Diverging Paths: Three Essays On The Transitions Of Working-Class Young People In South Korea

Hyejeong Jo
University of Pennsylvania, hyejeong@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations
Part of the Asian Studies Commons, Education Commons, and the Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation
https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/3038

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/3038
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Diverging Paths: Three Essays On The Transitions Of Working-Class Young People In South Korea

Abstract
Despite the egalitarian ideal of “college-for-all,” research shows that working-class young people remain disadvantaged in the transition to college and work. However, while some experience upward mobility, most go to work. Yet, scholars have paid scant attention to these variant pathways to adulthood within the working-class young individuals. Particularly, they have not fully recognized varying roles that teachers play in the transition of working-class students to college and work. Moreover, working-class young people’s understanding of the transition to adulthood has been discussed only insufficiently in the literature. Therefore, this dissertation, consist of three independent but complementary essays, investigates various transitional experiences of the working-class young people. The results draw on a one-year of ethnography in a South Korean high school as well as the broader community which serves young individuals from working-class homes. The first article of the dissertation shows how teachers, as “mobility sponsors,” selectively help working-class students to go to college. Whereas teachers provide sponsorship for the college admissions of those working-class students with academic excellence, they take a “laissez-faire” approach for ordinary working-class students without helping them directly. The second article illustrates how teachers stigmatize working-class students who seek to become working-class workers. Teachers stereotype working-class work and criticize vocational aspirations. I also find that work-bound students report that teachers’ negative comments create emotional distress for them. The third article explores young workers’ subjective understanding of their status in the college-for-all society focusing particularly on gender differences. The study finds that female workers are pessimistic about their status because they believe that their lack of college education might adversely affect their transition to adult roles. On the other hand, male workers are optimistic as they believe that their future compulsory military service will help them to become a respectable male adult. Overall, the dissertation discusses the social implications of the college-for-all society by showing various struggles of working-class young people. It also calls for policy efforts to provide institutional support for their diverging pathways to adulthood.

Degree Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Graduate Group
Sociology

First Advisor
Annette Lareau

Keywords
College-for-all, Education, Ethnography, Inequality, Korea, School-to-work transition

This dissertation is available at ScholarlyCommons: https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/3038
DIverging Paths: Three Essays on the Transitions of Working-Class Young People in South Korea

Hyejeong Jo

A Dissertation

in

Sociology

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2017

Supervisor of Dissertation

_________________________

Annette Lareau

Professor of Sociology and Stanley I. Sheerr Term Professor of the Social Science

Graduate Group Chairperson

_________________________

David Grazian

Associate Professor of Sociology

Dissertation Committee

Hyunjoon Park, Korean Foundation Professor of Sociology

Emily Hannum, Professor of Sociology and Education

Hae Yeon Choo, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Toronto Mississauga
DIVERGING PATHS: THREE ESSAYS ON THE TRANSITIONS OF WORKING-CLASS YOUNG PEOPLE IN SOUTH KOREA

COPYRIGHT

2017

Hyejeong Jo

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 License

To view a copy of this license, visit

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/
DEDICATION

To Sunggywun and Ahwool
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

My graduate career was deeply engraved by support, encouragement, and love of many people that I have met at Penn and in Philadelphia. First, it was my great privilege to have caring committee members for the dissertation project. I am very grateful to Annette Lareau for her advice and mentorship. She is not only a thoughtful advisor but also a patient mentor who has sincerely cared for my intellectual growth. Her academic and personal paths have never failed to inspire me. I also thank Hyunjoon Park who has provided bottomless support for my graduate study since we first met in Seoul in the summer of 2010. Over seven years at Penn, he has showered me with support and encouragement to nurture my scholarship. Emily Hannum and Hae Yeon Choo have believed in my potential as a sociology researcher even when I doubted about myself as well as provided insightful academic advice. I am humbled by the support and guidance of my entire committee, which enabled me to complete my dissertation journey.

While developing my dissertation, I have also been much benefited from my colleagues at Penn, including Yi-lin Chiang, Sherelle Ferguson, Nora Gross, Rita Harvey, Sarah Spell, Aliya Rao, Peter Harvey and Calvin Zimmermann. They read earlier drafts of the dissertation and offered thoughtful comments. Moreover, I am deeply thankful for students and teachers at Glory High School and many young workers in Harbortown, South Korea, who accepted me in their lives and shared their experiences for this study. Their generosity taught me that an ethnographer is always in debt to those people who are willing to welcome a stranger who wants to learn about the rhythm of their lives. This dissertation has been supported by the Benjamin Franklin Fellowship at the School of Arts and Science, the Otto and Gertrude K. Pollak fellowship in the Department of Sociology, and the Y. H. Park Fellowship in Korean Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Of course, the responsibility for any errors in the dissertation are solely my own, not any institutions or individuals mentioned here.

I would like to acknowledge many people who have supported me during my graduate career. Having their support while going through the ups and downs in last seven years was a gift of life. Special thanks to Eun...
Kyong Shin, Ning Hsieh, Elisa Landaverde, Radha Modi, Rozina Ali, and Sarah Spell for the friendship and beer that we have shared for many years. Junhow Wei, Aliya Rao, Rachel Ellis, and Yi-lin Chiang also added warmth and laughs to my life in McNeil. Outside Penn, many people have helped me, especially for the past nine months while I was learning to juggle my dual roles as a graduate student and a new mom of a baby girl, including Jin and Tony Shih, Sooji Kuk, Sunah Byun, Yunah Chang, Christina and Jason Oh, Jisun Kim Choe, and Helena Ji. New Hope Community Church members also supplied me with abundant love, fellowship, and authentic Korean food. I am grateful to my parents, Gee-chang Jo and Young-soon Jin, and my little sisters, Hanwool and Ara Jo, who have been always there for me. My biggest thanks go to my dear daughter, Ahwool and my loving husband, Sunggywun Gim, whose love brightens up every minute of my life.
ABSTRACT

DIVERGING PATHS: THREE ESSAYS ON THE TRANSITIONS OF WORKING-CLASS YOUNG PEOPLE IN SOUTH KOREA

Hyejeong Jo
Annette Lareau

Despite the egalitarian ideal of “college-for-all,” research shows that working-class young people remain disadvantaged in the transition to college and work. However, while some experience upward mobility, most go to work. Yet, scholars have paid scant attention to these variant pathways to adulthood within the working-class young individuals. Particularly, they have not fully recognized varying roles that teachers play in the transition of working-class students to college and work. Moreover, working-class young people’s understanding of the transition to adulthood has been discussed only insufficiently in the literature. Therefore, this dissertation, consist of three independent but complementary essays, investigates various transitional experiences of the working-class young people. The results draw on a one-year of ethnography in a South Korean high school as well as the broader community which serves young individuals from working-class homes. The first article of the dissertation shows how teachers, as “mobility sponsors,” selectively help working-class students to go to college. Whereas teachers provide sponsorship for the college admissions of those working-class students with academic excellence, they take a “laissez-faire” approach for ordinary working-class students without helping them directly. The second article illustrates how teachers stigmatize working-class students who seek to become working-class workers. Teachers stereotype working-class work and criticize vocational aspirations. I also find that work-bound students report that teachers’ negative comments create emotional distress for them. The third article explores young workers’ subjective understanding of their status in the college-for-all society focusing particularly on gender differences. The study finds that female workers are pessimistic about their status because they
believe that their lack of college education might adversely affect their transition to adult roles. On the other hand, male workers are optimistic as they believe that their future compulsory military service will help them to become a respectable male adult. Overall, the dissertation discusses the social implications of the college-for-all society by showing various struggles of working-class young people. It also calls for policy efforts to provide institutional support for their diverging pathways to adulthood.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENT IV

ABSTRACT VI

CHAPTER 1. TEACHERS AS A MOBILITY SPONSOR: HOW TEACHERS SELECTIVELY FACILITATE WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS’ COLLEGE ACCESS IN SOUTH KOREA 1

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TEACHERS AS MOBILITY SPONSORS 3

SOUTH KOREAN EDUCATION AS A CONTEST MOBILITY SYSTEM 6

METHOD AND DATA 9

FINDINGS 15

DISCUSSION 40

CHAPTER 2. THE HIDDEN COSTS OF THE COLLEGE-FOR-ALL SOCIETY: THE STIGMATIZED DREAMS OF WORK-BOUND STUDENTS IN A SOUTH KOREAN HIGH SCHOOL 50

LITERATURE REVIEW 52

WORK-BOUND YOUTH IN SOUTH KOREA 55

METHOD AND DATA 57

FINDINGS 61

DISCUSSION 78

CHAPTER 3. GENDERED NARRATIVES OF TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD AMONG YOUNG WORKERS IN SOUTH KOREA 90

THE PRECARIOUS JOURNEY TO ADULTHOOD 92

GENDERED NARRATIVES OF WORK-BOUND YOUTH 95

METHOD AND DATA 97

“IT JUST HAPPENED”: DRIFTING TO PRECARIOUS WORK 99

“A LIFE WITHOUT A FUTURE: THE PERPETUATING TRANSITION OF FEMALE INFORMANTS 106
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1. An Example of the Application Material Requirement for an Early Admission Program (Seoul National University, 2015) 44
Table 1.2. Summary of Sponsorship relationship and laissez-fair relationship 45
Table 2.1. Information of Eight Focal Students 84
Table 2.2. Characteristics of the Interview Participants 85
Table 3.1. Respondent Characteristics 122
CHAPTER 1

Teachers as a Mobility Sponsor: How Teachers Selectively Facilitate Working-Class Students’ College Access in South Korea

The power of parents’ social background has been well documented cross-culturally, especially with regards to shaping students’ experiences with educational institutions, as well as their academic outcomes (Lucas 2017; Lareau 2011; Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014). Much of the research has focused on the powerful ways that parents transmit class advantages to their children in the educational realm. Studies have found that middle-class parents transmit cultural capital to their children, allowing them to navigate and negotiate with educational institutions better than their working-class peers (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Lareau 2011; Calarco 2014). They also more actively intervene in children’s schooling (Lareau 1987; McNeal 1999; Reay 1998) and in their academic activities to facilitate their educational success (Sui-Chu and Willms 1996; Park, Byun, and Kim 2011; Abelmann and Park 2004).

Nevertheless, in sociological studies of education, the role of educators has been studied insufficiently, and when it is studied, the work has yielded contradictory results. Some have suggested that there are patterns of bias on the part of educators who selectively reward, assist, and punish children from different backgrounds, according to class (Calarco, 2011; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), race and ethnicity (Downey and Pribesh 2004; Morris 2005; Linnehan, Weer, and Stonely 2011), and gender (Duffy, Warren, and Walsh 2001; Jones and Wheatley 1990; Paechter 2002). Others, however, have shown that educators operate in relatively neutral ways or work to promote the academic success of all students. For example, the
literature on “college for all” highlights the ways that educators and counselors push students into higher education in a uniform fashion, regardless of their backgrounds or academic orientation (Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum, Miller, and Krei 1996). Moreover, researchers have argued that educators provide various educational benefits to disadvantaged students (Jack 2016; Gonzalez 2015; Horvat and Davis 2011). Overall, our understanding of the role of educators in students’ educational experiences remains unclear.

Still, there are signs in the literature that teachers do engage with students in unequal, rather than uniform, ways. They invest energy, time, and effort in some students more than others (Holland 2015; Hao and Pong 2008). While there is ample evidence of class bias in the interactions between students and teachers, there also exists variability in working-class students’ experiences with teachers, and this has not received sufficient academic attention (Jack, 2016). Indeed, understanding this variance in the experiences of working-class students is important because there is a clear pattern of upward mobility. While many working-class students encounter barriers to educational improvement (Goyette, 2008; Weis, Cipollone, & Jenkins, 2014; Lareau, 2011), a growing number of them do proceed to tertiary institutions, including elite universities (Byun & Park, 2017; Lee & Kramer, 2013; Jack, 2016; Hurst & Warnock, 2015; Hurst, 2010; Mullen, 2010). In this mobility process, educators can play a crucial role. Teachers offer extensive institutional support, assisting in their students’ academic achievement (Stanton-Salazar 2011). They also directly support the upward mobility of some working-class students (Gonzales, 2016). However, their sponsorship for selected working-class students, which might not apply for all working-class students, has not sufficiently explored.

