

**South Korea still needs more humanities education:  
For a more empathetic society**

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**Abstract**

This article suggests that South Korean society could be more empathetic toward people with disabilities, women, LGBTQIA+ people, and children. In certain South Korean landscapes, hostility against those marginalized groups is often framed as a normal response. Justification of such normalization comes from the idea that it is natural for marginalized groups to experience disadvantages, since people and society are too busy to take care of them. After describing this phenomenon, I suggest potential solutions to exacerbated hatred toward these vulnerable groups, focusing on humanities education. Humanities education could alleviate the situation because it can engender increased sensitivity and empathy toward others, including marginalized people. Unfortunately, South Korea currently faces a grim situation: job markets are becoming harsher than before to humanities major college graduates, and the value of the humanities majors is often looked down upon. Nonetheless, this might be the right time for society to appreciate more of the value of humanities education.

**Keywords:** Humanities education, South Korea, disability rights, women's rights, LGBTQIA+ rights

**Humanities Educations at Risk**

Humanities education in South Korea is in danger. In this article, I use the word "humanities education" to mainly describe a study of literature, philosophy, history, and the arts. Over the past nine years, around 155 units of humanities majors in four-year-universities have disappeared in South Korea (H.-Y. Lee & Jang, 2022). Not only that, from 2020 to 2022, seventeen humanities majors have disappeared while twenty-three engineering majors have been newly made in four-year universities in Seoul (Song, 2022). Unfortunately, President Yoon seems to have accelerated the situation. In a recent university lecture, he made several questionable points that were quoted by reporters: he first argued that only a few students were needed to become humanities majors and then that the students did not need to spend time studying humanities in their universities and graduate schools but rather they should study engineering or natural science majors because the corporates want such graduates (H. Shin, 2021).

Such remarks seem not only to reflect the president's opinion but also his goals for policy reforms. Yoon's government is going through an education reform to make education more relevant to the current and future industrial landscapes of South Korea. Yoon has emphasized that the ministry of education should think of itself as a ministry of economics and

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that the first mission of the ministry of education is to supply the necessary human resources for the development of industries (J.-W. Nam, 2023).

Following his philosophy, the Yoon government has announced that more than half of the budget allocated for the fiscal support for the provincial universities will be transferred from the ministry of education to the local governments so that local governments can decide how to use the budget (D.-E. Lee, 2023). Gyeongsangbuk province, therefore, is outlining a plan for the new reform: the province is planning to create the curriculum of local universities with the corporates, to specialize the curriculum according to the subject areas, and to make universities a hub of talent nourishment that corresponds with the demand from the local areas (D.-E. Lee, 2023).

Many people are worrying that such reforms might harm humanities majors already at risk. During a recent meeting, the president of Andong National University appealed to the government authorities to at least let national universities protect humanities, arts, and liberal majors so that their students who were currently studying those majors could graduate with no problem (D.-E. Lee, 2023). After the reform announcement, a humanities professor published an op-ed raising concerns about such reforms: he was worried that the local governments would fiscally support certain majors more than others since the local governments' priority would likely be the rejuvenation of their local economy, such as resurrecting declining local industries or tackling the depopulation issues, instead of educating university students with diverse majors (H.-R. Shin, 2023). He worried that provinces might make effectiveness a core value of education when executing the budget authority and, therefore, put humanities majors at risk. He admits that humanities education is not the best candidate when one is looking for effectiveness and profit as an output of the education (H.-R. Shin, 2023). Similarly, a policy manager of the Korean University Workers' Union has argued that such reforms view university education as merely a part of industry, and that they imply that majors that cannot prove their obvious industrial relevance do not deserve to exist (J.-W. Nam, 2023).

### **Public Perception of Humanities Education and Majors**

Unfortunately, the value of humanities education is not only questioned by the current government but also by some of the public. The discourse orbits around whether humanities education is worth the invested time and money when one cannot land a job. A self-degrading catch-phrase such as “sorry for being a humanities major” or, in Korean, “moon-song-ham-nee-da” has been a famous phrase for many years among young adults who major or majored in the humanities (J.-H. Lim, 2021; Yeo, 2021). People majoring in different fields also look down on those with humanities majors, questioning if such majors are necessary disciplines (S.-H. Park, 2019). The major reasoning, again, is that humanities majors and education seem unhelpful for corporate job opportunities.

