

Korean middle school students' reflections on the Free Semester policy

*How young adolescents in Korea exercise agency in
the context of East Asian education reform*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to explore how Korean middle school students exercise agency in the Free Semester policy setting. The Free Semester is an education reform policy in Korea which has been implemented to change traditional East Asian learning environment to be more student-centered and creative one since 2013. This qualitative research is motivated by what kinds of difference the Free Semester policy have brought in regards to Korean young adolescents' perception on schooling, learning and autonomy. Data for this study was mainly consisted of semi-structured interviews with seven Korean public middle school students; three second-grade girls (age of 13), one second-grade boy (age of 13), one third-grade girl (age of 14) and two third-grade boys (age of 14) who experienced the Free Semester one or two years ago. To analyze the interview data, thematic analysis was used and, as a result, three main themes were found as follows: Theme 1. Experiencing autonomy, Theme 2. Hope for more autonomous actions 3. Appreciation of social and cultural values. Korean middle school students experienced a widened range of agency in a newly given school setting under the Free Semester policy. However, their agency was still far limited by East Asian education culture. The students were stuck in ambivalent situations; while the students are encouraged for student-centered and creative learning by the Free Semester policy, they were still pressured to value traditional passive learning attitude since it is regarded as a winning strategy to earn a higher test score.

Keywords: Free Semester, Korean education reform, Asian education culture, Korean middle school student, agency

FOREWORD

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INTRODUCTION

CHILDREN IN EAST ASIAN CONTEXT

South Korea is well known for its education fever (Sharma, 2013). Many Koreans believe that thanks to their investment on education they could transform their country from an extremely poor rural economy to middle-income industrial economy (Lee, 2002: 1). In fact, this passion for education has been commonly considered as an essential drive of South Korea's fast economic growth after Korean War in 1950 (Lee, 2002). However, it also brought about a negative effect. There are many reports about how stressed Korean students are from excessive studying. According to the survey in 2015 by South Korean nonprofit organization for education, Asunaro, South Korean high school students spend an average of 12 hours per a day on schoolwork and more than 70 percent of answerers mentioned they "feel guilty" if they take a break (Shim, 2015). In addition, it is not difficult to find examples of children burdened with excessive studying like 83 percent of five-year children in Korea go to 'Hagwon (a Korean term for a private class)' for academic achievement for around five days per a week and for 2-year-olds it is more than two days per a week on average, which is found in the survey conducted by the Korea Institute of Child Care and Education in 2016 (Bak, 2017).

While most students complain about excessive stress from studying, domestic public opinions still support nation's passionate interest in education. One example used as a proof in support of their insistence is results of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) (Yoon, 2014). Korea has been one of the top countries in PISA tests since the first examination in 2000 (Jung, 2015). The most controversial point in regards to PISA result is between distrust and trust about traditional teaching style, which has been considered as low-level education driving students into simple memorizing as a way of learning. However, the PISA results proved that Korean education is competitive and Korean students' problem-solving ability is fairly good. According to PISA report in 2012, Korea is among the top three performances in both the PISA computer-based assessment of mathematics and the PISA digital reading test (OECD, 2012). People in Korea perceived this fact as telling that Korean education system is in high-level and this pride hid the nation's problems in education (Yng, 2015) and justified maintaining

academic burdens on students. However, education reformers like Hee-Yeon Cho, Superintendent as head of the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education, contended that good PISA score is not something to be proud of when considering how hard we have pushed our children into ‘never-ending competition’ (Bak, 2017). In Korea students are driven to engage in years-long competition to get into top-tier universities. There are many social phenomena such as ‘Tiger Moms (a term referred to the parenting style pushing children to attain a high level of academic achievement)’, ‘cram schools (a term for private schools which are specialized in training students to meet a certain academic goal, especially test results)’ and highly authoritative learning environment (Koo, 2014) pointed out as causes for Korea’s excessive competition of education.

Generally, tradition of Confucianism has been claimed as a root of why Asian countries are so obsessed with their children’s education and academic success (Lee, 2011). According to Cheng (2016), Chinese philosopher Confucius urged to recruit high-ranked government officers through civil examination. It was a revolutionary idea when it was initially implemented because the examination granted everyone a chance to improve social rank. Over 2000 years, that system has strongly remained throughout East Asian countries. As a result, there are several unique Asian cultures regarding education still remained. For instance, equating social status to academic achievement was one of them which left behind parents’ belief of pouring everything into children’s studying. This explains why Korean young students’ studying is family-related and closely regarded as moral excellency that emphasizing perseverance, self-control and dedicational attitude (Stefan, 2012). While Korean parents and society push their children in the way which they believe better for their children’s future economically and socially, children’s present struggle with excessive academic burden, authoritative parenting and hierarchical education environment are still on going.

FREE SEMESTER POLICY AS A MEANS TO REFORM EDUCATION IN KOREA

To bring a change to nation’s strong belief on education and free children from excessive burdens of studying, the Free Semester policy was implemented as one of the education reform policies in Korea. In 2013, the Free Semester started as a pilot program in 42 public middle schools and then expanded to all public middle schools in 2016 (Ministry of Education 2015 b,

p.4). From 2018, the policy expanded its implementation into a year-long period but most official documents still call the policy as the Free ‘Semester’ rather than the Free ‘Year’ so that this study keep referring to it the Free Semester. ‘Free’ Semester means being free from former written tests, which is considered the most significant in this policy. It offers one semester or a year (one Free semester from 2013 to 2017, one Free year since 2018) for freshmen of middle schools with opportunities for alternative classes instead of traditional Korean school classes. Each of the Free Semester classes falls under the following four categories; 1) Career Exploration Activities, 2) Art and Sports Education Activities, 3) Club Activities, and 4) Elective Activities (Ministry of Education, 2015 b). For the Elective Activities, teachers can choose how to consist the class based on students’ preference. 3D printer modeling was suggested as one example of class contents for the Elective Activities in the Free Semester guideline (Ministry of Education, 2015 b: 3). This exemplary suggestion shows what differentiates the Free Semester classes from conventional school classes in Korea. The main focus of the Free Semester policy is to boost students’ active involvement in school class; increase their participant level and develop democratic learning atmosphere in classroom (Ministry of Education, 2015a). A typical type of class in Korean middle school forces students to have a passive learning attitude. Students are required to sit still at their individual desks and listen to the teacher for 45-minute duration of each class. However, through the Free Semester policy, teachers are supposed to give students more opportunity to have a discussion and experiment with friends through team project and cooperative group learning (Ministry of Education, 2015a). Through all those efforts, the Free Semester policy aims to nurture learners’ creativity and help them build their own character so as to help them enjoy “happy education” (Ministry of Education, 2015a: 6).

Like most Asian countries, Korean education system also has valued good test results and academic achievement, which led to excessive competition among students for higher grades. On the other hand, traditional moral values in Asia emphasizing the respect for the elderly or authority pushes young students to conform to what they are instructed by adult teachers in school. It was quite sensational when Hye-Jung Lee proved in her recent report that students even in the top-tier university such as Seoul University who maintain the attitude of traditional passive learning style actually succeed in achieving A grades (Lee, 2018). A strong cycle in which a student with an attitude of conforming to social convention succeed in academic goal drove students to maintain passive learning style. The Free Semester policy aims

to change this education culture through reforming national education system, which means that the policy tries to make a fundamental change into student-centered learning paradigm. To do so, the Free Semester policy has reformed school curriculum to become more flexible by giving more autonomy to schools and teachers and included more of participatory and cooperative activities (Ministry of Education, 2015 b: 2).

IRISH TRANSITION YEAR AS A MODEL

Free Semester policy is known to have been developed based on analysis of Transition Year in Ireland, Afterschole in Denmark and PRAO in Sweden, and among them the Transition Year policy in Ireland has been referred to as a model in most researches related to Korean Free Semester policy. According to Guidelines of Transition Year policy (Department of Education, 1993: 2), Transition Year is a one-year program taken after Junior Cycle (mostly at the age of 15-16 years) aiming to offer students “a broad educational experience with a view to the attainment of increased maturity before proceeding to further study and/or vocational preparation (1993:2)”. The reason why Korean Ministry of Education considered Transition Year policy as the best model was because they share the same domestic problem in education such as excessively competitive learning environment and relying on human resources in national economy (Yoon, 2013: 2). Both countries wanted to reform their education to be more innovative and grant students with greater autonomy of their own learning and decision-making.