Derived from Turner’s (1960) theory of social mobility, this study analyzes the ways in which teachers play the role of a “mobility sponsor” in certain working-class students’ educational mobility. Turner conceptualized two different types of folk norms associated with social mobility; the contested and sponsored mobility. Whereas his ideas have remained useful in
understanding normative mobility regimes, only a few studies have empirically examined his theoretical model in recent decades (Lareau 2015). Particularly, little research has investigated the diverging ways in which working-class students experience educational mobility within each of these two mobility systems. In addition, the role that the dynamics within the school plays in the mobility process has not drawn sufficient academic attention.

Drawing on a one-year ethnographic study conducted at an academic high school in South Korea, in this research, I show how teachers play the role of a mobility sponsor by selectively supporting students in their journeys through the highly competitive educational system. I demonstrate that teachers provide support for only a small number of working-class students at the top of the academic hierarchy. Through this sponsorship relationship, educators effectively facilitate certain working-class students’ academic achievement, offer extensive help with college applications, and provide emotional support. Conversely, teachers form a laissez faire relationship with most other working-class students, often neglecting their educational needs and criticizing their lack of effort and preparation. These teachers emphasize contest mobility norms that highlight personal achievement. The resulting lack of support leaves many students perplexed and frustrated. By portraying these diverging patterns of teacher sponsorship, this study seeks to contribute to our sociological understanding of the nature of educational mobility and class inequality in education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TEACHERS AS MOBILITY SPONSORS

Turner (1960) describes two contrasting normative ideas about educational mobility systems—contest mobility and sponsored mobility—to account for structural differences in the American and British school systems. He argues that “contest mobility is a system in which elite status is
the prize in an open contest and is taken by the aspirants’ own efforts” (586). Under the contest regime, all are encouraged to participate in, and believed to be capable of winning, a mass competition for elite status. Rather than relationships with existing elite groups, individual efforts and achievement are emphasized. In contrast, “under sponsored mobility, elite recruits are chosen by the established elites or their agents, and elite status is given based on some criterion of supposed merit and cannot be taken by any amount of effort or strategy” (586). In this system, it is the elites themselves (or their agents) who select and educate a small number of students for future elite status; this selection occurs in the earliest stages of the educational system. In other words, the sponsors judge an individual’s ability and exclusively support some students over others; therefore, an individual’s relationship with the sponsors is crucial in securing elite status.

Despite the importance of his theoretical contribution to the mobility research, there have been only a few attempts to empirically examine or theoretically revisit his theory in recent decades. Particularly, as Lareau (2015) has pointed out, Turner’s research is unclear with regards to how sponsorship works for working-class students’ mobility. Turner discussed the sponsorship offered by educators, describing it as a major feature of the sponsored mobility regime. Yet sponsorship can also matter in contest mobility systems, and this possibility has been under-scrutinized. Whereas contest mobility emphasizes individual achievement in the competition for elite status, students may still need extensive support until they finish the competition. As many studies of middle-class youth transitioning to college have shown, students receive significant support such as academic guidance, mentorship, and emotional care from non-parental adults (i.e., teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, etc.) as well as their parents (Lareau, 2011; Weis, Cipollone, & Jenkins, 2014; Stevens, 2009). This sponsorship gives them a class advantage.

Sponsorship can be of particular importance to working-class students who seek educational mobility. Support from adults outside the family can offer crucial assistance to those who do not have sufficient educational resources at home. For instance, Stanton-Salazar (2011: 150)
1067) conceptualized the role of teachers as “institutional agents” who “acts to directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, highly valued resources (e.g., high school course requirements for admission to 4-year universities).” He explains that educators serve disadvantaged students by providing social capital and “institutional resources that function to ensure children and adolescents become effective participants within institutional spheres” (1078). Stanton-Salazar’s theoretical argument resonates in empirical research on the relationship between disadvantaged students and their educators. For example, in his study of undocumented youth transitioning to adulthood, Gonzales (2016: 79) documented how “a nudge in the right direction from an influential teacher” could help undocumented students from less affluent families transition to college, rather than leave school. His study shows that supportive educators cultivate their students’ educational aspirations, improve their college preparations, and develop their sense of belonging in school, all of which “set them on distinct pathways toward college-going from school” (77). In addition, Jack’s (2016) study reports that disadvantaged students, and specifically black students from low-income families, benefit from attending resourceful elite secondary schools. Similar to their peers from middle-class backgrounds, privileged poor who experience a nurturing educational atmosphere at prestigious secondary institutions “enter college at ease with the expected style of engaging faculty and … navigating institutional practices,” which facilitates a smooth landing in an elite college (13).

Clearly, educators play a role as what I call mobility sponsors: They facilitate disadvantaged students’ educational mobility by showering them with educational, social, and cultural resources. However, the mechanism of the sponsorship from educators, which enables to understand the nature of working-class youth’s mobility experience, has not been sufficiently examined. Little research has explored how sponsorship from educators is distributed across working-class students within the same school, and how receiving or being denied such sponsorship shapes students’ educational mobility. As researchers have discussed, providing
sponsorship to all students in an equal manner is virtually impossible (Corwin et al., 2004; O’Conner, 2000). Educators are given a limited amount of resources (i.e., time, physical and emotional energy, etc.), and hence their resources are diluted when they must distribute them across large numbers of students. Therefore, sponsorship from educators inevitably becomes a zero-sum game. When some students acquire resources from teachers, other students in the same school are likely denied the opportunity to utilize that same capital. This means that some working-class students are left unsupported, while others receive sufficient assistance from their educators. Nevertheless, this selective nature of sponsorship from teachers has not yet to be studied with scrutiny.

SOUTH KOREAN EDUCATION AS A CONTEST MOBILITY SYSTEM

The concept of a contest mobility system states that paths to elite status should be available to all in an open contest (Turner, 1960). Therefore, providing fair opportunities for competition for better social status is crucial. South Korean education arguably follows the contest mobility system paradigm. It seeks to guarantee students a fair competition for social mobility, regardless of their social origins. For example, through the High School Equalization Policy, the government has attempted to reduce between-school disparities by limiting both school choice and student selection; this is to prevent academically advanced students from becoming concentrated in a few prestigious high schools. In addition, standardized educational curricula are adopted nationwide, and educational practices providing different educational experiences for students within a single school (i.e., tracking and ability grouping) are prohibited.

In Korea, the competition for elite status is organized around college admissions, where there is a rigid stratification of higher education institutions. Four-year colleges are usually considered to provide a better educational environment and life chances for their graduates than
are two-year colleges (Park, 2008). Among four-year universities, several institutions in the Seoul metropolitan area and a fewer number of national universities in other major cities are considered top-tier institutions. Graduating from these schools means better access to economic opportunities, social privilege, and exclusive social networks. Therefore, to many parents and children, especially in the middle class, securing a seat in one of these top schools is the most important educational goal (Abelmann, Park, & Choi 2012). This induces intense educational competition among high school students. While simply going to a college has become easier due to the rapid expansion of higher education in Korea, getting into select schools has remained difficult for many.

Korean education has recently diversified the ways in which it selects students. Admission is now based on an evaluation of multiple qualifications. Consequently, the college admissions process has become more complex since the early 2000s. Before that time, applicants were evaluated based on a single criterion: their academic performance measured by their scores on the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) and HGPA. After the early 2000s, things changed. The government forced colleges to diversify their admissions programs to reduce this heavy reliance on test scores and allow for the consideration of diverse aspects of talent. Now universities select students via two major admissions programs: early admission (soo-si), where many aspects of the application portfolios are considered, including the HGPA, and late admission (jung-si), where students’ performance on the CSAT is crucial.

---

1 Institutions selected their new, incoming students in January and February, before matriculation in early March. No other factors beyond students’ academic standing were considered for college admissions. The rule of the game was quite simple: applications with the highest grades always had a better chance in the admissions competition, and studying hard was the best strategy for getting into a prestigious college.
For early admissions, during which approximately 60% of the incoming freshmen are selected, students are required to demonstrate diverse qualifications. For example, to apply for Seoul National University (SNU), one of the top schools in Korea, applicants must qualify in many ways. In 2015, Seoul National University asked applicants to submit several different types of information for the first round of the student selection process (see Table 1.1). Applicants were required to submit their school records, including HGPA, other records indicating their academic and non-academic activities, and a recommendation letter. Finally, applicants were asked to submit four “self-introductory essays” demonstrating their educational experience, academic aspirations, and plans. After screening the applicants based on their school records and essays, SNU chose their future freshmen from in-person interviews. For these interviews, the school asked the students certain questions to gauge their academic fit with the major to which they’d applied, as well as assess their academic attitude and overall personality. Whereas each school can customize their evaluation tools, selective schools usually adopt an evaluation process similar to SNU’s.

In this complex competition for college admission, students are required to demonstrate various academic and non-academic qualities. In addition, since many institutions ask students to

---

2 In 2015, 65.1% of all freshmen students beginning college were chosen through early admissions; the other 34.9% were through regular admissions (Korean Council for University Education, 2015). The government has incentivized colleges to expand their early admissions programs, so these programs are expected to continue to grow.

3 The essay consists of four questions, as determined by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education decides the first three questions. These questions do not change every year. They ask students to describe their academic endeavors, extracurricular activities in school, and learning of social virtues through school activities (e.g., cooperation, sharing, caring, and conflict management). Each institution adds the fourth question to their application materials. For instance, Seoul National University asked applicants to choose three books they’d read during their high school years and explain how reading these books influenced them. Since early applications are in September, students often begin preparing the essays over the summer. Also, students must understand what each question specifically seeks to measure if they are to write successful essays for competitive four-year universities. At the same time, they should know how to compose short essays that effectively demonstrate logical thinking and advanced writing skills.
prove that they have regularly engaged in diverse activities, students must strategically develop their portfolios from their first year of high school. This means that compared to past cohorts whose admissions were determined by standardized test scores, recent cohorts of Korean high school students have been forced to navigate a complex admissions system and carefully plan and participate in diverse activities. They now need cultural knowledge about the educational system; thus, sponsorship from adults – both parents and educators – is more important than ever, making the mobility experience of Korean working-class high school students an interesting case when examining sponsorship in a contest mobility system.

METHOD AND DATA

Research Site

For this study, I spent one academic year (March 2014 to February 2015) at a co-ed academic high school in a southern city in South Korea; in this research, I pseudonymously refer to this institution as Glory High School (or Glory). Glory is located on the outskirts of an industrial town called Harbortown. In the 1970s, Glory was a vocational institution that served local needs by primarily graduating industrial workers. In the 1980s, Glory became an academic institution designed to prepare students for university. Due to its early history as a vocational high school, Glory has had a longstanding local reputation as a low-performing school.

Thus, Glory High School has had to fight an uphill battle to attract academically advanced students. Because the number of recent graduates admitted to elite universities often shapes a high school’s local reputation, high schools in Harbortown and adjacent cities engage in intense competition for students with the academic potential to be admitted to prestigious universities. Since it occupies a lower rung on Harbortown’s academic hierarchy, Glory has drawn less academically oriented students who are more likely to attend two-year junior colleges
and less often go on to selective four-year universities; unfortunately, this serves to reinforce their negative reputation.4

Despite its less favorable academic performance, Glory’s educational mission is to prepare pupils for a university education. Like other academic high schools in Harbortown, the daily schedule at Glory is primarily organized around college preparation. Students spend 14 hours a day, from 7:30am to 9:30pm, Monday through Friday, at school. On Saturdays, when schools do not have regular classes, senior students are mandated to come to school to study or prepare college application materials. The major curricula address subjects chosen for college preparation. Club activities, which are less relevant to college preparation, are unofficially prohibited for senior students. Also, students’ attire is strictly controlled and monitored by teachers who believe that paying excessive attention to fashion distracts students from their studies. Currently, Glory seems to have achieved their aim, at least in a quantitative sense. Recent statistics show that more than 96% of graduates proceeded to college in 2014. They sent more than 90% of their graduates to college, including four-year universities and two-year junior colleges, in the last ten years. As of 2014, 52% of Glory High School graduates proceeded to two-year junior colleges, mostly in Harbortown or adjacent cities, and 44% went to four-year universities, including a few that are highly selective.