This atmosphere implies several tragedies of the nation; and one is that money, profit, and economic stability, which are essential if human beings are to survive in capitalist societies, are exclusively available to people who have a degree in majors that can prove their industrial relevance. Appreciation for the perspective that humanities education can cultivate in human beings is declining. As shown in the new education reform led by the government, as well as the reasoning behind the belittlement of humanities majors in public, society is leaning toward focusing on what type of industrial values a specific education can deliver, rather than other values such as community-building, sensitivity, or inclusivity. This article argues that, regardless of humanities education's unpopularity, South Korean society still needs more of

such education. As evidence, this article presents people's lack of communal sensitivity, which can be improved through humanities education. The lack of such sensitivity can potentially harm society, preventing the society from becoming a warm, inclusive community that makes its members happy. People's feeling unwelcomed by their own society will make them neither happy nor productive, even if they can be hired by some corporates with their "industrially relevant" degrees.

### **Development Narratives in the South Korean Context**

Before discussing some cases where South Korean society can improve its communal empathy and sensitivity, the context of development should be addressed first. Although the "developmental narratives" and "its promises" have "undoubtedly lost much of their credibility for certain people in certain places," some countries like South Korea have been and are still taking the "promises very seriously" (Ferguson, 2020, p. 182). Such seriousness is still evident in the direction of Yoon's government. Historically, South Korea has passed through several dramatic stages: the destitute colony under the Japanese empire; the whole nation turning into a "smoldering ruin" from the Korean war (Cumings, 1981, p.xix); years of consecutive brutal dictatorship under Park Chung-Hee that produced questionable records on human rights such as with "arrests, torture, kidnappings and, on occasion, assassinations" performed under the government's approval (Pacheco Pardo, 2022, p. 49) albeit "phenomenal economic growth" (C.-S. Lee, 2012, p. 313) and now an explosion of popular culture such as K-pop and K-drama where municipalities are rebranding their image as "media cities" (Oh, 2021, p. 193). Although South Korea seems to have outgrown the stage in which all its citizens are zealously yearning for the betterment of the nation's global financial and economic ranking, the country is still partially obsessed with the notion of development. Such obsession is shown by the tendency for economic growth, efficiency, and profit to be valued more than empathy, community-building, or sensitivity to equality. The act of ranking such values can be interpreted as a societal apathy, especially to vulnerable groups of people such as the disabled, women, children, and LGBTQIA+ people.

### **Profit, Efficiency, and Speed over Empathy, Inclusivity, and Equality**

Recently, a bizarre scene was broadcasted in a public television program in South Korea. One of the leading politicians of the conservative party and the leader of a prominent disabled rights NGO debated whether the NGO's recent rally in support of disabled rights was justifiable. The politician publicly criticized the fight of disabled people in South Korea, claiming that they inconvenienced innocent citizens who had to go to work by subway. Specifically, he mentioned on Facebook that the NGO's protestors were violating the rights of non-disabled passengers by causing delays in service in subways (A. Kim, 2022). Numerous Koreans liked his post, although countless Koreans were also furious at his comments, such as the people from the opposition party (H. Lee, 2022) and their supporters. Disabled people in wheelchairs got on and off consecutive subway stations to appeal to the public and the government for better transportation environment where all disabled people could travel without inconvenience. Disabled people in wheelchairs shared that using public transportation is still inconvenient due to the lack of full inclusive facilities and that going to cafes, restaurants, theaters, and public bathrooms in their daily lives is almost impossible because the only way to access these places is by stairways (Marsh et al., 2023).