WHY IS HEARING CHILDREN’S VOICES IMPORTANT?

Within traditional East Asian context, learning is closely related to values like conformity, diligence and perseverance to endure hardship (Raymond & Choon, 2017: 199). Emphasizing those values, on the other hand, has weakened children’s autonomy, reflexivity and agency. However, as globalization proceeded and western perception of human rights have become prevailed in East Asian countries, children’s voices got rather valued. As one trend of globalization, PISA reports have been regarded as important yardsticks representing the

national education system with regards to how students evaluate about their learning environment, their satisfaction in lives which make implications of the way in which the government improves education policies (Ringarp, 2016: 447-448). According to PISA report in 2015, under the category of ‘student’s well-being’, Korea marked the lowest in students’ life satisfaction rate among the surveyed countries (OECD, 2015 a). It was the most referred news in Korea in relation to education reform agenda. PISA report on students’ well-being is based on assumption that students’ feelings of being part of a school community and good relations with their parents and teachers are important factors which decide their academic performance (OECD, 2015 a). Based on this assumption, students’ life satisfaction, sense of belonging at school and schoolwork-related anxiety have been surveyed, and Korea’s results mostly marked one of the lowest (OECD, 2015 b).

In addition, including children as subjects of opinion gathering in the process of policy is fundamentally supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. UNCRC Article 12 (Respect for the views of the child) maintains that when adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account (The United Nations, 1989). Considering UNCRC as the most acknowledged international standard for children’s human rights, hearing children’s voices should be regarded as universal even in the matters of domestic policies. In support of this, as Archard (2016: 30) maintained, the rights to be heard is important because “what makes it valuable is both that there is a point to making one’s views known and, furthermore, that making one’s views known makes a difference”. This articulates the basic ground of hearing children’s voices in the matters of the Free Semester policy as their own rights.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study is developed based on the concept of ‘agency’, which means the capacity of an actor in a given environment. The concept of agency facilitates the view perceiving a child as a subject who actively makes relations and copes with circumstances (James, 2009: 34). Therefore, theoretical background of agency supports that children as social actors are not just a passive recipient but actively reacts to its environment and engages in making a difference to a relationship, a decision, social assumption and constraints (Mayall, 2002, cited in James, 2009:

34). It enables researchers to acknowledge both social structures which surround the subject children and their efforts to cope with circumstances (Klocher, 2007: 92). James (2009: 34) evaluated that, through the concept of agency, contemporary child studies could reconceptualize the ways in which children are understood as active participants in society. This epistemological change brought an attention into the significance of children's experience (James, 2009: 40-41), and my study draws on this approach of children's agency and focuses on how they construct their own lives, how they react to given circumstances and make a decision for their own interest.

In sociology, an agent is an individual who engage with social structure. An agent may make a change in pre-existing social structure by production or be constrained by the social structure and become a part of reproduction. According to Corsaro (2005: 489), children's action of reproduction means that they "contribute to cultural production" and, at the same time, they are "being constrained by the societies and cultures of which they are members". In reference to this concept, my study also examines how children produce and reproduce social and cultural values and how those are presented in actions.

Agency may be classified in various forms such as complicity, compromise, deviance or resistance and with various motivation - whether intentionally or unintentionally, voluntarily or involuntarily, as a self-expression, self-interest or group interest (Parker & Dales, 2014: 165). Based on these conceptual background, my research studies what kinds of actions children would make under the Free Semester setting and its implications.

IMPORTANCE OF THIS STUDY

As a current trend of Korea that children's views are much more valued and heard than traditional Asian context, the need to research children's thoughts and opinions in the process of legal legislation have become important (Clayton, 2013; Kim et al, 2016; Wall, 2016). This importance become justifying researches of children's agency. While there is a prevailing trend trying to attain children's views on education policies in Korea (Kim et al, 2016; Yeo & Chae, 2016; Shin, 2017), there has hardly been researches about children's agency based on ethnographic approaches to their day-to-day experience. As mentioned in the part of theoretical

framework, the concept of agency helps the researcher to view children's perception and behavior from an approach that the child is an active social actor. The basis of hearing children's voices and looking into their agency may apply to the Free Semester policy since this policy aims to change the direction of educational influence on students. How the students have been affected is an essential subject in analyzing the policy and it is also useful to improve students' school life as well which justify the importance of this study.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND QUESTIONS

To understand what Free Semester policy has brought about in Korean middle school and how it is perceived by the students and their environment, this study aims to look into the students' feelings and thoughts concerning the policy and to explore how Korean middle school students exercised agency based on the experience of the Korean education reform policy . This qualitative research would glance at how Korean middle school students' thoughts and actions are described and accounted for in interviews including what kinds of actions the students make to exercise agency. To figure out the answers for the research problem of 'How do Korean middle school students exercise agency in the Free Semester setting?', the following research questions are set.

1. How did Korean middle school students perceive about influence of their voices and agency?
2. How did the Free Semester policy affect students' daily lives at school, home and private classes?
3. What did students do in trying to expand their autonomy or exercise their agency under the Free Semester setting?
4. What do students want from family or school to expand a range of their agency and pursue happiness in their life?

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

EDUCATION CULTURE IN EAST ASIA

In the article *Does culture matter? Education reforms in East Asia*, Cheng (2014) discussed how Asian cultural values of education affected national education reform by examining the cases of three Asian cities; Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore. In his article, Cheng (2014) presents his observation on those countries by three layers.

The first layer is that “it is a cultural heritage that education is highly valued in the East Asian societies (Cheng, 2014: 1)”. He claims that selecting officials through civil examination which started in 603 CE in China still remained in all of East Asian communities that regards ‘education’ as ‘examination preparation’ (2014: 2). As a result, education (or examination) has been considered as a means of social mobility in East Asian culture while it was for acquiring knowledge and skills in the West (2014: 2). Cheng pointed out several cultural values commonly exist in East Asian education culture (2014: 2) and some of them are closely related to this study regarding the Free Semester. First, learners’ educational motivation is most time extrinsically formed, for instance, by family expectation or social pressure. Second, it emphasizes learners’ dedication regardless of their innate ability or social background. Third, education is a process of selecting an elite so that competition is expected. Fourth, the elite is supposed to have wholistic attributes and, therefore, education emphasizes moral dimension.

On the second layer of Cheng’s observation (2014: 2), he argued that most of East Asian countries have gone through comprehensive educational reform in the past 10 to 15 years. Those reforms are still on-going which emphasize individual development, encompass wide areas of education system such as “pedagogy, assessment, school leadership and teacher’s professional development (2014: 3)” and try to expand students’ learning experience other than traditional formal subjects. On the third layer, he claims the important feature of Asian education reform that, despite the effort to remove old cultural belief on education through the reform, it “furthers reflecting the cultural value placed on education (2014: 3)”.

Cheng evaluated such strong traditional values on education above still maintain in

some parts in the process of education reform. For example, parents still wanted to make sure their children get higher scores in the test and teachers reacted to expectations given to them in pursuit of public examination and university entrance test. On the other hand, the cultural norm of high respect on teachers led to a high expectation on teachers' professionalism during the process of current education reform. In addition, as the reform emphasized comprehensive development of individuals, it led to re-emphasis on morality, values, attitudes and ethics (2014: 4). From Cheng's evaluation, it seems like even though the education reform aims to remove traditional Confucian heritage in Asian education, it still remained strongly emphasizing learners' perseverance and parents' seriousness about formal education (2014: 3-4).

Cheng's research shows stubborn existence of Asian cultural belief on education; how deep-rooted it has been constructed, lasted and re-confirmed even in contemporary education reform process in East Asian countries. His findings are meaningful in relation to this study regarding the role of cultural values may work in both ways of hindering changes in Asian society and constraining autonomy of individual social members.