Students at Glory are from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds; students in Harbortown can apply for high school regardless of their residential district. However, the school is known to draw more students from low-income families, as compared to other schools in the area. Given the negative association of students’ SES and academic performance in Korea (Kim and Kim 2013), many of the teachers with whom I spoke pointed out that there is usually more working-class students than middle-class students at Glory. For example, the head teacher said during our

4 For instance, Glory High School’s results from the National Scholastic Achievement Test in 2014 showed that almost 60% of their students had a basic or below basic math ability, whereas only 15.5% of the entire body of examinees belonged to this group.
interview, “There is a vicious cycle between our low academic performance and students’ family backgrounds. Wealthy parents would not send children to us unless they want their children to have an advantage in the educational competitions within school. They would choose other, better schools in the downtown.” Despite restricted access to students’ family backgrounds for legal reasons, I can confirm that Glory has a substantial number of students from low-income families. For example, 15.3% of the senior students I observed were eligible for any type of government support for low-income households (those who made less than 20% above minimum wage). In addition, 30% had their registration fees waived (approximately $90) for the three-week CSAT preparation summer program because teachers determined that these students could not afford to pay.

Data Collection and Analysis

I gathered data using an ethnographic research method, including in-school observations and in-depth interviews with senior students, teachers, and administrators. I concentrated on senior students over a single academic year, since I sought richness rather than breadth in the data; I felt that this would best enable me to understand the rhythm of the daily experiences of students and teachers alike (for other examples of this method, see Willis, 1981; MacLeod, 1987; and Pascoe 2011).

For observations, I visited schools at least four times weekly during a single academic year, with each observation lasting approximately eight hours, on average. I had access to six senior classrooms, senior teachers’ offices, other facilities (e.g., special study rooms, the library, 5 Teachers repeatedly mentioned to me that Glory High School draws more students from less affluent families than other academic high schools in Harbortown. For example, one male English teacher said, “You should know that our kids are different. They are not only academically poor but financially poor. We have a higher proportion of poor students than any other school in the city. Many are from less wealthy neighborhoods. Their parents are often poorly educated, too.”

6 The fees were waived for those students whose households were eligible for government welfare programs or for those whose homeroom teachers thought that they could not afford to pay.
gym, and cafeteria) in Glory. Following senior students and their homeroom teachers, I primarily observed interactions between students and teachers during the self-study hours (four to six hours on weekdays and eight hours on Saturdays), lunch and dinner hours, and breaks. During observations, I tried to capture various interactions between teachers and students regarding students’ transition after high school. I used ethnographic notes to document my observations and later expanded these into field notes.

My role at Glory was primarily that of an outside observer, but both teachers and students accepted me easily and found me to be a useful resource in different ways. Many teachers said openly that they believed I could be a good influence on their senior students. I believe that my status in the international academic hierarchy, a PhD candidate at a well-known American institution, helped me to earn their trust. Since they believed I could be a good academic role model for their students, they were very receptive to my research. Teachers also asked me to get involved in certain academic activities. However, I strived to minimize my influence on students’ academic achievement or their college admissions process. When teachers (and less often, students) actively asked for my help with exam preparation or college admissions, I gently reminded them that I could not provide extensive support. When I inevitably provided teachers or students with some academic assistance (e.g., providing students with general advice for college application materials or exam prep for social studies), I tried not to interfere with the students’ overall educational experiences.

At the same time, the students saw me as a friendly ear with whom they could talk about their problems without being judged; they knew that I was neither their “real” teacher nor a classmate. Also, I believe that my personal history, growing up and attending school in

---

7 For example, at the request of teachers, I worked as an unpaid teaching assistant for Mr. Harrison, who was teaching senior English and was having a hard time because of the language barrier. My role in this class was minimal. I translated or helped teachers facilitate class discussions when I was asked.
Harbortown, allowed me to build a rapport with these students in a short amount of time. When I first entered the field, I found the students to be excited to share their experiences with me, though we were practically strangers. Within a couple of weeks, they began confiding in me about several issues, such as college, future careers, friendships, courtship and sexuality, and family conflicts, and touched upon aspects that they would not openly discuss with their teachers or classmates. In addition, the students often invited me to their classrooms for observation. Many students enjoyed my observations because they felt that they were receiving an unusual amount of attention from a grownup. Since social rewards and recognition are tied to academic achievement in Korea, many students found it pleasing to have an adult interested in them irrespective of their academic standing. Indeed, one male student said to me at the end of my research, “I enjoyed having you around. No one cares about us who are not good at studying, but you care about us, right?” Overall, due to my dual role, I was easily accepted. More importantly, this acceptance allowed them to behave freely in front of me, which was crucial for my acquiring vivid firsthand observational data about their interactions in the school.

In addition to observations, I conducted in-depth interviews with 33 students from working-class families and 10 teachers. The interview questions for the students generally addressed their educational experiences, career plans, academic aspirations, and perceptions of their interactions with teachers. With the teachers, I asked about their career experiences, opinions about the college admissions system, and their perceptions of students. All interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes to 2 hours. Because I used self-study hours or lunch periods for these interviews, they were sometimes interrupted when the break was over. In these cases, I asked the interviewees to meet with me again to complete the interviews. All interviews were conducted in Korean and audiotaped with the interviewee’s consent. I later transcribed and analyzed these tapes.
Because I am interested in the role of teachers in working-class students’ academic transition, I limited the scope of my analysis to students from working-class backgrounds. From the field notes, I selected only the information related to the experiences of students from working-class families. To measure these students’ family backgrounds, parental education was used as a proxy; I also used other class information as secondary data. I was not granted access to any school-level information regarding parents’ socioeconomic statuses, for legal reasons. Students provided me with certain information about their parents’ education – especially with regards to whether their parents had attended college – in a confident manner, as compared with other information related to their family backgrounds (e.g., parental income, homeownership, and parents’ occupations). Students were much more inconsistent when they described their financial situation or parents’ occupational history. I selected students with parents who had high school educations or less, and further limited the sample to students whose parents had working-class occupations. For example, I excluded students who told me that their parents were business owners or held managerial positions, even though the parents had high school educations or less.

To evaluate the field notes and interview transcriptions, I conducted an ongoing process of data analysis during the fieldwork, regularly reviewing field notes and interview transcripts, and writing analytical memos (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 1995). After finishing this one year of fieldwork, I revisited the materials to identify inductively any emerging themes, discuss connections to the existing research, and raise additional questions. Particularly, I sought to capture emerging themes regarding college choice and the application process. I also paid close attention to incidents from the field notes in which teachers and students communicated about going to college. I focused on categories related to interactions regarding attending college and college applications, and teachers’ differing treatment of certain groups of students. While conducting this analysis, diverging experiences emerged between high performers (who consisted of students selected for special study groups and other students whose teachers believed they
would be eligible to apply for competitive four-year colleges), and low performers considered
more suitable for local junior colleges. I further developed this analysis to clarify comparisons of
these two groups and identify disconfirming evidence.

FINDINGS

Academic Hierarchy in Glory High School

Students in the senior student building seemed almost indistinguishable from one another in their
grey school uniforms. They had carefully adorned themselves in similar fashion, guided by both
the latest teen trends and official school regulations restricting “immoderate clothes and
accessories that are not suitable for their status as high school students.” For instance, many boys
intentionally left a few buttons of their shirts open at the top so they could indirectly brag about
the brands of t-shirt (e.g., Nike, Adidas, and New Balance) that they were wearing underneath
their school uniforms. In addition, most had the same trendy mop-top hairstyle, helmet-like with
straight bangs neatly clipped just above their eyebrows. Girls usually let their slightly-dyed brown
hair that they had carefully ironed fall upon their shoulders. They also wore what they called
“transparent makeup,” which included only powder and pink lip gloss for an even skin tone and
“natural” look. This helped keep teachers from easily noticing their makeup, the wearing of
which violated school rules. Their similar look made it difficult to discern the hierarchical
structure of their peer groups.

It was another criterion, one to which scholars have paid scant attention, that largely
shaped the students’ status at school: their academic standing narrowly measured by their average
test scores (i.e., average HGPA). It did not take long for me to learn that the social world of
senior students at Glory was hierarchically stratified by their academic performance; this helped
to predict their chances of attending highly selective colleges at the end of their senior year. For
the first few weeks, teachers and students repeatedly instructed me on this invisible yet powerful social stratification mechanism.

For example, on my third day in the field, Ji-soo, a female student who was said to be a “good student” and who showed a high level of academic performance, walked me through the social world in which she lived every day. She harshly evaluated her school’s status in the local academic hierarchy:

Glory High School is just a dump. We are all trash. These kids are not interested in studying at all. No one. Thus, it is very fun to hang out with friends at school. They are not lame. Yet they are all a dump, too. Any smart kids would never apply for this school. We came here because we were not very good at middle school. It is obvious that no one in this school would do well at other academic schools.

Ji-soo explained that whereas the school’s academic reputation was less favorable, student’s status in the school was shaped by their academic standing. She clarified that their relative academic performance in school still divided the senior students into different social groups. In a cynical tone, she continued:

There are kids who study well. Teachers usually love them, but these kids are sometimes annoying because they think that they are smarter. They will live better lives than anyone from Glory … because they will make it to good colleges … The rest of the students are nothing. They are so far from being smart but still want to go to college. They are usually nice and fun, but they just do not study hard. Teachers do not care about them much, either.

In her vision, her school was rigidly stratified based on students’ academic performance. Many teachers and students at Glory confirmed Ji-soo’s categorization on several different occasions. Despite the various terms they used to describe the school’s hierarchical structure, my fieldwork uncovered two major student groups: a smaller number of academically excellent students at the top of the hierarchy whom teachers and students alike had labelled “rising stars,” and most of the other students who did not demonstrate academic excellence and were understood to be “ordinary kids.”
The rising stars were at the top of the academic hierarchy at Glory. These students were better academic performers than their classmates, and hoped to enter selective four-year colleges. Two or three of the 25 students in each class were rising stars. The most prominent were six top-performing students chosen to be in a “special class.” At the beginning of every academic year, Glory selected the top six students from each cohort to be in a special class. The special class was a sort of elite unit within the school; they were exclusively supported because they were the most academically advanced. Once the students were chosen to be in the special class, they received diverse educational advantages such as customized tutoring, individual mentoring from teachers and guidance counsellors, and access to a special study area. To be selected for the special class, only a single criterion was applied: students’ HGPAs from the previous year. Mr. Choi, the head teacher of the senior class, explained, “anyone can be in the special class if they show the highest performance. We invest in those students with the most potential.”

Their status within the school was symbolically illustrated by the special study room. This room was on the top floor of the building and was assigned exclusively to six rising stars. It was more spacious than any other room in the building, and isolated from the other areas. Other students were not allowed to enter. These six special students could enjoy a tranquil study space.

---

8 Any use of ability grouping in schools is prohibited by all sixteen metropolitan and provincial offices in Korea. In 2008, the Ministry of Education announced their “School Liberalization Plan,” which allowed local offices of education and individual schools more authority and freedom over their curricula and school management. One of the controversial clauses in the plan involves having each metropolitan and provincial office decide whether the schools in their district can use ability grouping. This includes creating classes that are homogeneous in ability and providing academically advanced students with special educational programs, such as the provision of exclusive self-study rooms. The National Human Rights Commission of Korea ruled against ability grouping in 2008, after this announcement from the Ministry of Education. Since then, local offices of education have banned individual schools from using the practice. However, despite the nationwide ban on special classes, NGOs and the news media have reported that schools have organized various forms of “special classes” to attract academically advanced students, selectively providing them with educational benefits and encouraging competition. I confirmed that all academic high schools in Harbortown and the two adjacent cities were running “special classes.” The sizes and specific educational programs for these special classes varied per school.
all by themselves. The special study room was also equipped with facilities that the other students
could not expect in regular classrooms. Each student had a spacious brown carrel with a
bookshelf and cabinet, and a green adjustable office chair to protect his or her back when
studying for long hours. In addition, these special students shared three personal computers so
they could search for college admissions information or take private online college prep classes.
These features were in stark contrast to those of the regular classrooms, where students spent
fourteen hours a day on weekdays. These classrooms were filled with more than two dozen small,
open-front desks, standardized school chairs, and small lockers. After regular classes ended
around 3:30 pm, the special class students would climb the stairs leading to the study room,
removing themselves from their crowded classrooms where their peers spent the rest of the school
day. This secluded space symbolized their distinctive location in the social hierarchy and the
social benefits of their status.