Statistics-wise, some people might say that the situation for the disabled in South Korea is not the worst. Indeed, in 2022, 93.55% of all subway stations in Seoul had an elevator

for disabled people and in 2021, 30.6% of the city buses in the nation had a kneeling-bus-function (Jeong, 2022). However, Jo Han-Jin, a professor of social welfare at Daegu University in South Korea, argues that even though the number 93.55% might look high, the fact that it is not 100% indicates that disabled people in wheelchairs have to experience significant inconvenience when travelling, since missing the elevator at one station means that someone needs to change her whole journey (Jeong, 2022). Depressingly, not only did the mayor of Seoul from the conservative party say that he would take a "zero-tolerance policy against the protestors," even "the city-run company," Seoul Metro, "filed the suit with the Seoul Central District Court" against the disabled rights NGO, "seeking damages of 601.45 million" KRW "for train delays and other losses caused by 75 illegal protests" (Yonhap News, 2023).

The most alarming part is that some part of the public also seems to have a problematic attitude toward disabled people's desperate call. Some attitudes are closer to hatred and apathy than empathy. One disabled protestor in a wheelchair was hit by commuters, followed home, shouted at by people, and asked why she had not just stayed home (Marsh et al., 2023); another commuter also claimed that the disabled protestors were causing harm to innocent citizens and that what they were doing was wrong"; similarly, other commuters said that disabled people already had enough facilities and two commuters commented that "while protesting was fine, causing problems for others was not acceptable" (Marsh et al., 2023). In these comments, a discourse that values efficiency and speed over equality is dominant, and a mechanical and de-contextualized understanding of equality, such as the argument that the non-disabled's mobility rights are harmed by the disabled people's protest for fundamental mobility rights, is strongly in evidence. According to people and some politicians who were unhappy about the protest, the cost of abled people's not being able to take the subway exceeded the cost of society's not being inclusive enough to disabled people.

The problem of insensitivity transcends the fight for disability rights. Gender equality is another area in which this public insensitivity is evident. South Korea does have a strong legal basis in interest of protecting gender equality, and one example at the time of 2020 indicates so:

As of 2020, there are six major projects by the Ministry of Gender Equality: (i) promoting awareness and culture of gender equality; (ii) ensuring equal rights to work and opportunities; (iii) enhancing women's representation and participation; (iv) creating social infrastructure for work-life balance; (v) eradicating violence against women and improve women's health; and (vi) strengthening the implementation mechanism for gender equality policies. There are also 22 implementation strategies for pursuing these major projects. (Choi, 2021, p. 27)

Not only that, article 10 of 'Equal Employment Opportunity and Work-Family Balance Assistance Act' in South Korea "prescribes that no employer shall discriminate on grounds of gender in the promotion of employees" (Choi, 2021, pp. 32–33). While the South Korean government does not seem as radical as, for instance, the Norwegian government which mandated 40% of corporate board members of all companies to be women from 2005 (Wang & Kelan, 2013, p. 451), its policy and legal basis seems hardly the worst.

However, the reality in South Korean society does not fully seem to reflect such intention regardless of the promising existence of such a clearly written law for gender equality:

Despite this law, however, international statistics indicate that working women in Korea confront a glass ceiling substantially more compared to women in other advanced countries. In fact, the performance of this law has been evaluated as being low with regard to promotions, as stipulated in Article 10. (Choi, 2021, pp. 32–33)

Women in South Korea not only face difficulties in promotion but also in receiving a fair salary. The gender pay gap in the South Korean labor market exists in considerable amounts both in horizontal and vertical labor segregation, according to scholars (U. Lim et al., 2015). Among OECD countries, "Korea's gender wage gap in 2021 was 31.1 percent" which means that "women receive only 68.9 percent of what men receive in salary" (J.-Y. Lee, 2022).

Women with kids are having a hard time too. Mothers who return from maternity leave earn less than their male colleagues who started working at the same time with them (J.-Y. Lee, 2022). Not surprisingly, 32% of Korean employees surveyed have observed that female employees with children are discriminated against at work, receiving slow promotions, disadvantages in HR evaluations, decreases of salary, and many other penalties (Na, 2017). 85% of working mothers have been discriminated against in companies, while only 24% of them could file an official complaint; 52% of them said that the reason they failed to complain was that they were afraid of experiencing more disadvantages from HR, 21% said that the department that was supposed to receive the complaint was nonexistent, and 25% claimed that their family members and acquaintances discouraging them from officially complaining (Na, 2017).