LIMITED AGENCY OF SOCIAL ACTORS IN THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION REFORM

Dil Bach (2017) discussed there can be two conflicting social messages prevailing in the process of education reform especially in East Asian context. In her article of *Battling the Tiger Mother: Pre-School Reform and Conflicting Norms of Parenthood in Singapore* (2017), Singapore parents were stuck in the situation they could not make a choice between traditional belief on education and relaxed parenting style influenced from the West. Current social discourse in Singapore regarding education tend to emphasize passion of learning, being creative and life-long learning perspective while traditional East Asian education culture still places a priority on academic results (2017: 134-135). Singapore parents are often being situated in between those two different values and Bach explained it as a 'double-binding' situation. 'Double-binding' is a phenomenon in which a primary message received to a social actor is systematically contradicted by a secondary so that individual actors cannot exercise their agency actively (2017: 135-136).

In Singapore, the national education reform has been undertaken extensively. However, public schools still run classes in old ways like large scale classes, harsh teachers and persistence of high-stakes examinations such as Primary School Leaving Examination (2017: 141). Bach argued that policies are not passively received by social members but “give rise to active forms of appropriation (2017: 136)”. Therefore, Singapore parents were led to adapt the policy to make it their own (2017: 136) while their practice of agency was limited by mixed messages from education authorities.

Bach’s analysis gives insights of how social structure and cultural belief strongly work in East Asian education reform context. Furthermore, while it is proved that the social actor’s agency was limited by ambivalent social messages, an individual agent still made actions in their own ways. Korea is also a highly constraint East Asian society and shares the same cultural values prevailed in Singapore. Bach’s analysis gives a hint that in Asian context an individual’s decision-making actions may imply more than what it simply appears. Based on Bach’s insight, this study examines what kinds of strategies Korean students as social actors would use in the process of education reform and how they actualize their analysis of social values in practice.

REFLECTING ON FREE SEMESTER POLICY

There have hardly been ethnographic researches about students’ reflection on the Free Semester in Korea. Most researches of the Free Semester are about satisfaction rates of school participants or from a quantitative approach. According to several previous researches regarding students’ feedback on the Free Semester program (Park, 2015; Shin, 2015; Shin, 2017), the Free Semester policy brought in a positive effect in students’ school life. ‘An Analysis of the Social Network Change Characteristics of Students with a Free-Semester Program Experience (Shin, 2017)’ studied students’ experience of the Free Semester program based on the surveys of 2,395 students in 22 schools. It compared pre- and post- survey results and revealed that, after the Free Semester, inner connection among classmates regarding both “friendship network” and “help network” increased remarkably (Shin, 2017). This result may be considered quite meaningful since students’ negative sense toward school life and studying have been chronic problem in Korean education. Another noteworthy study related to the Free

Semester is *Mid/Long term promotion strategy and plan for the Free Semester* by Kim et al (2016) This article (Kim et al, 2016: 54) analyzed the Free Semester policy through comparing the satisfaction surveys of students between pilot schools of the Free Semester and non-pilot schools from 2013 to 2016 as well as several domestic longitudinal studies. The report concluded that the Free Semester policy has brought positive results in five large categories which are 1) quality improvement of classes, 2) interactions among class members 3) students' participatory rate in classes 4) students' creative problem-solving ability and 5) students' happiness (2016: 53-59). According to Kim et al (2016: 59-60), the Free Semester policy has been successfully implemented because the need for education reform in Korean is deeply agreed by students, parents and teachers. With the results above, authors of this research argued the Free Semester seems a positive alternative to pre-existing education system in Korea and, therefore, suggested to expand the policy beyond middle schools and into elementary and high schools (2016: 66-68). Since those two Korean researches above suggested the same result showing the meaningfully positive changes the Free Semester brought in school reform process, the commonality in both articles would be used as a basic reference to discuss about results of the Free Semester.

Korean Ministry of Education implemented the Free Semester policy as a way of education reform. However, as seen in Cheng's research regarding how traditional education culture vastly affected education reform process in East Asia (2014), what the Free Semester policy tried to change in Korean education system seemed a tough mission. Furthermore, Bach (2017) pointed out the unsettling situation that social actors may be trapped in during the process of education reform, which again reminds the important role of education culture in East Asian context and also problems of unfinished reform policy. On the other hand, Kim et al (2016) emphasized the difference the Free Semester made in public middle schools based on students' evaluation of satisfaction rate and feedbacks. While Kim et al (2016) mostly praised the Free Semester as an education policy itself, Cheng (2014) and Bach (2017) suggest a culture-related analysis of East Asian education reform. Unlike the article by Kim et al (2016) which evaluated what students explicitly mentioned, this study uses the concept of children's agency to research what students explicitly uttered as well as implicitly expressed and meant. Therefore, this study places itself as a microscopic analysis of the policy receivers' reflections and perceptions aiming to reveal detailed assessment of the policy in practice and a close description of current trend of educational culture in Korea.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

In this research, ethical consideration is interpreted as thinking about potential harms during the research process and eliminating them in order to protect research participants (Dixon, 2015: 2068). Especially the fact that this research involves children as research participants was regarded as an important point that requires an ethical consideration and the researcher's responsibility (Farrell, 2015:1). Since the interview data was collected in Korea, I mainly followed *The Guideline for Establishment of Research Ethics* (Ministry of Education, 2015) as a basic ethic standard. According to the guidelines, an academic researcher needs to, first of all, respect research subjects' character and rights and treat them impartially. Secondly, a researcher has to protect the research participants' personal information and privacy. Third, honest and transparent research practice based on fact should be assured.

To ensure participants' rights and transparency of the research, I informed all the participants of their rights and background information related to this study while obtaining consents from both interviewees and their parents. According to Alderson (2005; 34), a valid consent should be in a form based on participant's willingness and to do so the process and use of the interview should be guaranteed with transparency. To realize this basis, I provided the information sheet and the interview guide (see Appendix 1, 2, 3 and 4) and fully discussed about the research topic, use of the interview results and procedures of the interview. Since the seven children in the interview were minors, aged from 13 to 14, I utmost paid attention to informing them of their rights. In the written consent for children, I explicitly mentioned they can 'take a break', 'demand for changing the question' and 'stop the interview' at any time during the interview if they feel necessary (see Appendix 2).

The interview was held in a café for convenience of both parents and children. The choice of meeting place was affected by cultural features of Korea. First of all, the café for the interviews were specialized for study meetings and, therefore, it was mostly quiet. Second, since the interviewees' daytime was fully scheduled with private classes, they wanted to use the interview as a refreshing event and preferred to somewhere not regular and they were excited about treats like drinks and cakes. Since the parents also preferred the café to their homes as a meeting place, we settled on cafe. While I interviewed the children, the parents did not attend because they expressed that they did not want to affect their children's answer. The children

also expressed they prefer not to have the parents attending in the interview to formulate their own answers freely. On the other hand, since my research is not directly involved in any school, I did not gain consents from schools.

The other part taken into as ethical consideration in this study was power dynamics between the researcher and interviewees. Power difference between the researcher and research participants might occur since it is always the researcher who gets to ask the question, decide when to go on to the next question and when to stop the interview (Dixon, 2015; 2071). To gain the participants' truthful, reflective and authentic responses, it is also important that the participants do not feel themselves deemed simply as a mere interview object (Dixon, 2015; 2071). Transparency of the research aim and the interview procedure as well as provision of related information for this research were considered to help the research participants not feel as objects. I discussed about backgrounds of this research as much as the interviewees and parents wanted before having the actual interviews. Most parents and children expressed a lot of interests about the result of their children's interview and my thesis. Those interests of both the parents and the children to attend the interview seems probably due to the discussion in which they actively questioned and talked about the research topic. This process worked as a way of building trust and reciprocal relationship between me and the interviewees and parents which led a relaxed atmosphere of the interview and more reflexive and active conversation from the participants.

For confidentiality of the participants' personal information and to avoid any possible harms caused by publishing this thesis, I carefully scrutinized the interview guide before the interview if the interview questions include too private or sensitive matters in relation to their family and other close ones and focused on the interviewees' general ideas as a member of young student group. To guarantee anonymity, all the interviewees' real names were not used in this study and appeared as numbers like 'Interviewee 1' through 'Interviewee 7'.