It is important to note that this special class is different from the honors or AP classes of
American high schools. The special class students at Glory had the same curriculum as their
classmates. Glory did not use a within-school tracking system like other high schools in Korea.
All students received the same education during regular school hours. The special class took
place only after school, in the evening and on Saturday self-study hours. This was not a part of
the regular curriculum, but a special curriculum designed to help the most talented students make
a successful transition to selective universities. Therefore, becoming a member of the special
class meant that they had a social status that was distinguishable from the rest of their
classmates, that they deserved more attention and a specialized education from the school.

Conversely, most of the students described themselves as “ordinary kids.” Teachers often
referred to them as “kids,” without a specific nickname like “rising stars.” Students sometimes
called themselves “nothing,” as Ji-soo described harshly. The ordinary kids were not as
academically advanced as the rising stars, so they were not expected to make the name of their
high school “shine.” They existed as a marginalized majority at Glory High School. Hyun-min, a stout boy with an outgoing and courteous demeanor, summarized their status as having “no presence.” Comparing the rising stars to the ordinary kids, Hyun-min said bitterly:

The rising stars are the main characters in the play. We are just supporting actors ... Honestly speaking, to this school, they must be more important. That is why they got the special treatment. We are of no use ... Ordinary students who are just doing fine academically have no presence at school. No one pays attention to us unless we make trouble.

Overall, the academic hierarchy was responsible for shaping even students’ more mundane experiences at school. It drew clear social boundaries between students, even defining their physical location in the school. However, as I will show below, this stratification did not just have symbolic importance. It also defined how the school distributed its institutional resources, serving as a pipeline through which teachers provided institutional support to the benefit of some and the detriment of others. In the following sections, I will outline two different relationship regimes that teachers forged with these two groups of students: the rising stars and the ordinary kids. By comparing their experiences, I will illustrate a teacher’s role as a mobility sponsor who selectively supports working-class students’ transition to college.

Sponsorship Relationship between Teachers and Rising Stars

As Stanton-Salazar (2011) argued, the teachers at Glory High School served as institutional agents, providing valuable educational resources to disadvantaged students. Yet they only offered their support to a small number of rising stars who already had strong academic records and the potential to be accepted by prestigious universities. These teachers formed a distinct relationship with these rising stars, which I have termed sponsorship. In this type of relationship, the teachers were mobility sponsors; they showered rising stars with academic and personal resources that directly led to their securing seats in prestigious universities, such as academic coaching, help with college applications, and general emotional support.
Academic coaching. As mobility sponsors, the teachers at Glory High School served as academic coaches to the rising stars. They meticulously monitored these students’ academic endeavors and performances to make sure their academic records would stay strong enough that they could apply for selective universities. To maintain their academic standing, students were required to make a steady and sustained academic effort. Teachers checked in daily on the rising stars; this was primary to the routines of the class teachers in the senior building. They visited the rising stars in their classrooms, the special study room, and even in the cafeteria during lunchtime, to connect with them and make sure they were fully committed to their studies.

For example, throughout the senior year, Ms. Han tried to make sure that Ga-hee, a rising star in her class, studied hard enough to retain her academically elite status. Ga-hee complained about Ms. Han’s “endless nagging,” but they retained a cooperative and favorable relationship throughout Ga-hee’s senior year. Ms. Han carefully checked in on Ga-hee’s progress and actively intervened in her activities if Ga-hee’s academic endeavors were less than satisfactory. Ms. Han’s hands-on coaching was only for Ga-hee and one other rising star in her class. She rarely paid this close attention to ordinary students, only checking in on them occasionally. One of her coaching techniques was “keeping Ga-hee separated from other kids.” Like other senior teachers, Ms. Han believed that students could be a substantial distraction for rising stars. In addition, she thought that her rising star needed some distance from her friends because of “Ga-hee’s nosy personality.” Ms. Han once complained to me about Ga-hee, saying “That girl gets easily distracted. She is interested in other people’s business too much. You can’t be focused on studying when you are nosy. Those students need some discipline.”

One evening in April, Ms. Han removed Ga-hee from her classroom and sent her back to the self-study room. Ms. Han had entered her classroom during a self-study hour and found Ga-hee busily chatting about the Sewol ferry disaster that had occurred five days prior. Because Ga-hee was concentrating on the conversation, she did not even notice that her teacher had returned.
However, Ga-hee’s presence in the room immediately caught Ms. Han’s attention. Ms. Han, annoyed, asked Ga-hee in a high-pitched voice, “What are you doing here now, young lady?” She did not say a word to the two students who had been chatting with Ga-hee, nor did she pay attention to the students who were conversing with one another or sleeping at their desks. Her eyes were fixed on Ga-hee’s back. Embarrassed at her teacher’s outburst, Ga-hee made excuses in an awkward but cheerful manner. “I was about to go back. I was here to pick up my workbooks.” She pointed at the workbooks in her arms, hoping they might prove her innocence to Ms. Han.

However, Ms. Han was persistent. She continued to yell at Ga-hee: “Go back to the upstairs right now!” The upstairs meant the special study room. Her voice was loud enough to be heard by everyone in the class, including myself. At that time, I was on the opposite side of the classroom to where Ms. Han and Ga-hee stood. Her scolding continued. “Are you insane or what? The midterm is around the corner. You must know that every exam matters for you from now on because there will be no more chances for you to make your academic records look better! It’s time to focus on studying, so go back to the upstairs!”

Ga-hee quickly complied with her teacher’s order. “I got it! I got it! I am leaving now.” She hurried to leave the room, putting a smile on her face. It seemed that Ms. Han’s scolding did not hurt her feelings. After she left, Ms. Han gave a cursory glance at her class from the door. When she left, she shouted sharply at the air, “Wake up! Did you come to school to take a nap?” However, she did not specify to whom she was talking. She did not give any specific guidance to the ordinary kids or remind them of the importance of the midterm exam. Ms. Han’s endeavors were only to make sure Ga-hee’s commitment to studying continued until she got in to one of the most prestigious private universities in Seoul.

Along with their careful monitoring of rising stars’ day-to-day academic activities, the teachers kept close track of their academic records and actively intervened when necessary. I observed teachers and rising stars discussing test scores after every test (i.e., mid-term, final
exam, and practice CSAT exams the students took every month). Through this communication, teachers informed students of their current academic standing. They provided timely advice to help rising stars maintain or improve their academic performance and make a successful transition to college.

For example, Sang-min, a male rising star who was in the special class with Ga-hee, did not do well on the mid-term math test in the first semester of his senior year. The son of factory workers, Sang-min had secured his position as a rising star during his first year at Glory High School. However, in the first semester of his senior year, his math results removed him from the top 4% of the senior cohort. Being in the top 4% meant receiving Grade Level 1 out of nine levels. High school grades in Korea are always on a curve. Therefore, he had to be in the top 4% to maintain the highest level in math. It was especially important for Sang-min to maintain Grade Level 1 in math and science because the bioengineering major at the elite colleges to which he was applying would consider these grades to be more important than those in other subjects.

Sang-min’s unsatisfactory test results shocked Mr. Lee, his class teacher. Mr. Lee expressed worry about Sang-min, whereas he did not show any concern about the performances of his other 24 other students. He was anxious that “Sang-min’s academic spirit had been dampened for some reason,” and that “the midterm result would negatively affect Sang-min’s early admission applications in the fall.” To help Sang-min restore his academic standing, Mr. Lee scolded Sang-min and reminded him that he needed to work harder to get admitted to a good college:

Mr. Lee is furiously yelling at Sang-min in the teachers’ office. Sang-min quietly listens to Mr. Lee with his head lowered and hands around his belly. “Are you insane? Are you a crazy person? How could you get … Grade Level 2 on the math test?” Mr. Lee fumes. A short silence fills the air as Sang-min keeps quiet. Mr. Lee lets out a short sigh, and then tells his disheartened student in a gentler tone, “Let’s do better, okay? You have done well so far. You can’t ruin everything in your senior year.” Sang-min

I did not observe any occasions where Mr. Lee had individual discussions about the midterm results with ordinary kids.
does not answer right away, and Mr. Lee hurries to fill the silence. “You understand?” Sang-min finally utters two words in a faint voice: “Yes, Teacher.”

As Mr. Lee intended, the conversation was “a wake-up call” for Sang-min. It helped him to realize that he needed to work harder to achieve his goal. After the meeting, Sang-min studied harder and recovered his math grade in the next exam. He was appreciative of Mr. Lee’s attention. In a feeble yet determined voice, Sang-min told me that he “totally understood why Mr. Lee got upset.” To Sang-min, Mr. Lee’s scolding was “a token of affection.” Sitting on the stairway leading to the top floor, Sang-min echoed Mr. Lee’s point about his academic attitude:

As he said, I might have been crazy or something. I might have been overly confident about my math skill. I was naïve enough to simply assume that I would get a good result this time too. However, it turned out that I was so wrong. I decided to try harder from now on. I have a final exam and another mid-term before the application, so I still have a chance to make it up.

Involvement in college applications. Teachers were also actively involved in rising stars’ college preparation and applications, another aspect of their sponsorship relationship. Because most rising stars were applying for early admission to university programs, they had to demonstrate both academic and non-academic qualifications. To be competitive for selective universities, rising stars began preparing from their first year of high school. They already knew the majors they would pursue. Based on those majors, they built cohesive resumes to demonstrate their consistent academic interest. Ideally, they also had a record of extracurricular as well as academic activities.

This complex process of college admissions is especially challenging for students from working-class homes. Because their parents could not provide sufficient guidance for college applications, working-class students at Glory High School found it difficult to prepare in advance. For example, Ho-jin, the youngest son of a fisherman father and homemaker mother, was a rising star aiming for a national teacher’s college. His parents were very interested in Ho-jin’s college
transition; yet Ho-jin felt that they could not help him sufficiently because “they don’t know …
about college applications.” Ho-jin said:

They always keep saying ‘you should go to a good school.’ But when I was about to apply for colleges, they just said ‘we trust you. You can do it by yourself.’ They didn’t know what to tell me, so I took care of the applications without letting them know about specific details.

Instead of parental involvement, Ho-jin received support from his teachers at school. From the beginning of his high school years, his teachers helped him to effectively prepare for the admissions process. For example, they assisted him with building a resume that would be suitable for applications to teachers’ colleges. Ho-jin particularly referenced Mr. Roh as one of the most helpful in his admissions preparations. Mr. Roh, who used to be the head teacher when Ho-jin was in his first-year, directly advised Ho-jin and other rising stars, helping them to make long-term plans and consistent resumes based on their goals. In addition, he encouraged rising stars to participate in extracurricular activities that might be helpful in the admissions process.