While the reality is clearly distant from gender equality, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family has not included gender equality nor prevention of gender-based-violence in their recent policy plan, following the ideology of President Yoon's regime (J.-B. Lee, 2023). Indeed, such anti-feminist rhetoric did not come from nowhere: the rhetoric was actively used by the conservative party during the latest presidential campaign, helping give Yoon the place of president (H. J. Kim & Lee, 2022, p. 304). Although Yoon won the election by a slim margin, his victory indicates that anti-feminist rhetoric works to persuade and mobilize people. Therefore, the blame should not be solely on the politicians; rather, we should question why a substantial number of people were persuaded by such rhetoric. The backlash, caused by the insensitivity toward women's situation in the society, is not something new but something that has existed for a while in South Korea, according to Kim and Lee (2022).

In fact, attitudes towards gender equality overall have dramatically worsened during the past few years in Korea. Data from the World Values Survey from the years between 1990 to 2020, for example, show that the proportion of respondents who agree that "men should have more rights to a job than women" has significantly increased in the past few years, from 32 percent in 2014 to 53 percent in 2020. (H. J. Kim & Lee, 2022, p. 304)

Their research indicates that anti-feminist rhetoric has been increasing in the nation. Considering that the current conservative party has received fervent support from young male adults in South Korea, it might sound plausible that there is also a gender difference in such a way of thinking. While 73.4% of women acknowledge the structural discrimination that women face, only 29.2% of men in their twenties think the same (H.-N. Lee, 2022). The contrast is sharp.

Moreover, even though feminists in South Korea have been ceaselessly arguing that society in general is rigged against women, for instance through a form of various feminist protests (J. Nam, 2018), influential male-centered online communities often invoke the anti-feminist concept that was used by a former advocate of men's rights. For instance, an anonymous user once uploaded the screenshots of men's rights' advocate's arguments to one of the online communities: the screenshot argues that companies would hire anyone, even a chimpanzee, if the companies deemed that person a profitable worker; therefore, the fact that women are not getting hired as often as men is simply because women are not profitable, or they are incompetent in the capitalist world, from the companies' perspectives (Anonymous, 2022). These advocates are enthusiastic about the idea that the gender pay gap is not real but that women, in general, happen to be incompetent (Anonymous, 2021). Brutal comments against feminists' argument about the gender pay gap have hundreds of likes under the main post (Anonymous, 2021, 2022). Although they are anonymous comments, in this age in which people express their opinions freely at an explosive scale and speed in digital spaces, we should also note the general tenor of discourse that is shared online. Such discourse reflects what people think and exposes silent online users to its influence.

Indeed, experts are diagnosing South Korean men in their twenties as showing "aggressive misogyny" and believing that they are "victims of feminism" (S. N. Park, 2021). Journalist Cheon Gwan-yul and data scientist Jeong Han-wool "conducted an in-depth survey on the values of Korean men in their twenties" in their book *Men in 20s* (S. N. Park, 2021). They argue that Korean men in their twenties value "meritocratic sensibility" based on "decontextualized fairness" and that they show strong hostility against feminism. 58.6 percent of them strongly opposed feminism (S. N. Park, 2021).

Based on the experts' research, it may not be a generalization that backlash is growing in South Korea, especially among young male Koreans. With such backlash, anti-feminist logic is gaining its popularity, often through the form of anonymous posts in online communities, as mentioned above. As shown in the previous example of a few online posts, the logic that justifies discrimination against female workers is contingent on the value of economic profit that President Yoon emphasized in his new education reform. At this point, we should ask why some people tend to lean into the value of the profits of corporates and industries rather than the value of inclusivity and empathy.