METHOD

Since my research aims to study about the experiences of Korean middle school students under the Free Semester policy, qualitative research was regarded as a suitable approach. In addition,

as a method to analyze the data, thematic analysis was utilized to focus on the patterns of what emerges from the interviewees' narratives which contain meaningful implications in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2008: 79-81). By thematic analysis, I intended to include "a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2008: 78)" to analyze interviewee's answers and the reasons behind them. I especially used an inductive 'bottom-up' approach among ways of thematic analysis and thematic analysis of being inductive means that it will not be driven by pre-existing theoretical frames but more by collected data.

On the other hand, as a limitation of this study, what was found in the study cannot be seen as something general for what happened under the Free Semester policy in Korea since it was not conducted widely enough to prove overall effect of the policy and the collected data heavily relied on the interviewee's personal reflections.

PARTICIPANTS

I interviewed seven public middle school students at the age of 13-14 who live in the same major city of Korea. I limited the interview participants to the students who lives in the same city since Korean public schools are primarily governed by municipal education offices. Almost public middle schools in same city share the same policy and the same school schedules. Because different education settings in schools may affect how students feel about the Free Semester policy, the interviewees' residence was considered when recruiting.

When this study was conducted, the Free Semester policy happened only in the first grade in middle schools (usually at the age of 12). Therefore, as a second (age 13) or a third grader (age 14), every interview participant experienced the Free Semester last year or on the year before. At the time when this research started the first graders in Korean middle schools did not begin the Free Semester yet so that I excluded the first graders and interviewed the other two graders in middle school.

Interviewee	Age	gender	the grade they are in now (in 2018)	The year he/she experienced the Free Semester
1	13	Girl	2 nd	2017 (a year ago)
2	13	Girl	2 nd	2017 (a year ago)
3	13	Girl	2 nd	2017 (a year ago)
4	13	Boy	2 nd	2017 (a year ago)
5	14	Girl	3 rd	2016 (two years ago)
6	14	Boy	3 rd	2016 (two years ago)
7	14	Boy	3 rd	2016 (two years ago)

Figure 1. Interview Participants List

INTERVIEWS

To guarantee enough support for the research participants' understanding of the aim and backgrounds of this research as well as the use of collected interview data, the information sheet and the interview guides are offered to both interviewing children and their parents, and written consents were also obtained from them. The formats of those information are attached in Appendix 1,2,3 and 4 in the end of this thesis. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes to 50 minutes in a public cafe, and all of them were audio recorded. Since the interview was semi-structured, I used the following five large questions as a guidance and used sub-questions if needed for each interviewee. The following questions were all asked in Korean and here are translated in English for the readers of this thesis.

1. What do you think a school and schooling are and how do you become thinking that way?
2. Tell me about how things have changed around you in schools, home and private lessons after the Free Semester was implemented as a school policy?
3. Is there anything became different in the way you define schooling, learning and individual development after experiencing the Free Semester?

4. Is there anything you have done differently or want to do differently since you experienced the Free Semester setting?
5. What do you think you need from school and family in order to be happy and achieve your future dream?

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze the data, I used the contextualist approach among thematic methods. Contextualist approach is a way to unravel the surface of reality by looking into how individuals make meanings of their experiences and, on the other hand, how social context impinges on those meanings (Braun & Clarke 2006: 81). Therefore, assumptions behind the interviewees' answers were importantly analyzed and those were reflected in relation to the reality of the interviewees' world.

During the process of discovering themes, I draw on Braun and Clarke's definition of the theme that "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (2006: 82)". As a step-by-step guide for thematic analysis, Braun & Clarke (2006: 86-93) suggested six phases and I followed those steps as follows.

Phase		Description of the process
1	Familiarize yourself with your data	I listened to each audio recording twice and tried to search for connections, meanings and implications in the interviewee's saying. I sensed that the interviewees had good memories about the Free Semester regarding its new learning styles. However, at the same time, they also had strong urge to achieve higher academic goal. Furthermore, strong connection between the interviewees' studying and their parent's belief, school tests and social values were found too. I transcribed all of recorded interviews and checked for accuracy.
2	Generating	Interesting features of the data were coded, across the entire data set. I

	initial codes	tried to find codes as many as possible, i.e. such as ‘obligation to study hard’, ‘desire for good test score’, ‘being excited to go to school during the Free Semester’, ‘higher self-esteem’, ‘worry about the future job’, ‘university entrance test’, ‘poor quality of the Free Semester classes’, ‘value of friendship’, ‘judging co-students’ attitude’, ‘slight recognition of students’ rights’, ‘importance of smartphone’ and so on.
3	Searching for themes	<p>A variety of codes were grouped into a few units that are seemingly connected each other. This was organized as an initial thematic map. Each group of codes was explained with a brief description and turned into the theme. I started to sense significance of each theme.</p> <p>Initial themes were grouped like following:</p> <p>Group 1 (good feedbacks on the Free Semester): ‘being excited for the Free Semester classes’, ‘higher self-esteem’, ‘learning from friends’, ‘good memories of friendship and co-learning’.</p> <p>Group 2 (poor quality of the Free Semester classes): ‘policy’s unreliability’, ‘only for six months’, ‘not helpful for the future academic achievement’.</p> <p>Group 3 (smartphone): ‘connected with classmates’, ‘peer culture’, ‘useful to learn new things’, ‘inseparable from daily life’, ‘potential device to practice political actions’.</p> <p>Group 4 (dislike being directed): ‘parents do not understand them’, ‘being pushed from parents to study’, ‘family love’.</p> <p>Group 5 (study to get into a good university): ‘obligation to study hard’, ‘desire for good test score’, ‘university entrance test’, ‘future job’.</p> <p>Group 6 (cultural constraints): ‘conform to social values’</p> <p>Group 7 (importance of social skills): ‘connected to classmates’, ‘judging co-students’</p>
4	Reviewing themes	I developed the thematic map to be more refined and checked if the coded data in each theme were well-connected and coherent. I considered validity of each theme in relation to the data set and if the themes reflected meanings evident in the data. I checked if the extracts in themes are not overlapped each other to avoid repetition in analysis. Since this study is

		about middle school students, the themes related to school life and friendship emerged many times. The themes related to family, classmates, studying were considered as possibly overlapped so that those themes were carefully reorganized based on coherence of each group' context.
5	Defining and naming themes	<p>I tried to find stories of each theme and refine its the specifics so as to identify essence of the themes. After fully working out to make clear definitions of each theme, I named each of the three large themes and their sub-themes;</p> <p>Theme 1. Experiencing autonomy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1. Making choices of the Free Semester classes 1.2. An active role in school class <p>Theme 2. Hope for more autonomous actions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1. Using smartphone as a potential device to expand autonomy 2.2. Resist being directed by parents <p>Theme 3. Appreciation of social and cultural values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.1. School as a means to prepare for university entrance tests and to get a good job 3.2. Reflecting on social structure 3.3. Social interaction
6	Producing the report	I organized the themes with logics and examples to support them. I related them with research questions, previous literature, and then produced the report of analysis.

Figure 2. Steps of Thematic Analysis

ANALYSIS

Through qualitative analysis, there are three main themes with either two or three sub-themes discovered from the collected interview data. The following themes are numbered in the order of prevalence of the patterns appeared in the data in relation to the research problem of ‘how students exercise their agency based on the experience in the Free Semester?’.

Theme 1. Experiencing autonomy

1.1. Making choices of the Free-Semester classes

1.2. An active role in school classes

Theme 2. Hope for more autonomous actions

2.1. Using smartphone as a potential device to expand autonomy

2.2. Resist being directed by parents

Theme 3. Appreciation of social and cultural values

3.1. School as a means to prepare for university entrance test and to get a good job

3.2. Reflecting on social structure

3.3. Social interaction

THEME 1: EXPERIENCING AUTONOMY

The interviewees pointed out what they liked the most about the Free Semester policy was expanded autonomy. Autonomy here and throughout this study means freedom to make an action and decision on someone’s own will. The interviewees commonly mentioned one of the most representative features of the Free Semester classes was they were consisted of a lot of different learning experiences rather than traditional studying. They also mentioned this feature made the Free Semester classes less constraint than normal school classes. It means that the

Free Semester policy granted students to have more autonomy. The form (that is a way) of the interviewees' experience of autonomy was mainly by making choices of classes and through active participating in classes. Those two are categorized as sub-themes under the theme 'experiencing autonomy'.

