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## Understanding of Education Fever in Korea\*

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### Abstract

This paper reports the results of a Delphi study investigating the meaning of education fever in Korea. Twenty Korean experts in education participated in a four-stage Delphi consensus-seeking process. Through the Delphi process, 20 items were selected and ranked in terms of importance. The results of Delphi study indicate that beliefs related to parents' desire to help their children have academic credentials or higher degrees were considered the most important components of education fever. Other highly ranked items were related to parents' needs or motivation toward their children's social and financial success. However, items measuring parents' instincts or psychological satisfaction were ranked low. The results suggest that education fever is still an evolving concept in Korean society. Discussion based upon the results and suggestions for the future studies were also addressed.

Key words: Education fever, Delphi study, educational consensus, parental involvement

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## 1. Introduction

In the past decade, the concept of ‘*education fever*’ has been widely used to explain Korean parents’ aspiration and support for education. In general, education fever refers to the underlying motivational energy behind strong parental involvement in education (Lee, 2000). However, education fever encompasses not only parents’ strong interest and motivation in education, but also a complex social system that reflects collectivistic perspectives on education, economic reward systems, structure of educational systems, and dynamics in educational testing (Lee, 2003; Seth, 2002). Although mass media as well as professional researchers commonly address the concept of education fever in Korea, it is still a relatively a new concept.

Education fever is a familiar concept not only in Korea, but also in other Asian countries (e.g., China, Japan) where Chinese characters are the written language. Education fever is directly translated from a Chinese word, 教育熱<sup>1</sup> combining two words, 教育(education) and 熱(energy, heat, fever). The reason why the researchers choose ‘fever’ in English instead of ‘energy’ or ‘heat’ is associated with the somewhat negative nuance of education fever in Korean society. Typical examples showing the negative usage of education fever are ‘Korean parents’ abnormal fever in education’, ‘the reason of exam hell’, ‘investment fever in private education for college entrance exam preparation’, and so forth. The meaning of education fever reflects unusual level of interest in education.

The concept of education fever is used for academic research in education. For instance, educational researchers in Korea pointed out parents’ abnormal education fever as motivation toward moving into the top of hierarchical society by earning a higher degree (Chung, 1984; Kim, 1986). In other words, Korean researchers conceive education fever as an important source of passion toward becoming a member of a higher level of social class as well as achieving a high quality education. In terms of the national obsession with education, Lee (2003) addressed education fever as the root of credentialism in Korean society. In a highly competitive society such as Korea, it is very difficult to get a job without having an appropriate level of credential. Thus, education becomes a war to survive (Park, 1994) by earning a degree, not to train young people to be skillful experts. In this situation, many Korean parents expend lots of their physical and financial energy in order to help their children entering highly ranked universities.

The concept of education fever has been used not only Korean people, but also international scholars to explain one of the reasons as to how Korea recovered economic power after the Korean war (e.g., Seth, 2002). They believe that education fever was the primary force that provided high-quality human resources. Unlike other east Asian countries (e.g., Iraq, Saudi Arabia), Korea lacks sufficient natural resources. Thus, human resources were the only choice that Korean people could develop for the recovery of Korea’s economy. Many people also believe that the human resource development was possible because of Korean parents’ education fever. In other words, it was Korean parents’ education fever that Korea used to rebuild economic structure by utilizing high-quality human resources.

On the other hand, many Korean researchers argued that education fever has been an important factor negatively influencing the public education system in Korea (Lee, et al., 2001; Lee, et al., 2003). For instance, private tutoring is the most typical example showing how education fever is affecting the public education system (Kim, et al., 2003). Because of the high level of education fever in Korea, many Korean parents send their children to private institutes for college entrance exam preparation (Hyun, Lee, & Lee, 2003). As a result, Korean students trust teachers at private institutes, rather than the quality of public education. Additionally, Korean parents spend too much money for their children's private education. According to the results of a recent report, the total amount of money spent for private tutoring in 2003 is more than 10 billion dollars (Kim, et al., 2003).

Given these general understandings of education fever, researchers have developed many different definitions to explain the concept of education fever. The definitions include 'desire for entering school'(Oh, 1986), 'level of educational expectation'(Kim, 1992), "aspiration and investment behaviors for education"(Kim, Lee, & Park, 1993), 'parents' desire to help their children have academic status or high level of academic background for success in life'(Kim, 1985), 'war for education'(Park, 1994), and 'abnormal phenomenon for achieving higher level of academic background and status'(Oh, 2000).

These competing perspectives on education fever suggest that the concept of education fever in Korea is still evolving and is without a clear consensus at this time. In spite of the long history of discussion on the topic of education fever, the concept of education fever is not well-defined and is controversial. As Lee (2000) pointed out, education fever is more than a concept of psychological energy or passion. Rather, the concept reflects society's value system and is dependent upon social consensus about the meaning of education. The multiple definitions of education fever make it quite difficult for administrators, researchers, teachers, and parents to discuss the root of educational motivation, parental involvement, interaction between teacher and student, and high quality schooling. The purpose of this study was to seek a preliminary consensus among experts regarding the meaning of the concept of education fever in Korea.