South Korean society could also improve its empathy toward LGBTQIA+ people. Although there is no law that punishes or criminalizes queer sexualities, the society also does not have a secure social net that could ensure and protect the rights of queer people. Currently the nation does not have a law to recognize the legitimacy of same-sex marriage nor same-sex union. Although the recent court ruled in favor of recognizing the legal legitimacy of "spousal dependence" in gay couples (Seo et al., 2023), neither the law nor the public is fully welcoming to queer people. According to HankookResearch,<sup>1</sup> one of the biggest South Korean public opinion research companies, the society is split on whether to accept queer people (D.-H. Lee, 2022). Around 37% of people say that society should accept homosexuality while 39% say the society should not; the ratio is similar for bisexuality (D.-H. Lee, 2022).

According to Korea Gallup, a South Korean research institution, in 2021, 38 % of people agreed with the legalization of same-sex marriage while 52% did not (Gallup Korea, 2021). However, 58% of people acknowledged homosexuality as one type of love, while 33%

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<sup>1</sup> Its website is <https://www.hrc.co.kr/Eng/Default.aspx?rnd=2>

of them disagreed (Gallup Korea, 2021). One thing evident here is that people who are not queer think that they are somehow entitled to judge the validity of other people's choices around sexuality.

Empathy is also relevant to understanding other people's education. Why do people have a hard time understanding what other people are going through, and what makes them adamant against making their community more empathetic, warm, and inclusive of other people? To address this lack of empathy, I will now argue for reorienting the value of humanities education for the cultivation of empathy for all human beings. In the next section, I will argue that humanities education has proven to be an effective tool for enhancing empathy.

### **The Social Cost of a Discriminatory Society**

In this neoliberal era in which market value is emphasized more than anything else, people can lean towards a myopic stance, such as being gatekeepers against certain people's marriage rights, believing that the right to take the subway at the right time is more important than the commuting rights of the disabled, and being a fervent supporter of the corporate logic of profit even though it means enabling inequality.

Such hostility against underprivileged groups may engender a society whose values are fixated on exclusion and a society in which certain groups of people must keep fighting for the privilege that other people possess. Borrowing the language of economics which people often use, one can argue that excluding and discriminating against people is not necessarily good for the economy. Indeed, according to the France Stratégie, a research institution under the French prime minister's cabinet, social discrimination also leads to an economic loss; for instance, when discrimination against women and immigrants in the French labor market disappears, France could increase the population's earning 150 billion euros more for the next twenty years (Bon-Maury et al., 2016). In South Korea, one scholar has also observed that the higher rate of salary the disabled receive, the less social cost occurs (Chul, 2005). The Korean Development Institute came out with a similar result, that discrimination against women and the disabled in the labor market causes fiscal loss in the long term (Yoo, 2004).

However, not only does economic, monetary, and fiscal loss occur, but we can also think of how an inclusive and empathetic society can benefit every member of the society in holistic ways, not just groups currently categorized as underprivileged people. People often forget that being weak and vulnerable could become their own stories: we all become old and weak once in our life; and there's a high possibility we will become disabled when we get old. According to the research conducted by the Korea Institute for Health And Social Affairs (KIHASA) in 2017 about the disabled population in South Korea, 88% of disabled people answered that they had acquired a disability during their life (Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, 2017; S.-H. Lim, 2021). The boundary between "normal" and "abnormal" shifts through social and political contexts and is not fixed. One might be in the "safe" category, dubbed as "normal" for now, but when the society changes, one could be also lumped into a group targeted for discrimination. When we consider that the societal boundaries that makes "inferior" and "superior" are relative and constantly mobile, we can realize that caring for marginalized groups becomes not just beneficial for certain groups but also an action of caring for oneself.