Mr. Roh provided customized help to Ho-jin by getting actively involved in Ho-jin’s long-term preparations. Particularly, he advised Ho-jin to participate in volunteer work. Because Ho-jin wanted to go to a teachers’ college, demonstrating his commitment to his community and caring for others would be helpful in the admissions process. It would testify to his non-academic qualities important for future teachers, such as integrity and altruism. Mr. Roh helped Ho-jin found a student volunteer group at Glory High School; Ho-jin also began working as a volunteer tutor at a local community center. Mr. Roh contacted the center, run by an acquaintance, and requested that they accept his student as a tutor and mentor. Thanks to Mr. Roh’s efforts to arrange volunteer work for Ho-jin and other rising stars whose goal was to attend teachers’ colleges, Ho-jin could work at the center for three years, leading the volunteer group as a co-founder and president. Ho-jin enthusiastically explained the role Mr. Roh played in his success:

When I told him that I wanted to go to teachers’ college, he recommended that I found a volunteer student group at the school. He told me that it would be good if I had a
record of volunteer work for three years. He explained to me that professors who would review my applications wanted to see how committed I was to my community. He told me to do … volunteer work, which is related to teaching, for a long time, because no one would believe my intention to do … volunteer work if I worked only for a few months.

Ho-jin was grateful for Mr. Roh’s guidance and involvement in his early life at Glory High School. Ho-jin recognized that his sponsorship relationship with his teacher was crucial to achieving his educational goals. He told me in a serious manner:

Without Mr. Roh, I wouldn’t get accepted. I had no idea how to prepare for admissions. I realized that good academic records were only a basic requirement for college admissions only after I began my applications. There are many students who have good records but eventually fail because they don’t have good resumes. They simply don’t know who professors consider to be … good candidates. I think that I was very lucky to have Mr. Roh.

Another common way that teachers became involved was directly helping rising stars prepare their admissions materials. For instance, teachers actively helped them to write self-introduction essays. These essays are a crucial part of the admissions process. However, both rising stars and ordinary kids felt burdened with writing them. While students generally learned how to write essays for college applications during regular classes, many students felt stress about the essay, including Sang-min, a rising star who severely struggled in this area. He did not have a first draft of his essay one week before his first application deadline in September.

His struggling alarmed Mr. Choi, the head teacher of the senior class. On one Thursday in September, Mr. Choi quietly roamed the special study room, something he did every day. I ran into him whenever I was sitting in the study room. Checking in with the rising stars was a part of his routine. One by one, he asked them about the status of their applications. When he asked Sang-min about his essay, Sang-min hesitantly mumbled, “I am still writing. It is hard. You know that I am not a good writer.” Mr. Choi’s face hardened immediately. In an unusually low voice, Mr. Choi asked Sang-min seriously, “So, are you saying that you haven’t finished your essay yet?” Silence fell upon the study room. Other special students kept quiet, because no one else had
finished his or her essay either. Mr. Choi frowned and put his hands behind his back. He nervously bit his lip and shook his head. “Is this a joke? Your deadline is in a week, and you haven’t written anything?” Letting out a sigh, he continued, “I think that I can’t have you guys handle … the applications by yourselves.” He implied that the teachers should become more actively involved in the students’ applications.

After that moment, Sang-min became a “priority target” who drew intense focus from all the teachers. It became a collective effort among the teachers to help Sang-min. Mr. Choi informed Mr. Lee, his class teacher, of Sang-min’s issue and asked him to step in. Mr. Lee immediately met with Sang-min to discuss the problem with the essay and arrange a meeting with a Korean teacher, Mr. Ki. Agreeing to help his colleague’s rising star, Mr. Ki met with Sang-min every night for almost an hour until Sang-min submitted his applications. Sang-min said, fidgeting with his fingers, “He almost rewrote what I had written.” Being shy, he handed me a hardcopy of his essay. It was filled with Mr. Ki’s copyediting marks in red, which showed his conscientious efforts to help Sang-min. Thanks to his teachers’ timely and considerable intervention, Sang-min submitted his applications on time and got in to one of the schools to which he’d applied.

*Emotional support.* The sponsorship relationship between teachers and rising stars also involved teachers’ emotional support. For example, Ga-hee constantly complained about how nervous she was while preparing her submission to her dream school, Yonsei. Her desks were decorated with the school’s name, logo, and even pictures of the campus. She was obsessed with that school, and the submission process gave her much stress. Though she had completed the materials a few days before the deadline, she could not send them because of her anxiety. “I just can’t do it because I am so nervous. What if I don’t get it?” As the deadline approached, Ga-hee regularly discussed her anxiety with her teachers whenever they asked about her application.
Her teachers tried to subdue her anxiety by encouraging Ga-hee. Mr. Choi, the head teacher of the senior class, helped her through the admissions process that was causing her such emotional distress. When Ga-hee showed signs of anxiety, Mr. Choi shared his confidence in her chances of getting admitted. By reassuring her with humor, he attempted to help her move forward through this stressful situation, as the field note recorded:

Ga-hee is filling out the electronic application form for Yonsei University, her dream school. Mr. Choi quietly stares at the computer monitor from behind her. She suddenly stops typing. “Continue!” Mr. Choi orders in a soft voice. “I am freaking nervous!” She frivolously replies, pretending that her body was trembling. “What do you feel nervous about? Just fill out the form and send it!” Mr. Choi pretends to scold her but remains cheerful. Ga-hee tells him that she might not be admitted, but Mr. Choi vehemently responds, “Who would be able to be accepted if you aren’t? Name those students. You want to bet? You like fried chicken, right? I will buy you fried chicken if you fail. You buy me fried chicken if you are accepted. How about that?” Ga-hee mischievously smiles, “I don’t have money! You know that I am poor.” He gently taps her shoulder, saying “I will buy you fried chicken if you are accepted, too. So please go ahead and finish this.” Then Ga-hee returns to the computer, saying happily, “Then we have a deal! At least I can eat fried chicken no matter what.”

It took almost half an hour for Ga-hee to complete the application. Mr. Choi stood behind her the whole time. Whenever she was anxious, he kept her from stopping the process by saying “Keep going. It will be fine” or gently tapping her shoulders. When Ga-hee finally finished, Mr. Choi gave her a big smile and told her that she would have to buy him fried chicken. Ga-hee stood up and shouted at Mr. Choi, “You just said that you would buy me one if I get accepted!” He chuckled and responded, “Don’t worry. I am just kidding. If you get in to this school, I will buy a whole chicken farm. It’ll be our school’s honor, so the principal might buy you one if I don’t.” Putting a big smile on her face, Ga-hee turned around and said to her special class peers, “It seems like we are going to have a big party! It will be on Mr. Choi.” Mr. Choi helped Ga-hee get through this emotionally disturbing moment by providing encouragement in a cheerful and humorous way. The interaction led her to release some of the intense anxiety and move forward.

Teachers also provided emotional support to students when they had to deal with failures in the admissions process. This helped students remain calm and patient when they were agitated.
by their friends’ admissions results. For instance, June was under a lot of pressure in October because he had not heard any news from the colleges to which he had applied. Other students were already receiving admissions letters. Whenever a student received an admission notice, his or her roar filled the hallway, followed by their friends’ cheering. Among the rising stars, June was the only one who had not yet had any good news. Instead, he had received three rejection letters, which worried him badly. He once bitterly told me, “I got screwed! I am in a big trouble!” He was considering spending another year preparing for college admission. He believed that it would be a disaster because it would burden his parents financially to support his college preparation for another year.

His concern kept him from studying for the CSAT. He needed those scores in case he only received a conditional admission or was put on a wait list. However, the rejection news devastated June. When he was rejected by his dream school, he refused to talk to anyone. He remained silent for the entire school day and left school early. He told his class teacher that he was sick. It was the first time he had ever asked his teacher to allow him to leave early. Mr. Bae sensed that June was critically disheartened by the rejection. He was worried that “June might give up even though the admissions process had not been completed yet.” Mr. Bae invited June to “have a counselling session” with him the next day.

He asked June to sit next to him on the orange, fake lather couch in the corner of the teachers’ office. Mr. Bae threw his left arm around June’s neck and brought his face very close to June’s. His cheek almost touched June’s. Mr. Bae’s voice was much softer than usual. “This is not the end of your life. You know that, right?” June silently nodded his head several times. He comforted June by saying, “You were just not lucky with the other schools. You’re still waiting for the last one. Also, there is a wait list. Have you ever thought what would happen if you get on the wait list and then you fail to meet the minimum CSAT score to get the admissions letter? I think that it is too early to feel frustrated. Your game is not done yet.” June raised his head and
looked at the air. He didn’t say anything. Instead, he let out a short sigh. Mr. Bae advised him to go back to studying for the CSAT. “I know it’s hard, but we still have some time.” He then tapped on June’s back and cheerfully ordered him to “Stand up and go back to the classroom. Go study hard!”

June still seemed unhappy after talking to Mr. Bae, yet as advised, he returned to his studies. He admitted that his teacher had made a good point. During a conversation after his meeting with Mr. Bae, June said in a deep, low voice:

I would need to study anyway. Mr. Bae is right. To get accepted to the last school, they require … minimum CSAT scores for the final decision. Even though I would have to wait for another year after failing to get in any schools this year, I would need to study anyway for the next year. I can’t just waste my time worrying about my future.

Mr. Bae’s counselling did not dramatically change June’s mood, but it helped him stay focused on studying. Later, June did receive an acceptance letter from his last school. As he had recommended, his preparation for the CSAT helped him to secure his seat at a national university. Even though it was not his first choice of school, June was happy to be going to school “without wasting another year and money to go to college.”

*Laissez-Fair Relationships among Teachers and Ordinary Kids*

Compared to the sponsorship relationships that teachers forged with rising stars, teachers took a less invasive, more laissez fair approach to ordinary kids’ college transition. Rather than provide direct and extensive help, teachers emphasized self-help for ordinary students, resonating with contest mobility norms. Accordingly, the ordinary students, who the teachers believed lacked a strong work ethic, rarely received comprehensive support. This lack of help left ordinary kids from working-class homes perplexed and frustrated with the application process and led them towards less prestigious colleges that might not provide as many opportunities for class mobility.
Lack of academic coaching. Teachers at Glory High School often complained about a lack of academic effort and interest among the ordinary kids. Mr. Choi expressed his frustration, saying “They have zero interest in studying. They are not motivated to work hard at school. I sometimes feel that they’re just sitting and killing time until they graduate.” The teachers lamented that students did not work hard enough at the admissions process, particularly with regards to two-year junior colleges and less prestigious local universities. Admission to these types of institutions have become easier in recent years, a state that echoes arguments by Rosenbaum (1997; 2011) and other researchers (Schneider and Stevenson 2000). The teachers worried that these ordinary kids would be “academically adrift” at college (Arum and Roksa 2011). They expected that a substantial number of their students would fail to graduate from college because they were not academically ready for university life. Overall, the teachers believed that many of their students needed more academic experience for their educational careers to be successful, as three teachers discussed.

Mr. Lee, for instance, said he was worried that his students might not go to college because they “hate studying.” Ms. Han gently disagreed. She said with a mild smile, “Everyone will eventually go to college. It’s a matter of where they are going, not whether they can go to college.” Mr. Bae, who at that point had been staring at his computer screen, bluntly interrupted the conversation. “That’s the problem. Even dogs and cats go to college. But the kids will regret being idle during high school when they begin their first college class. Why? They simply won’t be able to comprehend what professors are teaching. I’ve seen many kids come back to me … whining, ‘teacher, college is so hard.’”

Despite their discontent with ordinary kids’ lack of academic rigor, these teachers rarely got involved in their students’ academic activities. They infrequently intervened in their students’ study time after they had not performed well on examinations. The lack of academic intervention sometimes led to students having a difficult time transitioning to college. For example, Bo-yoon
was disappointed when she realized she could not apply to a nursing program due to her low HGPA. She determined that her academic record was not competitive enough for a nursing program, even at a two-year junior college, due to the high demands of the major. Colleges usually release their admissions requirements, including average GPA cutoffs, from previous years. That way students can gauge their chances of getting into a certain program. Since Bo-yoon was not proactive in searching for admissions information until she began her application process, “it was too late to improve the grades.” Bo-yoon thought that she, herself, was primarily responsible. She said in a sullen voice:

> It was naïve of me to think that I could get into one of the nursing schools because there are tons of schools. I thought that there might be a few junior colleges that would accept me. Yet I didn’t know how good my academic record should be to get into one of them. I looked down on those schools. I was stupid. I should’ve been more prepared. I don’t know what I’ve done while attending Glory High School. I guess that I’ve been just sitting at school all day long doing nothing for the last two years.