## **2. Method**

### 2.1 Participants

Twenty experts in the area of education in Korea participated in the Delphi process. They were 4 university professors, 4 administrators, 4 researchers, and 4 experienced teachers, and 4 principals. The average experience in education is 19 years. Experts were recruited through collaboration with a professional association in education and a national research institute in Korea.

## 2.2 Data collection procedure: The Delphi process

Because of many competing perspectives on education fever, it was not easy to develop measurable items for data collection. Given the controversial definitions of education fever in Korea, clearly defined constructs reflecting the concept of education fever could not be developed. Additionally, the purpose of this study was to seek a consensus among experts regarding the meaning of the concept of education fever in Korea, rather than testing any particular research hypothesis or confirming a theoretical model. Thus, instead of conducting a typical survey study, the researcher designed a Delphi process (Dalkey, 1967; Dalkey, 1969; Helmer, 1966) seeking consensus through a four-stage repeated data collection method. More detailed information of the Delphi process is as follows:

### 1) Stage 1: First Delphi

Based on a review of Korean literature on education fever described earlier, the researchers developed a list of 25 items, each describing a specific aspect of what education fever might mean within the Korean context. A copy of the list of 25 items, including an additional open-ended question, which stated: “(If you do not agree with these education fever concepts, please write down your own education fever ideas)” was sent to each of the experts. Each expert was asked to rate each of the items in terms of importance using 3 measurement points (1: not important, 2: somewhat important, 3: very important). The experts were asked to return their responses within two or three weeks and all responses were to remain anonymous. All twenty experts returned their responses.

After collecting their responses, a mean rating score was calculated for each item. Out of 25 items, 5 showed low scores (less than 2) and were thus deleted. The deleted items were ‘social needs in education’, ‘interests in schooling’, ‘pure aspiration for education’, ‘parents’ paranoiac involvement in education’, and ‘sort of ideology seeking wealth and honor.’ Although the experts suggested many new concepts of education fever through answering the open-ended question, new items that could be added to the list were not found. Therefore, 20 important items (see Table 1) were identified through this first stage. These 20 items were used for all subsequent Delphi stages.

### 2) Stage 2: Second Delphi

A list of the final 20 items was sent to each of the experts. The experts were requested to rank order the 20 items in terms of importance, giving a rank of 1 for the most important item, a rank of 2 for the next important item, and so on. Again, the experts were asked to return their responses within two or three weeks. All experts did so.

According to the results of second Delphi, highly ranked items were ‘parents’ desire to help their children have a strong academic background or status’, ‘educational motivation composed of parents’ love for children and desire for success in life’, and ‘motivation or desire to seek

academic background or status for success in life.' 'Survival instinct in the situation of education war', 'sort of psychological energy', and 'behavior to pursue education for selfish reasons,' were ranked low.

### 3) Stage 3: Third Delphi

For the third stage, the same list of 20 items was sent to the experts again. On the list given to each expert, the previous ranking given by that expert in the second Delphi as well as the median ranking given by all experts, representing majority opinion, during the Second Delphi for each item were shown. The experts were asked to revise their own rankings of the 20 items after reading the median ranking data. If any new ranking of any item was more than 3 ranks away from the median (i.e., majority) rank, the expert providing that dissenting new ranking was requested to provide a written rationale for his/her dissenting regarding that item (e.g., rank of this item should be higher because ----). All experts returned their responses and their written rationale for dissension within three weeks.

The results of third Delphi showed a similar pattern when compared to the second Delphi. Although the experts had a chance to revise their ranks after reading the written rationale for dissension, only two items were newly ranked high and low in the third Delphi process. They were 'parents' strong psychological energy focused on education for children' and 'parents' instinctive needs based on love for their children' respectively.

### 4) Stage 4: Fourth Delphi

The final stage of Delphi was very similar to the third stage except that, on the list for a given expert, each item was accompanied by that expert's 3rd Delphi ranking, the median ranking of all experts and reasons that the item should be ranked higher or lower. Each expert was asked to take into consideration the rationale for higher and/or lower rankings when s/he considers each of the items, its median ranking (i.e., majority opinion), his/her own 3rd Delphi ranking. After considering all these factors, the experts were asked to finalize their rank order of the items. All experts returned their responses within four weeks.