## Can Humanities Education Fix This?

In his article "The Meaning of Liberal Education," A. Scott Robert argues that humanities education can teach people "a balance between material and non-material goals, caring for others, empathy, tolerance, and respect for diversity," which all seem beneficial to South Korean society considering its conflicting attitude towards people with disabilities, women, children and parents, and queer people (A. Scott, 2014, p. 30). Learning the humanities might not give the nation an immediate boost in ranking in this "financial global jungle," but it might give people a platform from which they could slow down to ponder what equality is, what power hierarchies are, and what happiness is instead of being obsessed with efficiency, speed, convenience, and corporate profit (Ferguson, 2020, p. 148). The cost of not being inclusive to women, the disabled, and queer people might haunt the society when it becomes accustomed to setting a too-high bar for what "normal" is. Before such tragedy comes, the nation might need to consider benefiting from humanities education by cultivating a better understanding of vulnerability and diversity among people.

Humanities education demonstrates clear benefits that can make current South Korean society a better place for everyone to live. Such education "can teach us critical citizenship through free democratic thinking," and such education can also shape "people's affectivities, the students' imagination as well as their reason, in ways that go behind the implementation of a set of normative values" (Dernikos et al., 2020, pp. 48–49). Therefore, this type of education has the potential to challenge people to think about what exactly "normal" is and who has the power to define what "normal" is. Not only that, humanities education is "supposed to be a moment of suspension in space and time" amid the fast-moving neoliberal, industrial landscape of the nation, so that students can "focus completely on learning and on being trained to think, argue, and do research in a complex and ancient field of knowledge production" (Dernikos et al., 2020, p. 39). If more people in South Korean society take time to ponder how their hostile knowledge against disabled people, women, kids and their parents, and queer people develops, it might give them a pause, letting them examine how certain thoughts about certain groups of people have been formed. In the process, stereotypes and apathy towards marginalized groups could be critically re-assessed.

Similarly, Martha Nussbaum has also mentioned the benefits of humanities education; she argues that education could possibly make people aware of their own knowledge production, which requires self-critical thinking. In *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Nussbaum argues that the lack of humanities education will only produce "generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 2). Although I have not touched much on the concept of democracy, Nussbaum's argument resonates with what this article has been trying to pitch. Humanities education can teach people to be critical of what people have unquestionably normalized, and most importantly, help them develop some empathy toward others so that they can transcend their own lived experiences through imagination, attempting to grasp a part of others' pains and emotions. Such an attitude is needed now more than any other time in South Korean society.

One reviewer of Nussbaum's book also emphasizes that the "ability to care will lead to respect" and that "respect will work to eliminate fear, greed, and narcissism," a process which could be fostered by humanities education (Lin, 2016, p. 770). When implemented properly, the ability to care for others requires the emotional intelligence and empathy that many scholars

have argued that humanities education can cultivate in one human being. Such an education can break the barriers between privileged and underprivileged people, helping the privileged people see themselves in the marginalized group too.

Humanities education is also important to developing people's "imagination" and "emotional intelligence" (Edmondson et al., 2020). Understanding other people's pain requires empathy, imagination, and emotional intelligence. How can people who have never been given the chance to ponder the lives of others understand the pain that they have never encountered? Research has shown that medical students engaged in humanities education have shown more empathetic behaviors toward their patients (Graham et al., 2016; Ong, 2022). Sarkar and Senapati, for instance, define emotional intelligence as a "trainable trait" and suggest that "medical humanities" can offer "different modules for training medical students and professionals to develop empathy, tolerant attitudes and overall understanding," which are essential attitudes for medical workers dealing with various patients (Sarkar & Senapati, 2016, p. 34).

Some South Koreans' attitudes toward vulnerable groups also raise the question of whether they value the importance of community enough. Neoliberal ideas go well with the self-help theory which argues that being competent enough to survive in a tough world is an individual's own responsibility; in other words, if people are not "competent enough" to perform certain tasks that the industrial and capitalist society requires them to do, it is not other people's business to help or care, but it is the "incompetent" people's fault. The reasoning is on par with hostilities against marginalized groups in South Korea. Humanities education could benefit society by filling this gap because it has the potential to teach people to think about the value of community. Humanities education can help us cultivate "empathy and moral and creative sensibility" so that "individuals do not simply graduate in their own islands" but rather ending up becoming "part of an organic collective" (Edmondson et al., 2020, p. 225). When people understand that they are not living alone but are connected to each other organically, they might think about their own responsibilities as members of society when viewing other marginalized groups of people, instead of detaching themselves from the vulnerable groups.