She blamed herself for being underprepared for her college applications, but Bo-yoon also wished that she had had more academic advice during her high school years. With tearful eyes, she said, “I wish that someone had scolded me harder when I was idling. I wish that someone had told me the reality that I would encounter more honestly.” Particularly, she gently complained about the lack of academic coaching. She wished that teachers would have given her more specific advice on how to improve academically. She felt that her teachers’ vague advice may have made her situation worse. She wiped her eyes with a Kleenex, and continued:

> In class, teachers always said something like, ‘Study hard now, or you will regret it. College is not everything, but your life will change if you get in a good school.’ But who doesn’t know that studying well and getting in a good school is important? However, I did not know how. I’ve never been good at studying. Nor was I interested. I didn’t know how to study hard. There is no use … blaming others for my own fault, but I wish that I had had more help than hearing ‘Study hard!’

As Bo-yoon said, when the ordinary students academically struggled, the teachers did not provide extensive support. Instead, they emphasized individual academic endeavors and encouraged students to work harder. For example, Min-joo did not get the help she needed, even
after she asked for it. In the beginning of her senior year, Min-joo decided to apply to a four-year college as a psychology major. However, she was afraid that her “elementary student-like” English proficiency would prevent her from keeping up with college classes because some, if not all, would be taught in English. In fact, her English grades were among the lowest in her class. Min-joo asked Mr. Han, who was Min-joo’s class teacher and who also taught English, for help.

After speaking to her teacher, Min-joo received an English grammar workbook designed for seventh graders. However, she received no advice on studying. She still did not know what to do to improve her English skills. When I asked her about the book on her desk, she smiled shyly and then said with a puzzled look:

Ms. Han gave it to me. I asked her how I could do better in English. Then she gave this to me. She said that the book is for middle school kids. She told me to start from this book because building ... fundamentals is important when you learn a foreign language. However, I don’t know what to do with this book. It’s not clear to me what is a noun and what is a verb.

Ms. Han interpreted Min-joo’s struggling as a lack of sincere effort to learn. When Min-joo asked Ms. Han for help, she gently refused to get involved. She advised Min-joo to try studying the book by herself before asking for help. One day Ms. Han was walking around a classroom during a self-study hour. She stopped at Min-joo’s desk and cheerfully asked, “Are you still on the first page?” Min-joo had opened the book to the first page and had been there since the beginning of the self-study hour. She has circled a few words and highlighted some phrases, but the rest of the page seemed clean. With an embarrassed smile, Min-joo complained pleasantly, “Teacher, this book is too hard for me. I don’t know what to do.” In a firm tone and without smiling, Ms. Han admonished her, “This is for seventh graders. How can you not understand what a seventh-grader can? Give it a try first. Study hard first, then ask your teacher for help. It’s not ... good ... to ask first without making some effort.” Min-joo’s only reply was a disheartened “Okay.”
Min-joo did not ask Ms. Han for help again. Nor did I see Ms. Han check in with Min-joo about her progress. It seemed that she stopped studying the book after that first page. I did not see Min-joo open the workbook after that day. Min-joo constantly worried about her English proficiency, but gave up studying English at all after the first midterm examination. She said in a monotonous tone, “I am an English abandoner. Probably I will take some private classes after I graduate, but for now, I try not to care about English too much. I have other subjects to study.”

Lack of the involvement in the college applications. Whereas teachers helped rising stars to prepare for the admission and got involved in the application process if students had a difficulty, these same teachers took a laissez-faire approach toward ordinary kids’ college applications. Since ordinary kids usually applied for less selective colleges, they were less likely to received direct help with their applications. Mr. Lee explained that they tended to provide less help for ordinary kids “because they wouldn’t need extensive help to apply for a two-year junior college in the neighborhood.” In an instructional tone, Mr. Lee said:

Listen, Teacher Jo. Less competitive schools like junior colleges nearby are just waiting for students to apply for their schools. They would accept anyone. All they need to do is putting their information on the application system, submitting whatever documents or essays that the school requires, and transferring the application fees to schools. It’s simple and easy. It’d be a good thing if we could help everyone, but we don’t have much time. So we can’t help but care less about those students who don’t need help.

Moreover, since almost all students applied for various application programs, it was impossible for teachers to get involved in students’ applications directly. When they faced higher demands for their help, they considered rising stars’ applications a top priority, and limited their help for ordinary kids, emphasizing the students’ own efforts. For example, Mr. Kim made it clear that he would not help ordinary kids, especially those students who would apply for less selective junior colleges. He believed that “anyone who wouldn’t be able to handle with the application process shouldn’t go to college in the first place because it’s obvious that they would
not catch up with college classes.” He made his point clear by making an announcement to his class that he would not help students when they apply for two-year junior college:

He stormed into the classroom as opening the door. Chatting in a small group during self-study hour, students went silent immediately. They pretended that they were studying. A few students shook and woke up their classmates who were taking a nap. In a sharp and loud voice, which broke the silence, Mr. Kim told the entire class. “Those who are applying for two-year colleges, do not come and ask me about college applications. You figure it out yourself. It’s simple: Do a web search. I will begin consulting the four-year university applications first. You got it?” No one answered.

As he announced, he began to have a counselling session to help some students with their four-year college applications. He called Hye-rim’s name first. Teachers called her “a super star of the school” who might be get in a medical school at the end of the year, which would be value-added for the school’s reputation. Then, Mr. Kim summoned six other students for meetings in order of their academic rankings. The other sixteen college-bound students did not have a meeting with their class teacher before the applications.

Without teachers’ sufficient help, some ordinary kids, including Sun-hee, in Mr. Kim’s class were struggling. For Sun-hee, the admission process was not as easy as teachers would expect students to feel. Whereas her parents advised her to pursue a profession in the medical field, it was vague to her how she could have a job in the medicine. During an interview with me, she gently complained about the lack of specific guidance from grown-ups around her, including from her parents:

My parents did not have much education, so they didn’t know what I should do to get in colleges or what majors I should do to work in the hospital. They just tell me, “Oh, people say that working in the hospital is good. So, go for it.” They basically ask me to work hard and go to good school. However, this application is so confusing. There are too many schools. The names of majors are so confusing. I wish that someone just told me, “Okay, you apply for this school and this major.”

The confusion that Sun-hee led her to apply for college in a haphazard manner. Whereas she managed to narrow the scope of her search to dental-related majors, she was still confused about which major would serve her best interests. She became more anxious as the application
deadline for junior colleges was coming up rapidly. Using a computer in her classroom—that she shared with the other 23 classmates, she searched for admission information. While clicking numerous webpages of junior colleges, she shouted in the air. “Does anyone know the difference between the major of oral hygiene and dental technology? They sound the same to me.” Her best friend, Ha-kyung, asked her back as she was joking, “How do I know, bitch?” Ha-kyung giggled. However, Sun-hee was serious. “Don’t play with me. I’m not in the mood. This is fucking confusing. I don’t know where to apply. Not to mention individual application programs, I don’t know to which major I should apply!” Staring at the monitor and holding a mouse in her right hand tightly, Sun-hee talked about her struggle. Approaching Sun-hee, Ha-kyung advised, “Apply bunch. Apply everywhere and every major first. You can figure it out where you want to study once you get the admission results.”

Without supervisions of grown-ups, Sun-hee applied to four junior colleges. Unlike her initial plan to apply for dental-related majors, she ended up applying for three different majors, including oral hygiene, clinical pathology, and child development. Three after her search, she told me happily, “Teacher, I made it! I applied.” Hearing about her major choice, I asked her how she came to apply for child development that was not on her list three days ago. Her decision to apply for those majors was influenced by her friends’ choices. Without sufficient information about each major, she applied to multiple ones. She chuckled embarrassed about her sudden change and said:

I was not sure if I would like oral hygiene any more. When I applied, one girl told me that I would have to look inside people’s mouths all day long. When I imagined it, I got cold feet. Then, Ha-kyung said that she would apply for child development. Then, another girl said that she would apply for clinical pathology and said that that area would be promising. The grass on the other side always greener, right? Other majors seemed much better than oral hygiene. So I asked my parents, and they were okay about it. So, I ended up applying for different majors.

Ordinary kids not only received less attention from teachers, but they also experienced a rejection when they sought for help from teachers. When students asked for help about the
college admission, teachers saw this as a sign that they did not exert enough effort. For example, Dong-ha was preparing for an admission interview with a four-year university that teachers did not think of highly of. During the preparation, he found out that professors might ask him a question in English from information in an internet forum: “last year’s applicants had to speak English in front of professors.” Since Dong-ha was not confident with his English and did not have much experience with speaking English in front of strangers, he was nervous. During our conversation about the admission, he jokingly talked about his English capability, “I know nothing. All I can speak in English is, ‘My name is Dong-ha Kim’ and ‘Fuck you, fuck you.’ That’s it!”

Nervous about the interview, Dong-ha asked Mr. Nam if he could help him to prepare the English interview. However, Mr. Nam gently reminded Dong-ha that it was his own responsibility to take care of college application. The field notes documented:

“Teacher, could you help me with my interview in English?” He asks Mr. Nam politely. “Dong-ha Kim, what do you need?” Mr. Nam, sitting back in his chair, asks Dong-ha in a friendly manner. “Um…um…I am applying…for this university, and…um…I need to prepare for the interview.” Dong-ha stutters and it shows his being nervous. Mr. Nam stares at Dong-ha’s eyes for a few seconds and asks slowly, “So?” Dong-ha asks if he can help with his preparation for the interview more cheerfully this time. Mr. Nam half-jokingly answers, “Sir, you as a future college student should know how to introduce yourself in English. Don’t you think so?” “Please, teacher!” Dong-ha giggles and twists his body to avoid the embarrassing moment. Mr. Nam tells Dong-ha in a soft but firm tone. “Try it hard yourself. Consider it a part of studying.”

After Mr. Nam refused Dong-ha’s request and returned him to the class, I asked Mr. Nam why he refused Dong-ha’s solicitation. He answered in a firm tone, “It will be endless if I take care of every student who prepare for English interviews. Also, it is not that hard. They can figure it out themselves. They can search online. Everything is in there these days. It’s just their attitudes. They can’t ask teachers to do their jobs. They should learn to be independent.”

However, it was difficult for Dong-ha to prepare for the interview when he did not have sufficient English skills. After he struggled for a few more days, he asked one of the rising stars
in his class, Si-joon, to write a script of a self-introduction. However, Si-joon could not help Dong-ha answer tougher questions, such as “How will I develop my intellectual interest at college? or “Explain why you applied for our program.” In the end, Dong-ha had to do the interview without preparing for the interview as much as he wanted because he could not find help beside Si-joon.

$Lack of emotional support$. While ordinary kids did not receive sufficient help with their college applications, they also did not have teachers’ emotional support when they struggle. In the sponsorship relationship with rising stars, teachers helped rising stars to go through the stressful experiences of college admissions while paying close attention to their personal situations. Yet, in the laissez-faire relationship with ordinary kids, teachers provided only momentary and brief support, if at all. For example, Mi-jin did not receive sufficient emotional support when she was disturbed by the admission results. She felt unhappy because all four schools that she applied did not give her an admission. Whereas she could go to two-year schools, which are usually relatively easier to get into, she was shamed by the disheartening news. During a conversation with me after she got the last rejection news, she said in a sad voice, “I feel that my last twelve years of education became useless now. Though I was not a good student who studies hard, I guess that I did okay. I expected to go to one of four-year universities because there are so many. This is embarrassing because those kids whose GPAs were lower than mine still go to four-year schools. However, not me.”