SUB-THEME 1.1: MAKING CHOICES OF THE FREE-SEMESTER CLASSES

Under the Free Semester policy, schools are supposed to offer the opportunity for students to make a choice among various classes (see Introduction p.2). This was a quite different school setting in Korea and many students in the interview mentioned they enjoyed it. By glancing at the students' decision-making process when they made a choice of classes, the process of their practice of agency was revealed. Interviewee 7 described her choice of the Free Semester class as follows.

“I once chose to take the Rhythm class for the Art education activity during the Free Semester period. I did not think the class would be much helpful or consisted of interesting lessons but I did choose it anyway because I knew I would have enough time interacting with my friends in that class.”

Interviewee 4 articulated his criteria of class selection like follows.

“I took the movie class during the Free Semester period because I liked the fact that I can watch the movies during in-school time.”

As reflected in those two answers above, the interviewees made a purposeful choice in pursuit of their interest whether it is for being with friends or not to be directed as usual school classes. Such actions imply how they exercise their agency. Making choices is a very basic form through which children exercise agency (Samman & Santos, 2009: 3-4). A typical Korean school is a uniformly nationalized institution in which students are unilaterally offered with an orderly structured learning instruction. Although the opportunities for students to exercise agency were still very limited, the fact that the students chose the classes with their own will is an important change happened in the Free Semester period.

As a result of empowering students' agency by the Free Semester policy, some of the

interviewees actually tried to put their thought and wills into actions based on new ideas and inspirations acquired from the Free Semester classes. For instance, Interviewee 3 said:

“I experienced various activities through the Free Semester. One class led me to consider about writing lyrics in my future. I once searched for books related to producing lyrics, and read the book written by one of the most famous lyricists in Korea, Ina Kim, more than five times. To understand the process of producing lyrics, I have read her book again and again”.

This utterance of Interviewee 3 shows explicit attempts by young adolescents to achieve what they desired on their own will and ability with given autonomy in pursuit of their self-improvement.

The theme ‘making choices’ revealed that Korean adolescents appreciated given opportunities to make choices of school classes during the Free Semester and through that they experienced enlarged latitude of available agency.

SUB-THEME 1.2: AN ACTIVE ROLE IN SCHOOL CLASSES

The interviewees commonly answered they preferred the Free Semester to normal school semesters with a conventional lesson format. Most of them mentioned, under the Free Semester setting, they felt differently about the school and learning. Interviewee 7 said:

“During the Free Semester, I could sense kind of brightness in the classroom”.

Interviewee 1 also differentiated the Free Semester class from normal school classes that consist of traditional subjects. Every time when she referred to the Free Semester class she called it as ‘Free Semester’ whereas she called non-Free Semester class as just ‘class’. From the way of how Interviewee 1 named the classes differently between the Free Semester class and the traditional school class, it is revealed how students perceived the Free Semester as unique and different from conventional school classes. Interviewee 1 also mentioned:

“During the Free Semester, the classes did not feel like studying time. I enjoyed talking with my friends about assigned topics. I liked having an opportunity to

represent my opinion in front of the class. It was a nice feeling that the teacher recognized my opinion and praised me. Teachers hardly praise me in normal classes.”

The interviewees liked the experience to lively participate in the class and present their opinions. During the interviews, many times the interviewees expressed excitement when talking about their roles as a presenter in the class, a helper for other students’ learning or of sharing their feelings and opinions in the Free Semester classes. Interviewee 4 mentioned he liked the Free Semester classes where he could share his feelings with classmates after watching the movie. In conventional school classes, watching movies is considered as a breaktime. However, in the Free Semester class, the movie was regarded as a source of the class. This difference brought a liveliness in the class where students transformed what they had observed in daily life into school lessons in forms of writing and discussion. Those lively interactions within school classroom seldom existed in regular Korean public schools in the past. From those reflections of interviews with Interviewee 1, 4 and 7 above, it could be sensed that the Free Semester works as it was aimed by the government to make a difference in educational environment. As analyzed in many domestic researches (Kim, 2016: 54-95; Shin, 2017), the Free Semester successfully brought about a change in public school in terms of increasing students’ active participation in classes, interactions between students and their sense of belonging at schools.

However, this active evaluation of the Free Semester classes by students was not limited only to positive feedback on learning environment but also included negative criticism on the Free Semester classes. Aside from learning environment and democratic operation of classes, all the interviewees commonly criticized quality of the Free Semester classes. For example, Interviewee 4 said:

“In the cooking class, we learned how to make cookies. But, making cookies is not such a professional job. You can make them easily at home. Furthermore, in the class, all the ingredients were already measured in bowls and what we had to do was only mixing them together. To become a cook, we need far more knowledge and insight than that. I highly doubt that cooking class was really helpful for us to seek our dream.”

Interviewee 6 also mentioned:

“As one of the Free Semester class, the global NGO agency World Vision came to conduct a class. The presenter from World Vision showed us a video clip of children’s lives in poor countries. I understand their situation is so hard and I also admit I do not know much specifics of poor life. But, what the presenter did in the class was literally emphasizing compassion. As a class, I do not understand what is so special to force us with sympathy.”

Due to the poor quality of class contents and vocational practice, most students evaluated the Free Semester classes not as fully reliable or trustworthy as normal school lessons. Interviewee 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7 all articulated that the Free Semester classes would not be much help for their academic career. This unreliability of school classes resulted students to have anxiety about maintaining their academic status. I could sense while explaining the Free Semester experience in relation to academic scores that the interviewees felt pitiful about that they did not keep working on self-regulated studying schedules. Interviewee 1, 2, 3 and 4 all shyly uttered that they ‘just played’ during the Free Semester. Interviewee 2 mentioned:

“Every other student except for me studied really hard. But, I like playing. When I heard to study a bit more from my parent, I did a little bit but that was all’.

Most of those who answered they ‘just played’ during the Free Semester also expressed willingness to study harder afterwards.

Students’ experience of playing an active role in the Free Semester classes made them more deeply involved in class interactions and, based on it, they had a sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. On the other hand, they also aggressively criticized the quality of the Free Semester classes and negatively appraised the policy’s reliability. The interviewees reflected on their academic habits and attitude by comparing with co-students and, then, reformulated their own ways. Taking this further in relation to agency, the Free Semester policy may be evaluated that by offering more opportunity to experience autonomy and reflexivity it brought in an internal development of individual student which in turn may strengthen the students’ agency. However, it is revealed that the reliability of the policy as a way of education reform and to be practical help for students’ vocational career and academic knowledge was failing.

THEME 2: HOPE FOR MORE AUTONOMOUS ACTIONS

As the second main theme, Korean middle school students' wish to widen their agency in practice was found. This hope was appeared in two contexts in the interview. First, the interviewees realized smartphones can be a useful device in expanding their autonomy and to practice agency especially in school context. Second, they hoped to make decisions independently and not to be directed from their parents.

SUB-THEME 2.1: USING SMARTPHONE AS A POTENTIAL DEVICE TO EXPAND AUTONOMY

When students were asked how they define schooling or learning, several interviewees mentioned about smartphone as a new way to acquire knowledge. The smartphone was being perceived as a device that frees the learners from formats of learning or settings of time and space. While the traditional learning method forces learners to passively follow what they are instructed, the smartphone grants the students to have an initiative to direct their learning styles and when and where to stop it.

From the interviews, it was showed that Korean youth heavily rely on smartphones. Interviewee 5 explained she uses her smartphone around four hours a day on average and so do most of her friends. Exchanging information about homework was also pointed out as one of the most frequent use of smartphone among the peer group. In relation to the Free Semester, especially for project learning classes, Interviewee 1 and 2 mentioned that SNS was used to schedule the meeting and share related information.