A more specific example comes from the history teachers' experience in various parts of the United States of America teaching difficult histories such as the Holocaust, the genocide against indigenous people, or the history of slavery to their students. According to Lindsey Stillman, learning about the Holocaust is "a necessary foundation for fostering ethics and empathy in a democratic society. Florida's 1994 bill already established that Holocaust education is "encouraging tolerance of diversity in a pluralistic society and (...) nurturing and protecting democratic values and institutions"(Stillman, 2022, p. 47). However, due to an insufficient emphasis on learning other hard histories that trace the discrimination and oppression many groups of people have faced, such as indigenous people, American teachers have found that students exhibit a "level of inherent racialized attitudes, a lack of historical empathy, and either no knowledge of, or no concern with, the cruelty inflicted upon Indigenous Peoples" (Rich, 2022, p. 67). . When teaching people about the suffering of others fails, students lose their chance to develop empathy for and imagination about other people's situations. Similar benefits occur when teaching difficult histories to kids in South Korea too. Indeed, I vividly remember when one of my middle school teachers screened a video of Korean people sacrificing their lives while protesting for democracy and against military dictatorships. The footage of people shouting for democracy and being killed by heavily armed soldiers made me wonder about what type of society I wanted to live in. However, recently the Ministry of Education of South Korea omitted several contentious histories in the South Korean past from

history textbooks, including the May 18<sup>th</sup> Democratic Uprising and the Jeju April 3<sup>rd</sup> uprising, which were two symbolic historical cases where civilians were brutally murdered by the government (N.-Y. Kim & Kim, 2023). According to the Ministry of Education, "the revision is part of the curriculum change to minimize descriptions of specific and individual historical events, including the crackdowns during the pro-democracy uprising in 1980" (N.-Y. Kim & Kim, 2023). If numerous scholars argue for a correlation between emotional intelligence and humanities education, the newly edited history textbooks might deliver a decontextualized message to young students.

### Potential Solutions

Then what can we do, specifically in the South Korean context, to enhance the existence of humanities education? First, I suggest that in terms of humanities education, students should not be subjected to intense time pressure or the equally intense burden of competition in evaluations. South Korea is famous for its crammed, hurried, and competitive lifestyle, which contributes to the country's high suicide rates among students and young people. For instance, in 2021, "suicide was the main cause of death for those aged 10 to 39, with 44% of teenage deaths and 56.8% of deaths of those in their 20s" in South Korean society (Rashid, 2023). The nation has achieved better equality compared to the past, but deep inside, it is "a deeply unhappy country" (Rashid, 2023). The majority of South Korean kids do not have enough opportunities for socialization or taking care of their well-being because of the "intensive education system" that involves the cooperation of their parents and is caused by the "the highly competitive job market, where good grades and a prestigious university degree are seen as necessary for obtaining stable and well-paid employment" (Rashid, 2023).

The value of a humanities education derives from its ability to provide students with time to pause and contemplate certain issues deeply, instead of being hurried, which is typical of the South Korean lifestyle from childhood to adulthood. Students should be given enough time to contemplate certain subjects during their humanities classes to develop the necessary empathetic and critical thinking skills. Jennifer Rich, "an academic who studies and teaches Holocaust and genocide education" conducted an "open-ended survey to seventy-five undergraduate students in New Jersey" about how much they learned in their public school about dark global histories including those of U.S.A. (Rich, 2022, pp. 64–65). After analyzing the survey and another anecdotal survey she conducted about high school history teachers, she concludes that "a deep dive into one history is more effective than quick passes across many" and helps students learn critical thinking skills and empathy better (Rich, 2022, p. 71). She argues that most teachers want to teach difficult histories to their students so that they could take a lesson about humanities and make a connection between the past and present (Rich, 2022, p. 72). And when such an ideal intention is realized through an appropriate method of education, she indicates that "in order to help students work to create a more just future, to act to create lasting and meaningful social change, it is imperative that teachers focus on one complex history as case study" so that "time can be devoted to uncovering nuance, big questions can be asked and explored, and connections to other hard histories can be made" (Rich, 2022, p. 72). Such an example indicates that a slow pace in learning is far from bad, but rather could be something that could make the learning process more meaningful for students. Interestingly, a few schools in South Korea are selecting alternative curriculum for their kids, schools that feature tasks such as writing a poem together instead of memorizing already-written poems, travelling to mountains to observe, smell, and feel nature, and forming communities with other kids to learn about diverse cultures and arts such as theatre (Kim, 2021). While such education is not common in South Korean, such a slow-

