 100 million, %)

Year	National and public university		Private university		Proportion of national and public universities	
	Student	Amount	Student	Amount	Student	Amount
2018	194954	5199.6	845846	30445.0	18.7%	14.6%
2019	191829	5073.6	834977	29218.0	18.7%	14.8%
2020	192965	4996.4	845121	29409.3	18.6%	14.5%

Source: Korea Student Aid Foundation

Note: It is the sum of type 1 and type 2 national scholarships.

Due to page and time constraints, we have briefly looked at only some of the inequality issues in Korean education, but there are many other ways to find things that are far from equality in terms of educational opportunities and results. Then we need to think about what we should and can do to achieve more equal education.

4. For improvement of educational inequality

Today's topic is educational inequality, but I would like to emphasize the fact that in order to eliminate educational inequality, we must start working together with other parts of society. Education must change, of course, but it is difficult to bring about change through education alone.

Let's take the college entrance exam issue as an example. The problem that students are currently struggling with while preparing for college entrance exams is something that responsible adults should think seriously about and try to improve. The fundamental problem with Korea's entrance exams is that we expect too much from them. There is bound to be some error in selecting youth under the age of 20, so you should not expect a perfect entrance exam. Above all, because humans are equal, they cannot be lined up in one line. However, education in Korea is perceived as if the only goal of education is to get in line through entrance exams. Meanwhile, students are becoming sick in many ways as they go through a screening process that is perceived to influence their lives at inappropriate times. It is highly likely that this will become a chronic disease in our society in the future. If the

sense of privilege that students at prestigious universities or medical schools have is a problem at one extreme, then at the other extreme there are much larger number of students who do not fully recognize their worth based only on the results of the college entrance exam.

The problem is that so many students are frustrated with the results of the college entrance exam. Paradoxically, the reason is that the selection process after the entrance exam is “unfair.” It is obvious, but society does not become a fairer society just because the entrance exam is fair. What must be fairer than the entrance exam is the subsequent selection processes. Society and the older generation must respond properly to the desire of young people to be evaluated for who they are, not for the title of the university they graduated from. We must not forget that the difference in abilities among young people is much smaller than the older generation's interpretation of entrance exam results.

Education should not be a tool to screen students, but a process that leads them to their better lives. Of course, the world does not run on ideals alone. The reality is that sometimes the process of screening talented people cannot be avoided. If screening is unavoidable in reality, appropriate screening tools should be used. Naturally, more thought needs to be given to appropriate screening tools. Depending on what screening tools a society uses, inequality can be either alleviated or strengthened. Education is bound to be influenced by that screening tool.

An inappropriate screening tool used by Korean society in the past is English. At one time, Korea used English as a screening tool to adapt to globalization. As young people are screened through a tool called English for public enterprises, university transfer exams, and many other fields, even students who do not need English much in their social life have put a lot of effort into learning English. This amounts to a significant cost in terms of students' precious time. And considering that English as a subject relies more on family background than any other subject, it can be said that as Korean society began evaluating people in English, it made choices that limited class mobility and moved further away from being an equal society.

Once again, change cannot be achieved through education alone. Overcoming inequality in education requires a long-term change in culture and perception. Change is essential in many areas, including school and labor market assessment practices and media attention. For example, it would be impossible to hope that education would become more equal while

the number of students entering Seoul National University by high school fills the front page of the newspaper. I strongly believe that normalization of education is impossible without overcoming the foolish perception that college entrance exam results are viewed as status rather than class. In order for education in Korea to become more equal, the whole Korean society and policymakers must be able to turn their eyes and ears to those who have no or low voices.

Educational inequality cannot be improved through education alone, but of course education itself must also change. I would like to say a few more things, believing that the specific ways will be discussed through presentations and discussions afterwards. Elite education in Korea needs to be changed. In particular, those with outstanding academic ability must be taught with care to avoid giving them a sense of entitlement. The example of Israel, which is very advanced in gifted education, is worth learning from. Israel takes underdeveloped regions into consideration by allocating number of selected talents to each region from the stage of selecting gifted students. It is well known that they provide convergence education, but what is more important is that some gifted schools require students to volunteer for half a day each week, such as tutoring children with disabilities or single parents. In summary, we need to provide good education so that gifted students can work to improve inequality, not expand it.

Of course, school education is important. Through our experience during the COVID-19 era, we have experienced that when school education is not properly provided, private education expenses increase, and the educational gap widens. I've occasionally heard that schoolteachers recommend private education, and I hope that at least that doesn't happen in Korean public education. Schools should not be places where students are screened and lined up, but rather places where inclusive education, not exclusion, is provided based on the belief that all members of future generations have the ability to learn. Depending on how education is conducted, inequality can be alleviated or strengthened. Many people are now worried that education in Korea has shifted from alleviating inequality to reinforcing it. Now is high time to change the direction again.