“For a project learning, I and the other group members schedule when to meet and where, and also shared research information through SNS.”

“I often check the homework through SNS with my classmates.”

However, the interviewees' parents were not happy with their children's use of smartphone. Interviewee 1 mentioned:

“My dad told me not to use my smartphone too much. Sometimes I got my

phone taken away by my parents”.

Using smartphone often led conflicts between parents and children but the interviewees’ smartphone usage was not always for simple fun. Interviewee 1 and 2 urged they do not need conventional teaching as much as in the past because YouTube or other smartphone applications can replace most of it. Interviewee 1 said:

“I looked up make-up tips in YouTube. It is all in YouTube. I feel like we no longer need traditional lessons to learn new things, not only the make-up but also traditional subjects too.”

Interviewee 1’s articulation implies that the students recognize the ways of independent learning through the smartphone. Among students, perception of learning process was definitely changing from receiving what learners were told to learn into what the learners direct to learn themselves.

On the other hand, one noticeable point of the interviewees’ smartphone use appeared in the interview with Interviewee 6. Interviewee 6 urged the smartphone became inseparable in Korean middle school students’ lives and emphasized its importance saying:

“Last year on the night before the National College Scholastic Ability Test, the test schedule was cancelled due to sudden earthquake (in Po-hang, a city in southeast of Korea). Students were so confused whether they have to go to school like normal weekdays or they should not do so as it was previously scheduled for the National College Scholastic Ability Test. At that point, I as a student president realized Facebook would be useful to quickly spread our school’s decision on it. It turned out that we had to go to school. Only if we could have spread the news on SNS, there would have been less confusion”.

As seen in the interview above, Interviewee 6 became aware of the value of smartphone to gather and spread news and opinions of student group at school. This explanation can be interpreted as a way of young students’ action as a political member at school. Interviewee 6’s answer to the question of what kinds of support he wants from school for happier school life, he urged his school should grant the student group more chances to represent themselves and also expressed strong belief on his co-students’ potential political ability as a group representor.

“My co-students do not normally express their opinions as a school member but, once they are given with a chance to present themselves as a member of the student group, they would definitely represent themselves.”

As seen here, the students wanted to expand their agency as social agents in school structure. They were hoping for better school life for themselves or as a group. In line with it, they felt needs or urge to do some actions to represent themselves as a school member. For instance, the interviewee 6 mentioned:

“I do not think it is right that the school regulates our outfit standard without asking our opinions. Student, parents and teachers must be considered as the three main agents of school regulation agreement. I hope students have more opportunity to be heard”.

As seen in this interview, there was a hope for more autonomy at school and demand for their rights to be heard. The interviewees did not think that the school had changed in the way to listen to students’ voices more due to the Free Semester. However, they had positive expectation that the school would change in the future, and perhaps experiencing the Free Semester classes might have given them some hints of new ways of school learning such as how to present their opinions, interact with other students and teachers and recognized their places in school.

Over all, by formulating their own ways to adopt into high technology, the Korean middle school students tried to widen a range of their autonomous actions. Students used smartphones to teach themselves, acquire up-to-date information and gathered opinions as a school’s interest group. They recognized how smartphone can be effectively used in their lives, and with this device they may further their agency.

SUB-THEME 2.2: RESIST BEING DIRECTED BY PARENTS

The interviewees appeared to resist against their parents’ power exercise, especially when they are directed by the parents about their daily routines and future dreams. The interviewee 1 emphasized it is not right that his parents interfere too much with his studies and the future.

“I hope my mother, teacher and school support me without telling me too much

about directions. For example, when I want to be a cook, they may search for schools or classes for cooking if they wish to help me. But directing me to go here and there is not welcome.”

Interesting point of the interviewees’ resistance is their acting behavior. Typical ways of students to resist their parent are through being silent or avoidant. It is shown in what Interviewee 7 talked about his relationship with his parents.

“I do not talk to my parents about what they would not accept my opinion. I usually measure the possibility if my opinion would be granted or not before I go to talk to them”.

The interviewee 7’s choice of inactive action as a way to resist seems to be caused by a wide gap of power relation between him and parents. Additionally, in some parts, this tendency seems to come from authoritative Asian culture which emphasizes respect for the older and considers talking back to adults as rude (Cheng, 2016). However, it does not necessarily mean the interviewees do not have close relationship with their parents. Most of the interviews said they usually talked about their school life freely with their parents. But in the matters of studying and academic achievement they limitedly expressed their opinions. Interviewee 1 articulated her limited agency because her academic achievement does not meet her parents’ expectation.

“My mom listens to me well but my father pushes me a little bit to study harder. When I said I wanted to do piercing, he said if I got in the top ten in the next test in my class I would be granted to do so. He told me to achieve what I want through effort.”

Regarding ‘studying’, the interviewees often felt they do not have enough grounds to persuade their parents and, therefore, their actions remained inactive even when resisting.

To sum up, the interviewees showed resistance about being directed by their parents but their way of resistance was rather passive and defensive. It might be considered to be caused by the social norms expected to the younger in Asian moral context as well as education culture.

THEME 3: APPRECIATION OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL VALUES

Under the third theme, the aspect that the interviewees were highly constrained by social construction and cultural values was revealed. In support of it, three sub-themes such as ‘school as a means to prepare for university entrance test and to get a good job’, ‘reflecting on social structure’ and ‘social interaction’ were found and analyzed.

SUB-THEME 3.1: SCHOOL AS A MEANS TO PREPARE FOR UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE TEST AND TO GET A GOOD JOB

Although the Free Semester policy brought in a change in educational environment like empowering young adolescents’ autonomy in school as shown in the previous themes, they were still strongly constrained by socially constructed perception on education.

The first social belief generally appeared in the interviews is the close relation between academic ability and job opportunities. When asked about the meaning of studying in the interviewee’s life, Interviewee 4 directly related the studying to the future job.

“When someone’s academic score is good, it means that he/she will enter a top-tier university and gain a good job.”

Interviewee 1 also explained the university is going to be the most important turning-point in her life. To the question of ‘What do you think a school and schooling are?’, all the interviewees commonly answered that the school is a means to prepare for their future. An example of it appeared in the interviewee 5’s definition of a school as “*an institution of preparation for what we want to do in the future*”.

This phenomenon is in line with a feature of education in Asian context which considers education as a means to prepare for human capital in the next generation. It is a dominant social belief regarding education in most Asian countries including Korea (Lightfoot-Rueda, 2018: 43). Under this paradigm, education is promoted rather as an ‘investment’ for the future human resource than as a human right (2018: 44-48). What is found in this study seems that this social

conception is being naturally accepted by Korean young adolescents that the interviewees in this study all emphasized the close relation between academic ability and job opportunities. Another example of students' adoption of existing social values in relation to education is that they pointed out diligence, perseverance and endurance as social norms they should follow as students. For example, when asked what kinds of changes he wants to bring in his daily life, Interviewee 4 answered,

“I want to stop wasting time in my daily schedule like reading comics or dawdling. Instead, I feel like I need to do something rather productive”.

In comparison to the previous theme 1. ‘experiencing autonomy’, findings here in the theme 2.1. looks quite opposite. It seems that the students enjoyed the freedom given by the Free Semester policy and, at the same time, submissively maintained a traditional attitude as a student. A hint to analyze this may be found in the theme 1.2. ‘An active role in school classes’ where student evaluated reliability of the Free Semester classes. All the interviewees agreeably believed the Free Semester is a temporary event. For example, Interviewee 1 often referred to the Free Semester class as ‘not a class’ but a ‘Free’ Semester time. This differentiation implies their perception on which side is more socially dominant and, therefore, will impact on their life.

Most of the interviewees' evaluation of social values in relation to studying was highly influenced by family. Family seems to be an important factor for the interviewees when reflecting on social values in relation to education for Korean young adolescents. For example, Interviewee 3 said:

“My mother told me not to lose focus on studying even during the Free Semester period and I tried really hard to do so.”