Mr. Bae, her class teachers, tried to comfort Mi-jin when he found out that she was struggling with the news. However, his emotional support was not helpful sufficiently as the interaction between him and Mi-jin lasted for a short amount of time. Moreover, his words were not effective because he was not clearly aware of her situation. Therefore, their emotional interaction did not comfort Mi-jin, as shown in the field note:
Mi-jin has been upset all day because she earlier got the rejection from a school that she wanted to go. During the cleaning break, other students are busy moving desks and chairs, sweeping the floor, and dusting the windows. However, Mi-jin is quietly leaning against the cabinets lined up back in the classrooms. When Mr. Bae sees her standing still, he bluntly asks, “What are you doing there, Mi-jin?” She does not reply. He raises his voice. “I asked what you were doing there? Why aren’t you cleaning up?” Mi-jin answers in a faint voice. “I didn’t get accepted. What should I do? I got screwed.” Mr. Bae asks immediately, standing a few steps away from her, “Which school?” Mi-jin gave him the name. “What should I do? This is annoying.” Mi-jin expresses her frustration. Mr. Bae ponders a bit, but soon enough he comforts her. “You must be discouraged by the news. But you applied for other schools, too.” Mi-jin immediately answers irritated, “No. I already got rejected by the others. I told you.” Embarrassed by her response, Mr. Bae rushes his response, “Yes, you did. But you have other chances, like junior colleges. You can transfer to four-year schools after finishing two-year colleges. Don’t be disappointed too much.” Mi-jin bluntly answers, “Yes, I get it.” Mr. Bae looks at her for a few seconds silently and turns around. He starts to goes around the classroom to check in with other students.

After Mr. Bae left, Mi-jin was still devastated. She skipped the dinner. She put her hand down on the desk all the evening. She would not raise her head until the school ended. While Mr. Bae looked at her with a serious face from time to time when he walked around the class to monitor students’ self-study, he did not talk to her. I once saw him stop next to her and look at her back silently. However, he left her alone.

Moreover, some teachers were not sympathetic about ordinary kids’ failures. When students received their early admission results and some found out that they did not get in four-year colleges, many students felt disappointed with the results. Teachers interpreted their failure as an expected outcome of students’ lack of effort. For example, during a dinner meeting among senior-year class teachers, Mr. Choi described students’ failures as “karma.” He suggested that the admission results reflected students’ academic efforts, and, hence, students should deal with the results if they found the results to be less satisfactory. The field note documents the conversation between teachers as:

Mr. Choi says to other students in a high-pitch voice, “The students who failed to get college admissions must be tormented. They might be suffering. However, it’s their karma, karma. They are now paying off for their twelve years they spent idling. It’s sad to see them struggling, but they are facing the reality that their effortless twelve years brought.” he then bitterly chuckled and asked other teachers. “Isn’t that right?” Mr.
Kim agreed with Mr. Choi. He said emotionless. “They are learning a bitter and sour life lesson now. Who did tell them not to study? They now regret but there is no way that they can turn it back.”

This viewpoint of teachers about students’ struggle with the admission results was reflected their interactions with ordinary kids when the students needed emotional support. When ordinary kids were devastated by the admission results, teachers blamed students for their own mishap. Mr. Nam once chastised his class student, Chi-woo, for not having studied hard enough when he was frustrated by the news that he did not get into a four-year university. When Chi-woo applied for the school, Mr. Nam advised Chi-woo not to apply. He thought that “the school is too high” for Chi-woo. He felt that even if Chi-woo could get an admission from the school, he would struggle academically at college. Mr. Nam did not think highly of Chi-woo’s academic readiness for a decent four-year university. However, Chi-woo applied anyway.

Checking the admission results from the college website on the classroom computer, Chi-woo told Mr. Nam that he did not get the admission. As the field note reports, Mr. Nam’s reaction to Chi-woo’s news was less sympathetic than what teachers usually showed to rising stars when they struggled:

“Teacher, I didn’t get the admission.” Chi-woo sighs. Mr. Nam smiles and says as if he makes a joke, “I knew this, kiddo! I knew what was coming when I saw you taking a nap during self-study hours. You should’ve worked hard when you could.” Keeping his hands behind his back, Mr. Nam looks at Chi-woo who keeps looking at the computer screen. Chi-woo gently tries to defend himself by saying, “However, my HGPAs were good enough to get into the program when I checked the last year’s admission results. I thought that I would be okay.” However, Mr. Nam was persistent. “If you had intended to go to good schools, you should’ve studied harder. You should’ve made sure that your HGPAs were high enough to get into the school. You shouldn’t assume that you could get into the school because your HGPAs were higher than the average HGPAs of the admitted students last year.” Chi-woo did not say anything. Looking at Chi-woo who was disheartened, Mr. Nam comforts him briefly by tapping his shoulder and saying, “Cheer up! There’s no use of regretting over spilled water. You should wait for other schools to release the admission results. Cheer up.” Chi-woo did not raise his head. Tapping his shoulder a few times, Mr. Nam leave the classroom without saying anything further.
Overall, the stark difference in the relationship between teachers and two groups of working-class students were observed in several distinctive aspects. In the sponsorship relationship with rising stars, teachers were a proactive sponsor for their successful transition to selective universities. Yet, teachers emphasized self-help and efforts to achieve a better result in the admission to ordinary kids whose academic records were lower than those of rising stars. Sometimes, this lack of support left ordinary kids confused and frustrated during their journey to college.

DISCUSSION

Researchers have documented various roles that teachers played in the mobility process (Jack 2016; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Horvat and Davis 2011; Gonzales 2016). Some researchers have argued that teachers are biased against the working-class students (Calarco 2011; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bowles and Gintis 1976), which would hinder their social mobility and, hence help, to reproduce the existing class structure. In contrast, other researchers have shown that teachers could provide vital support for the working-class students’ transition to higher education (Horvat and Davis 2011; Jack 2016; Gonzalez 2015; Stanton-Salazar 2011). Nevertheless, previous literature has not sufficiently studied the variability in working-class students’ mobility experiences. Particularly, it has yet to examine the ways in which educators help their mobility in the contest mobility system in which individual merits and achievement are emphasized for one’s social mobility.

This study addresses this gap in the literature by illuminating the role that teachers play as a mobility sponsor in the contest mobility system. Based on a one-year ethnography in a South Korean high school, in this study, I found that teachers formed two distinctive relationships between their students from working-class homes (Table 1.2). In the sponsorship relationship
with rising stars who present academic excellence, teachers proactively engaged in college preparations by helping them to go through the intense competitions for securing a seat in one of prestigious universities. On the other hand, by taking a laissez-fair approach for ordinary students, teachers emphasized to them with the contest mobility norms which emphasized self-help and achievement. In this less-intervening relationship, working-class students struggled as they proceed to colleges.

Whereas this study resonates the important findings of previous studies on the supporting roles that educators play in working-class students’ education (Stanton-Salazar 2011; Horvat and Davis 2011; Jack 2016; Gonzalez 2015), it makes a distinctive contribution in two ways. First, this study shows that teachers can play a sponsoring role in the contest mobility regime where the social mobility is understood as a social reward that one can achieve by demonstrating his or her merit. Yet, in this study, academically-talented students benefited from teachers’ support when they participated in the contest for an elite status. While they exerted themselves in an effort to be successful in the college admissions, their teachers actively helped their transition to college in various ways. Particularly, when they were facing a complex admission process, the sponsorship relationship with teachers was a crucial resource for those students. Therefore, this study demonstrates how sponsorship can be viable for working-class students under the contest mobility system.

Moreover, this study reveals the nature of teachers’ sponsorship as a zero-sum game: the institutional support awarded to a few advanced students is effectively lost to the larger group of students who go unassisted. Note that many researchers have already empirically found that educators can be helpful for students’ educational development (Holland 2015; Bryan et al. 2011; Crosnoe, Johnson, and Elder 2004). However, it has been less clear in the literature how teachers are selective in choosing whom they help with limited resources available for them. In this study, teachers were not egalitarian in distributing their support. They concentrated their time, energy,
and attention on a few students who presented academic excellence and hence had a better chance to be an educational elite. Therefore, many average students tended to be left without sufficient help in their journey to colleges. These distinctive experiences of two working-class student groups demonstrate that teachers’ sponsorship is not bottomless. Nor is it equally provided for all working-class students. Teachers inevitably choose a smaller number of students to help, which ironically contributes to maintaining the disadvantages of many working-class students at the school.

One interesting area for future research is examining the ways in which teachers’ selective sponsorship shapes students’ academic experiences in the long-run. Many studies have reported the cultural and educational struggles that working-class students experience in elite institutions (Lee and Kramer 2013; Collier and Morgan 2008; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). On the other hand, a few studies have shown that high school educators could provide valuable cultural resources which help working-class students to navigate the higher education institutions successfully (Jack 2016). However, this study does not examine whether the favorable relationship that rising stars had with teachers would have a long-term benefit when they settle in colleges. Likewise, this study does not show if ordinary students would academically struggle when they proceed to less selective colleges without teachers’ sufficient help. Clark (1960) earlier showed that low-achieving students could face gradual institutional discouragement and hence lowered academic aspirations at community colleges. A longitudinal ethnographic study about diverging college experiences of rising stars and ordinary kids would be an interesting addition to this study.

This study also leaves the roles of parents in the transition of working-class students’ transition to college less clear. Since I focused on the interactional experiences that students had in the school, I did not have a chance to collect extensive data about the ways in which working-class parents could support or hinder students’ college transitions. During the interviews and
observation, students often mentioned that their parents were not always helpful in the college admission process because of their lack of knowledge. For example, Ho-jin, a rising star, recognized the complementary role of the teachers when his parents could not provide sufficient support for his college admission. He said during an interview, “I am lucky to have good teachers around me. My parents were good parents and always willing to help me. However, there’s nothing they could do more than giving me encouraging words in terms of college admissions. Teachers can be more helpful sometimes.” Moreover, there are signs in the literature that parental class positions could shape children’s educational experiences substantially (Lareau 2015; Lareau 2011; Calarco 2014; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Therefore, to understand the mobility experience of working-class students in a holistic manner, various ways in which parents could shape their transition to college should be further examined, along with the roles that educators play.
Table 1.1. An Example of the Application Material Requirement for an Early Admission Program (Seoul National University, 2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Records</th>
<th>HGPAs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attendance records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Honor and awards during high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extracurricular activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Homeroom teachers’ written evaluations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Recommendation Letter   | A written evaluation of students’ academic and non-academic characteristics that might be helpful for the admission from a schoolteacher or a grown-up who knows the applicant well (usually a senior year homeroom teacher). |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Introductory Essays (Four questions)</th>
<th>Q1: Demonstrate your academic endeavors at high school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q2: Discuss your experience with three extracurricular activities that you felt meaningful during high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q3: Describe your behaviors during high school to show your capability to cooperate and care others or manage conflicts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q4: Describe three books that most influenced you during your high school years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.2. Summary of Sponsorship relationship and laissez-fair relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sponsorship Relationship</th>
<th>Laissez-fair Relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Academically advanced students (“Rising Stars”)</td>
<td>Academically ordinary students (“Ordinary Kids”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic coaching</td>
<td>Extensive involvement in students’ academic achievement.</td>
<td>Lack of involvement in students’ academic activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provision of timely support for students’ academic development</td>
<td>Emphasizing students’ individual efforts without specific guideline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help with College applications</td>
<td>Active involvement in the preparation of college applications</td>
<td>Provision of a general guideline for college application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provision of customized help for each student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
<td>Provision of emotional support when student feel stressful and anxious</td>
<td>Occasional provision of emotional support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Framing students’ stress as the result of lack of efforts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


Chapter 2

The Hidden Costs of the College-for-All Society:

The Stigmatized Dreams of Work-bound Students in a South Korean High School

Scholars of the sociology of education have long debated the various costs of the “college-for-all society” (Clark 1960; Rosenbaum 2001). Many young people experience extensive costs created by the growth of the higher education system and the normative expectations of a college education. For example, researchers have documented the issue of over-education among college-educated workers—the job mismatch between their credentials and the work available to them (Robst, 2007; Hartog, 2000). Other researchers have pointed out the prolonged transition to adulthood, which is derived from the longer years that young people take to complete their educations; this has raised much public concern of late (Arnett, 2001; Furstenberg Jr, 2010; Newman, 2012). Moreover, scholars of the college-for-all society point out that an expansive college education might hurt students’ school engagement and transitions to work (Arum and Roksa 2011; Krei and Rosenbaum 2001).