paced education that allows students to focus on few things at one time opens a new possibility for humanities education that can help students think by themselves and ask meaningful questions with genuine curiosity.

In "The Race for the Perfect Score: The Detrimental Effects of the South Korean Education System" published in the *Cornell Diplomat*, the author Dorothy Kim argues that "the South Korean educational system fundamentally ingrains the fear of failure into students"; therefore, "students are indoctrinated with score-based standards of success or failure, leading them to focus on outrunning failure rather than following their interests" (Kim, 2021). As she argues, it is a societal norm among South Korean students to choose college majors based on their scores or job prospects, not on their interests, due to the competitiveness of the society. In such an environment, where grades dictate the majority values of the education system, it becomes a challenge for students to take a long, deep breathe to contemplate difficult topics that are not necessarily related to their next exams. Therefore, students should be taught an alternative education model rather than one based on grades and exams. For instance, methods like using a pass-and-fail grading scale instead of a letter-grading scale, or lengthening time with creative engagement methods, could be applied to humanities education for middle and high school students.

In addition, there should be a change in South Korean companies' narrowed mindsets, so that they stop preferring non-humanities majors over humanities majors when hiring new workers. Companies should acknowledge that they need workers who have a good set of soft skills such as communication skills, community-building, empathy, and teamwork. All these soft skills are cultivated by a humanities education in which individuals can enhance their emotional intelligence, sensibility, and empathy toward others. In addition, more research into the real-world relevance of the soft skills cultivated in humanities majors could incentivize more students to choose humanities majors, since at the moment many students are choosing majors not because of genuine interest but because of their fears of being jobless. Although the goal of humanities education should not be the production of "suitable" workers for the capitalist age, under capitalist and neoliberal society, in which humanities education has been consistently under attack for "not being productive enough," borrowing language from neoliberals could help alleviate the situation.

Lastly, I call for more widespread dissemination of humanities knowledge to the South Korean public from academics' ivory tower. There has been a substantial increase in such dissemination in recent years. Examples include the increased number of free humanities lectures given at the local public centers and the establishment of the Humanitas College in Kyung Hee University, which specifically mentioned that they established the college over their concern for current universities' liberal arts education, including humanities. (Humanitas College, n.d.). Many scholars in humanities disciplines are eager to make their knowledge more public. However, the number of forums available for sharing such knowledge could be increased. Accessible information about humanities knowledge could be made available through the installation of more public libraries with books of quality, a campaign to promote reading, and more city or government-funded public lectures free of charge containing insights from humanities disciplines. For instance, EBS, the South Korean public broadcasting station that focuses on education, has recently started a public lecture series called "Great Minds" that is funded by the national budget, and it has created an unprecedented situation in which numerous worldwide scholars have given lectures to the nation-owned educational broadcasting station, including Jane Goodall, Roxane Gay, Eva Illouz, Linda Gask, Jared Diamond, Göran Therborn, Judith Butler, Beth Simmons, Vandana Shiva, Biao Xiang, and

many others (*widaehan suöp 위대한 수업 Great Minds*, n.d.). The lectures are all on the EBS website so that anyone in South Korea can rewatch them. The lectures have been exposed to the public, so that information that usually remains inside academia has been widely disseminated. With increased accessibility to content like this, the insights that humanities scholars in South Korea have explored for decades could be integrated into people's daily lives, offering the public a chance to to develop insights and capacities that could help make a more inclusive society.

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