As a result, the interviewees perceived studying as the most important part in their daily lives. Interviewee 5 explained about the relation between learning and future dream saying:

“school is a place where we learn, study hard and supposed to achieve good test results. I cannot think of much other than that”.

These behaviors and utterances are in accordance with traditional attitude toward education in East Asia which considers studying as a given job to students (Cheng, 2014: 3).

This phenomenon in turn works as a way of restricting the interviewees' agency. It appeared in the collected data, the interviewees' agency was quite restrained by social construction of 'good university equals to good job' because it implies unlimited pressure of higher test scores on them. One example of it is that they feel ashamed of not achieving high test score in schools. All the interviewees in common showed that their academic achievement at the moment was not good enough to be satisfied with and they feel that they must work harder for it. The interviewee with Interviewee 3 and 5 showed that they acknowledge themselves as obliged to do so. Interviewee 3 said,

“To study hard I need to be patient. I tried really hard to be so. It was unbearable to memorize uncritically whatever I was instructed by teachers. But, my friends who achieved high test scores are not like me. They do not even move from their chairs during a recess. I indeed envy her so much that she can bear everything like that”.

Findings under the theme of 'school as a means to prepare for university entrance tests and to get good jobs' showed that Korean students has a strong belief on traditional value of education. The young adolescents followed Asian style of learning attitude and adopted traditional social norms which are mainly influenced by family. The interviewees felt tremendous pressure about studying and there are various contexts of how those students feel pressured. They perceived the pressure from parents, classmates or what others talk. According to this study, the young adolescents' agency in Korean context is not constrained solely by either one of school system, parenting or friendship. It appeared that they are restricted by a complex of all of those as context of educational culture surrounding them.

SUB-THEME 3.2: REFLECTING ON SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Students tried to decide on their future jobs by actively linking what they like to do or what they are good at in the presence with vocational knowledge and self-reflections acquired from the Free Semester classes.

Interviewee 7 said:

“I once heard about a job of an architect in the vocational education class. Imagining people living in the house I build made me feel kind of happy. It was an awesome feeling. After that, I became considering a dream to be an architect”.

As seen in this interview, students were often aspired to think about what they would do in the future based on inputs from various classes during the Free Semester. Relating their present to the future led them to imagine how they would shape their life reflecting on their social status in given circumstances. In the interviews, most students have tried to place themselves in social structure (Interviewee 1, 4, 6 and 7). Those reflections also led to the awareness that they need good test scores to get a higher status in social structure. In the process of it, the young adolescents actively used their interpretation of social values and economic status of their family and analyzed relation between individual abilities and social traits. They mostly obtain sources for their interpretations from what is nuanced in dramas, discussion with friends or parents' talking. As an example, Interviewee 1 said that:

“Going to the university requires a lot of money. I do not think everyone need to go for university certificate. However, it is people's prejudice that matters. For example, when a celebrity is known as a top-tier university graduate, people tend to look up to him/her”.

In line with it, Interviewee 4 articulated,

“I want to get good grades in the test to enter the universities. Seen in many dramas on TV, people who did not go to good universities could not get good jobs. I do not want to suffer like people in the drama who failed to get employed and become poor”.

Findings in this theme also shows how Korean young adolescents adapt themselves into socio-cultural construction just like what was found in the previous theme 3.1. ‘school as a means to prepare for university entrance tests and to get good jobs’. As a result of interpreting social structure embedded in their environment, the students again chose to train themselves to be good at what is highly regarded in the society. To do so, most of all, ‘studying’ was chosen as a means for them to achieve higher social status and happier life in the future.

SUB-THEME 3.3: SOCIAL INTERACTION

When asked how learning was different during the Free Semester, some interviewees mentioned about good feelings they experienced in the context of cooperative learning and social interactions. Interviewee 3 said:

“I liked the experience in the art class during the Free Semester period. In that class, I got help from my friend who is good at painting. With her help, I could obviously see my painting was much improved. It was such a nice thing, getting some help from my friend and learning from it.”

However, not only the Free Semester class but also the school class overall, all the interviewees mentioned in common that a school is a place to enhance their social abilities when asked a question of ‘what a school means to them’. Interviewee 6 answered:

“School is a place where we learn how to handle with conflicts with others so that we improve our social skills. For instance, I exercise my social skills when I get involved in fights with friends. I am in the third grade in the middle school and, trust me, there are a lot of chances for it”.

Interviewee 2 also pointed out:

“No one can do all things alone, even including studying. It is also less hard when we do things together”.

The Interviewee 1 also emphasized the importance of holistic moral development that each student must achieve from school.

“Morality is important to be a successful person. School is where we develop it.”

Under the theme 3.3 ‘social interaction’, it was verified that students had positive experience of cooperative learning as aimed by the Free Semester policy. Through interactions with peers they developed social skills and moral sense. In addition, they showed strong belief on the need of acquiring social skills for holistic human development. This can be interpreted as an example in line with traditional Asian value analyzed in Cheng’s article (2014: 2) that most Asian

countries where Confucianism is prevailed commonly emphasize education's moral dimension and comprehensive development of learners, and more importantly this traditional value tends to be re-emphasized in the process of Asian education reform.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore how Korean middle school students exercised agency based on the experience of the Korean education reform policy, the Free Semester. As the aim of the Free Semester policy was ultimately to transform educational culture and system in Korea, it was expected to be meaningful to explore the students' perception on learning and schooling regarding how both have changed after experiencing the Free Semester. Furthermore, analyzing how the students perceived about pre-existing social values and norms enabled to understand their perception on social structure and extend of their agency. To do so, a qualitative research based on the interviews with seven Korean public middle school students was conducted to look into the students' reflections, thoughts and feelings.

The analysis of this study demonstrated several evidences of how Korean young adolescents exercise their agency in a newly given environment under the Free Semester policy. The students in the interviews enjoyed the expanded autonomy through making choices of classes to attend or playing an active role in school classes. Having thoughts about a future career and dream in vocational classes during the Free Semester, despite prevailed doubt about quality of class, led the students to have deeper reflection on their presence and future. These findings are in line with the previous study by Kim et al (2016) that the Free Semester policy have brought a positive change in Korean public schools from traditional passive learning to creative and student-centered one. Kim et al (2016: 53-59) evaluated the Free Semester policy has improved class participants' satisfaction, participant rates and interactions among students. In my study, especially the theme 1.2. 'an active role in school class', the students experienced a chance of empowerment when they presented themselves in front of the class and got acknowledged by teachers and classmates which fostered a sense of higher self-esteem. It seems like the Free Semester policy successfully achieved its aim to nurture creative and individualized learning

process in public schools. It is shown in the students' decision-making process in the theme 1 'experiencing autonomy' and what forms the student's action in the theme 2 'hope for more autonomous actions'. They made choices and actions for various reasons such as a strong willingness in pursuit of self-development, relationship with friends or constant reflections on where they are situated in social structure. All those considerations were complexly affected by what is directed by parents or school, what is nuanced in TV drama or from the talking with friends.

It is revealed that the essential element enabled students' autonomy to be expanded during the Free Semester was the fact that there was no test. Traditionally Korean public middle schools take two formal tests in each semester. According to Ministry of Education (2015: 14), the Free Semester policy planned to eliminate the traditional form of tests during the Free Semester and instead evaluate students' academic achievement focusing on students' learning process; how actively they participated in the class and to what extent they have achieved the targeted competency. Therefore, in the new format of the test, the result was not about how many correct answers they got. Having no tests means that the students were not lined up by test scores and freed from hierarchical grading system. Perhaps this point was how the Free Semester brought a change to students' perception on school life and schooling as shown in positive feedbacks from the interviewees. The Free Semester worked in a way to get students relieved from school constraints and, therefore, helped them exercise a wider range of agency.