## **3. Results and discussion**

The results of Delphi process show that beliefs related to parents' desire to help their children have academic credentials or higher degrees were considered the most important components of education fever (see Table 1). Other highly ranked items were related to parents' needs or motivation toward their children's social and financial success. However, items measuring parents' instinct or psychological satisfaction were ranked low. The results showed a consistent pattern throughout the Delphi process. By and large, the surveyed Korean experts believe education fever reflects the idea of parents' desire and motivation to help their children

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Table 1. Final rank order of 20 items through the Delphi process

Item #	Definition of education fever	Median rank
1	parents' desire to help their children have a strong academic background or status	3.0
2	educational motivation composed of parents' love for children and desire for success in life	3.5
3	motivation or desire to seek academic background or status for success in life	4.5
4	parents' strong psychological energy focused on education for children	5.0
5	desire for upward social position/class	7.0
6	parents' investment in children's education	8.0
7	parent's desire for success achieved vicariously through children's educational achievement	8.0
8	desire for success in life through education system	9.0
9	parents' need to help their children enter school	9.5
10	level of parents' expectation for their children's education	9.5
11	primarily, a fever for college entrance exam success	10.0
12	by-product of one-dimensional hierarchical society	12.0
13	motivation embedded in educational phenomena and behaviors	12.5
14	zeal or aspiration for education	13.5
15	zeal of people who desire education, rather than zeal of people who should be educated	14.0
16	parents' psychological proxy satisfaction through children's success in education	14.5
17	survival instinct in the situation of education war	15.5
18	parents' instinctive needs based on love for their children	15.5
19	behavior to pursue education for selfish reasons	16.0
20	sort of psychological energy	19.0

successful in their lives.

The experts' consensus based upon the highly ranked items addressing parents' motivation toward moving into a higher social class or status supports the results of previous research studies (e.g., Chung, 1984; Kim, 1986; Lee, 2003). The Korean experts agree that education fever resides in the parents. That is, education fever is understood as parents' educational motivation, investment behavior, and desire for achievement. Additionally, the parents' education fever is mainly based on helping their children to be successful academically and financially. In other words, they perceive education fever as a bread-and-butter tool, rather than pure academic background or credential.

The consensus reflects Korean society's value system and current school environment. In

Korea, it is still parents who make decisions for their children's education (Hyun, Lee, & Lee, 2003). Although the quality of public education system in Korea has been changed and improved, Korean parents are not sure whether the public schools are ready to help high school students prepare for college entrance exam. In this situation, parents keep spending their energy in order to find better private education systems (e.g., cram schools).

Interestingly, the experts did not choose any instinct-based definitions as high-rank items. They ranked 'parents' survival instinct' and 'parents' instinctive needs based on love for their children' 17th and 18th respectively. They did not give high values to natural needs or motivation as main components of education fever. In contrast, "desire for social position upward" (5<sup>th</sup> item) and "desire for success in life revealed through educational system" (8<sup>th</sup> item) were ranked high. The experts believe that education fever stems from social system, rather than parents' natural needs or desire.

Given the results and insights from the Delphi, the researchers recommend the following ideas for the future study of education fever in Korea. First, since it is parents who possess education fever, more extensive studies should be conducted in order to investigate education fever from a parent's perspective. For instance, lots of Korean parents stress the importance of earning a degree while most educational experts insist that critical and creative thinking abilities are more important in the future (Hyun, Lee, & Lee, 2003; Kim, et al., 2003; Lee, et al., 2002). There is not sufficient evidence about whether the experts are too much idealistic to ignore the existing power of credentialism in Korean society or parents simply do not understand the meaning of a degree in knowledge-based society where more creative thinking is important, rather than having a high degree. Based upon the high ranked items, it is recommended to conduct national level research in order to identify factors that explain the root of parents' education fever.

Second, in order to address parents' education fever at the national level, a more systemic review of education fever should be conducted. Many definitions of education fever rely on observable phenomena such as the competitive college entrance exams, cram schools, and money spending for private education. In particular, many of the definitions are usually from the negative aspects of education fever. Although the concept of education fever itself has been used to explain a sort of social pathology in Korean society, they may not capture the main focus of parents' educational motivation. Thus, instead of perpetuating the ideology of education fever as a negative window into the understanding of Korean society, studies should investigate the meaning of education fever, and develop new concepts reflecting different dimensions of education fever.

Third, although education fever is a unique concept addressing educational issues in Korea, it could be extended to international level. Educational phenomena (e.g., strong parental involvement) in Western countries can be explained by adapting the education fever concept. This has been demonstrated in two settings. An international conference focusing on education fever (Institute for Educational Research, 2003) is one example of the ways in which the

concept of education fever can be used for academic research purposes in other countries. Furthermore, research papers presented at a recent symposium of American Educational Research Association addressed the concept of education fever from Asian and American perspectives (Aemero, 2004; Li, 2004; Yu & Suen, 2004; Yang, 2004).

In short, education fever is still an evolving concept needing more investigations and research. The concept covers not only psychological and motivational aspects of Korean parents' aspiration for education, but also complex social systems and culture in Korea. In order to be a good academic concept and measurable construct for further research studies, education fever needs more thorough theoretical refinement, quantitative measures, and qualitative investigations. Additionally, it is hoped that education fever can be applied to educational research in other Asian and Western countries.

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<sup>1</sup> 教育熱 could be translated into 'education zeal', 'enthusiasm for education', 'aspiration for education', etc.

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