While Korean middle school students exercised rather expanded agency in the Free Semester classes, their agency was still far limited in most other areas. A representative example of what constrained Korean students in their daily lives was found in the theme 3.1. that a school is regarded as a means to prepare university entrance test and to get a good job in the future. They had a strong belief in education as a means to climb a ladder in social hierarchy and for that aim they drove themselves to study hard. This shows the aspect that Korean young adolescents reproduce social values. For Korean students, studying 'hard' was perceived as a social norm to be diligent and patient. This social value emphasizes an individual's internal control which in turn restricts their day-to-day autonomy and agency. What interviewees regarded as a standard of 'A student' was someone who controls his/her behaviors, regulates daily schedules

and, based on those understanding, the interviewees judged other co-students' attitude and actions.

Cheng (2014) discussed the attempt of education reform has been extensively carried out to remove old cultural belief on education in Asia countries but, nonetheless, traditional cultural values of education still remained significantly in those countries. Just like Cheng' argument, traditional education culture still played an important role in Korean context too. This phenomenon is shown in many ways in this research. In the theme 2.2 'resist being directed by parents', it is appeared that the interviewees seldom expressed their opinions in the matters of studying while talking to their parents. Also, in theme 3 'appreciation of social and cultural values', the interviewees were shown controlling their behaviors in accordance with the traditional cultural norms. These significantly constraint children's voices and their social and political power as social actors. Thus, shifting the paradigm of educational culture seems to be an essential requirement to increase Korean students' examination of agency.

This study also proved that Korean students were stuck in the 'double-bind' situation just like what is found in Singapore in Bach's research (2017). The students were urged to learn and grow autonomously as supported by the Free Semester policy. However, at the same time, keeping the traditional learning method of mechanical memorization was still a winning strategy to get a higher score in school tests. This ambivalent situation was shown in all themes of 1, 2 and 3. The interviewees strongly condemned excessive burdens of studying in their lives but, on the other hand, they believed they need to study hard to succeed in their future. They received the message to pursue high score in the tests from parents, teachers, friends and media whereas they were guided to go for creative learning only by the Free Semester policy.

After all, the interviewees more valued traditional education culture than what education reform policy guided. The interviewees were skeptical about the Free Semester classes' usefulness and their evaluation on quality of the classes was one of grounds for it. This reaction was quite interesting considering the fact that the interviewees' satisfaction on the Free Semester was fairly high (Kim et al, 2016). As seen in interviewees' expression of unreliability of the Free

Semester class, their skepticism seemed to extend to school's ability to make a meaningful change regarding school education system or test format.

To improve the policy and further the Korean young adolescents' autonomy, it is probably worth to focus again on what was found in theme 3.1. 'school as a means to prepare for university entrance tests and to get a good job' as a reference. Many interviewees used the word 'preparation' when they described what school means to them. What the interviewees regard as the most important matter in school life seems the university entrance test. The university entrance exam is the essential factor which underpins the social construction surrounding Korean middle school students' life. While most official documents related to the Free Semester policy put great emphasis on how to nurture the policy's strength in the future, maybe the most decisive factor for the success of the policy is hidden in its weakness. Without transforming the pre-existing test format, especially the university entrance test, it seems hard to make a success in Korean education reform.

By qualitative analysis with the collected data from interviews, this study was able to look closely into the feelings, thoughts and actions of the interviewees. Furthermore, thematic analysis enabled to understand connections and meanings of the interviewees' articulations and what affected the interviewees' actions and decisions. However, the method of qualitative analysis cannot help understand to what extent and at what point the interviewees dissatisfied with the Free Semester classes or their quality evaluation of the classes in numbers. This quantitative approach may have suggested precise understanding of the students' assessment compared to traditional classes. Since the interviewees highly distrusted the Free Semester in terms of the policy's usefulness for their future, quantitative approach may give a hint of the Free Semester's practicality in Korean existing education system. Thus, for future research, I would suggest the combined approach of qualitative and quantitative analysis to complement each method's strengths and weaknesses.

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APPENDIX 1

Consent Form

Dear parents,

As a master degree student in Linköping University, Child Studies, I, Wongie Jung, request your permission for your child to participate in the following research study:

‘How do Korean middle-school students exercise their agency in the Free Semester setting?’

This study aims to research about how young students’ perspectives have changed after experiencing the Free Semester setting and several large questions for the interview are listed in the Interview Questions sheet.

Your child will take part in the research through having an interview with me. The interview will last around 20-30 minutes, most likely in public café. To hear an accurate perspective from your child, I am hoping to conduct the interview alone with your child. However, if you feel like you need to observe the interview, you may do so and, in that case, I would like to suggest you sitting at the other table from a distance to reduce the influence of parents on your child. The interview is going to be voice-recorded only for future revising and accurate analyzing.

The aim and use, and the process of the interview will be clearly explained to your child before we start the interview. In addition, during the interview, your child will have rights to take a break, to demand for changing the question or to withdraw from the interview at any moment if he or she feels needed.

Since the study will be completely anonymous, names of your child, his/her school or family members will never be revealed in the paper.

If you wish to have a copy of this thesis in the future, you are welcome to ask.

For further information and any related questions regarding the study and the interview, contact me at meg1008@naver.com.

I _____ (your name), understood the aim, process and result of the research and permit Wongie Jung to conduct the interview with my child.

Signature of Parent

APPENDIX 2

Consent Form for children

Thanks for interviewing with me!

My name is Wongie Jung and I am a master student of Child Studies in Linköping University in Sweden. My study is about:

‘How do Korean middle-school students exercise their agency in the Free Semester setting?’

This study aims to research about what you experienced in the Free Semester setting and how you feel about it, like if there are any changes in your life or in any way you came to wanting to make difference around you in school life, family or anything in your daily life.

I will use our interview only to look into what appears in common with the other interviews and analyze the data in searching for socially meaningful findings (like in which way students feel good about the Free Semester which we need to pursue in the future when reforming Korean education system).

This study is only for my master thesis. I will never use this data except for my thesis.

Names of you, your parents, friend or teachers you mention in the interview will never be revealed in the paper.

The interview will last around 20-30 minutes in the place you prefer. To hear an accurate perspective from you, I am hoping to conduct the interview alone with you. However, if you feel like having your parent alongside us, we can do so. Feel free to ask any question with regard to this matter. The interview is going to be voice-recorded only for future revising and

accurate analyzing.

At any moment during the interview, you have every right to

- 1) take a break
- 2) demand for changing the question
- 3) stop the interview

If you wish to have a copy of this thesis in the future, you are welcome to ask.

For further information and any related questions regarding the study and the interview, contact me at meg1008@naver.com.

I _____ (your name), understood the aim, process and result of the research and permit Wongie Jung to conduct the interview with me.

Signature of the interview participant

APPENDIX 3

Information Sheet

What is the study about?

Topic of the research:

‘How do Korean middle-school students exercise their agency in the Free Semester setting?’

As you know well, the policy of Free Semester has started nation-widely in Korean middle schools since 2016. However, apart from initial intention by the government of giving students opportunities to explore young students’ career path and dreams, the main effect of the Free Semester policy resulted in freeing students from excessive burdens of studying and expand their autonomy. What I want to study in my research is from student-centered view point regarding how students feel about the changes caused by the Free Semester policy and how students exercise their autonomy based on experiences of the Free Semester.

You may never have heard of the concept of agency, the term I used in the research topic sentence above. ‘Agency’ is originally from sociology and adopted in contemporary child studies in most Scandinavian countries and England. Exercising agency means that a social member has an autonomy and ability to influence one’s surroundings and make differences. It is closely related to ‘rights’ that grant children to act on their own wills, which Korean education reformers try to adopt to bring changes into public school systems and child-rearing culture.

What have young students in middle schools experienced through the Free Semester policy? Is there any change that the policy brought into school life? Can we find a clue for the ideal education that hopefully satisfies us in our own culture and social setting? Will there be any surprises I may find from students’ thoughts and insights? These are the questions to which I am looking forward to find answers from the research.

APPENDIX 4

Interview Questions

1. What do you think a school and schooling are and how do you become thinking that way?
2. Tell me about how things have changed around you in schools, home and private lessons after the Free Semester was implemented as a school policy?
3. Is there anything became different in the way you define schooling, learning and individual development after experiencing the Free Semester?
4. Is there anything you have done differently or want to do differently since you experienced the Free Semester setting?
5. What do you think you need from school and family in order to be happy and achieve your future dream?