Despite the fruitful discussion on the social implications of the college-for-all society, previous research remains incomplete. Researchers rarely consider the experiences of work-bound youth. Instead, they mainly focus on young people who are headed to college. Even when working-class students are studied, researchers usually examine the ways in which students from working-class homes experience various
difficulties in the higher education system (Collier and Morgan 2008; Jack 2016; Kim and Sax 2009; Lee and Kramer 2013). However, the ways in which work-bound youth experience the college-for-all society have been under-studied, with a few exceptions (Howe 1990). Nonetheless, there are signs that work-bound youth can be marginalized in the college-for-all society, despite its egalitarian ideal that the expansion of educational opportunity can provide equal lifestyle opportunities for young people. For example, Howe (1990) argues that work-bound youth—whom he calls “the forgotten half”—receive unfair treatment from society, and are often thought of as failures because they do not attend college. While the opportunities for decent jobs are shrinking, as is the lifestyle security for work-bound youth, their future is less “invested from public resources than is true of the college bound” (Howe 1993). Nevertheless, little empirical research has studied how work-bound youth are marginalized in a society with an educational ideal of college-for-all.

In the paper, I seek to fill the gap in the literature by investigating the stigmatization of work-bound students in an academic high school in South Korea. Based on a one-year ethnography at Glory High School, I make three points. First, teachers at Glory do not recognize students’ vocational aspirations as legitimate. When students express the goal of transitioning to work after high school, teachers stigmatize the working-class occupations that they pursue. Second, during the school day, teachers see work-bound students as “contagious.” Afraid that their aspirations might be harmful to college-bound students, teachers stigmatize their work-bound students. Third, work-bound students find these stigmatizing actions by teachers to be emotionally distressing. Some students feel anxious as they persist with their work plans. Others end up shifting
to a college plan by the end of the year. Overall, shedding light on work-bound students’
experience in a college-friendly academic high school, this study seeks to reveal the
hidden costs of the college-for-all ideal that burdens work-bound youth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent cohorts of young people have shared the ideal of college-for-all (Goyette 2008;
Schneider and Stevenson 2000). They believe that “completing a college education is a
gateway to more prestigious jobs and higher earning” (Schneider and Stevenson 2000).
Therefore, many young people take it for granted that participating in higher education
leads to a better future. This prevalent norm is often demonstrated by the increasing
college attendance rates among recent cohorts. However, some researchers are concerned
about these pervasive educational norms because students’ higher aspirations for college
do not always lead to desirable educational experiences. Schneider and Stevenson (2000)
use the term “ambitious generations” to describe those students who fail to align their
educational aspirations with realistic career goals. In addition, students can become
academically adrift in college when they matriculate without sufficient preparation (Clark
1960; Rosenbaum 2001).

Some researchers have argued that high school educators are major contributors
to this college-for-all movement (Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca 2009). According to
Rosenbaum, Miller, and Krei (1996), “they urge virtually all students to attend college,
under almost any circumstance, even if they have not done well in school.” The most
salient way that high school educators channel students’ educational aspirations is not
providing “the crucial information… that students will need to make their plans come
true” (Rosenbaum 2001: 1666). Because they are afraid that their candid guidance might discourage students’ college aspirations and hurt their self-esteem, they avoid telling students how to realize their educational and career goals. Therefore, even when they are uninterested in or cannot afford college, students are blindly guided to college with neither the necessary academic preparation and nor the necessary knowledge about a college education (Rosenbaum 2011; Schneider and Stevenson 2000).

Previous studies on the roles of educators in the college-for-all society have been insufficient for two reasons. Frist, the literature has yet to examine how teachers promote the ideal of the college-for-all empirically. Whereas Rosenbaum (2011) and his colleagues (Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum, Miller, and Krei 1996) interviewed high school guidance counsellors to understand their perceptions of the college-for-all society, little empirical research has scrutinized the day-to-day interactions between teachers and students whereby teachers promote educational ideals to students and push them toward higher education. However, by examining the roles that teachers play in disadvantaged students’ college aspirations and transitions, several studies have indicated that teachers could be more actively involved in students’ transitions to college than the previous literature has suggested. For example, Stanton-Salazar (2011) argues that teachers can play a role as an institutional agent for low-status students. By showering those students who lack family resources with support, they facilitate the development of students’ academic aspirations and achievement. Similarly, Gonzalez (2015)’s ethnography of undocumented youth shows that teachers help students to have a sense of belonging at school, and offer them the necessary help. Nevertheless, this proactive role of teachers has drawn insufficient attention in the college-for-all literature.
Secondly, the college-for-all research has not studied how teachers shape work-bound youth’s transition. Researchers commonly argue that teachers encourage work-bound students to go to college (Krei and Rosenbaum 2001; Schneider and Stevenson 2000). However, how teachers divert their pathway from work to college has remained a “black box” in the literature. Indeed, there are signs that teachers push work-bound students toward higher education. As presented in studies on the school-to-work transition, vocational education is losing its importance in high school (Cantor 1989). Moreover, according to Schneider & Stevenson (2000: 115), “even with the increasing awareness of the skills needed for entry-level jobs, vocational programs in high schools are often viewed as undesirable” by educators. Therefore, teachers’ withdrawal of support for work-bound students’ career plans could be shaping their transitional experiences. Moreover, the literature hints that individuals who do not follow the dominant educational norms could be seen as less desirable. For example, Baker (2014) claims that in what he calls “a schooled society” where education serves as a central social institution and a global norm, school dropouts are seen to present “moral sin” because they “have academic talent and yet dropped out of school.” This implies that work-bound students might face difficult interactions with teachers as they stray from the college-for-all norm that teachers uphold. Nevertheless, the college-for-all literature has overlooked the infavorable interactions that teachers form with work-bound students in the college-for-all atmosphere.
WORK-BOUND YOUTH IN SOUTH KOREA

The school-to-work transition has become less common among high school students as more students advance to college.\(^\text{10}\) Instead, college is undoubtedly the most common post-high school destination for young people. As of 2008, 83.8 percent of high school graduates in South Korea advanced to institutions of higher education. Whereas the percentage had dropped to 70 by 2016, the majority of high school students were still choosing college as their post-high school career destination. Among these tertiary educational institutions, the majority of South Korean high school graduates matriculate to four-year universities, and about a quarter go to junior colleges (Korea Educational Development Institute 2014). Moreover, young people in South Korea are graduating college at higher rates: In 2011, 63% of the cohort aged 25-34 had graduated from college, the highest percentage among OECD countries (OECD 2013).

This college-for-all society is a recent historical phenomenon in South Korea. As early as 1980, only 34% of general high school graduates and 10.1% of vocational high school graduates chose college as their post-secondary educational destination. However, the number of college students ballooned after 1981. In 1981, the South Korean government restructured higher education by increasing the quotas of students accepted to college. Throughout the 1980s, the social demands for college education increased

\(^{10}\) In South Korea, there are two types of high schools: academic high schools and vocational high schools. Academic high schools, which are attended by 80 percent of high school students, provide academic curricula to prepare students for college, whereas vocational high school train students for the labor market. Vocational high school organizes the curriculum around several majors including agriculture, engineering, commerce, fishery, and home economics (KRIVET 2001). Whereas vocational high schools aim to train future workers, many have college prep classes and their graduates attend college as well.
along with the rapidly increasing number of high school graduates (Park 2007). In 1981, the government increased the college enrollment rate by 130%. In 1990, the government increased college acceptance quotas and chartered many private higher education institutions (Shin 2012). As late as the 1990s, higher education continued expanding along with the neo-liberal movement in South Korea. In the mid-1900s, South Korean society was molded by the neo-liberal globalization that the government had been promoting after the Asian Financial Crisis (Shin 2010). As South Korea began participating in aggressive globalized market competition, the social needs for specialized and diversified higher education increased. Responding to the demands, the government further expanded and developed the mass higher education system.

In South Korea, where college education is pervasive, work-bound students are positioned on the lower rung of the academic hierarchy. A cultural norm of social mobility through educational achievement—similar to what Turner (1960) conceptualizes as the “contest mobility system”—requires young South Koreans who seek elite positions to participate in intense educational competitions. Securing a seat in a highly-ranked selective four-year university is considered an educational goal for many students and parents, as a college degree from a prestigious institution has a high stake in one’s life opportunities (Seth 2002). When students invariably participate in the competition for college education, work-bound students’ career aspirations mean that they withdraw themselves from the chance to achieve a higher social position. Like Chinese vocational students who are stigmatized both at school and in the neighborhood (Woronov 2011), work-bound students in South Korea can be seen as “educational failures.”
METHOD AND DATA

Glory High School (or Glory), which has approximately 500 students and 40 teachers, is an academic high school in an industrial city, Harbortown, in South Korea. The school is small compared with other academic high schools in the town. Glory began as a vocational high school in the 1960s and later became an academic high school in the 1980s. Since then, it has been preparing students for college, which is usually the most crucial educational goal for academic high schools in South Korea. Because of its short history as an academic high school, Glory has few graduates who have matriculated to selective colleges. This has adversely affected their local reputation: As a science teacher explained, despite their recent improvements in college admission results, people in the town still consider Glory a “low-quality school where low-quality kids go.” Therefore, compared with other academic high schools in the town, Glory has primarily attracted low-performing students who are more likely from low-income families.11

At Glory, I collected ethnographic data for one academic year between March 2014 and February 2015. I mainly used participant observation and in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and administrators. I limited the scope of the research to the senior class to maintain the richness of the data. Using participant observation, I collected ethnographic data about students’ day-to-day experiences as seniors and their interactions

11 As one English teacher said, “You should know that our kids are different. They are not only academically poor, but also economically poor. We have a higher proportion of poor students than any other (academic) high school in the city. Many families are struggling financially, and the parents are often poorly educated themselves.” In fact, 15 percent of the seniors with whom I engaged came from families that would qualify for any of the government subsidies offered to low-income households. Nearly 30 percent of these students had their fees waived for the three-week summer academic program designed to help students prepare for the college entrance exam (approximately $90 USD).
with teachers. I paid closer attention to various forms of interactions between students and teachers regarding college-attendance and career plans. I observed how they talked about college preparation, college admissions, or vocational aspirations. I tried to capture discussions about career plans between students and teachers in classrooms, hallways, and the teachers’ office, and learned the meanings of their interactions.

For observations, I visited the school between four and six times every week during the 2015 academic year. I spent about eight hours every visit “hanging out” with seniors and teachers. With the permission of the principal, I gained wider access to various school activities and events pertaining to my research. I could freely enter classrooms, and interact with students during breaks and study hall hours after regular school hours ended at 4:30 pm. Upon request, I also participated as a volunteer teaching assistant in a senior English class. In addition, the school allowed me to use the teachers’ office. Six senior class teachers shared the office which served as an office area and a teacher’s lounge. In the office, they prepared their classes and held both counselling meetings and parent-teacher conferences. My access to the senior class and the teachers’ office offered me the opportunity to capture the mundane experiences of both students and teachers.

While everyone addressed me as “Teacher Jo” as they would address any teacher, my status at Glory was ambiguous. One female student who actively helped my research by connecting me to her peers described my status as “neither a teacher, nor a student.” My vague position in the senior class helped me to build relationships with both students and teachers.

---

12 An academic year in South Korea begins in March and ends in February, and consists of two semesters. The summer break is usually from late July to August. The winter break is between late December and February.
and teachers. Teachers accepted me as their “honorary member.” After the first two
months, they would regularly invite me to their formal and informal gatherings. As I
mingled with teachers more frequently, they seemed to feel increasingly comfortable
about my presence when they would have a meeting or when they would be discussing
students. Beginning around May, I rarely observed teachers pause their conversations
when they saw me enter the office or treat me as a visitor. At the same time, students
accepted me as their “friendly ear.” Many students, if not all, asked me for a “counselling
session.” They wanted to talk about various issues including conflicts with friends, family
matters, or career plans. In my presence, they behaved feely as they accepted me as a
person with whom they could talk candidly. The favorable acceptance of both teachers
and students enabled me to acquire first-hand observational data about ordinary
interactions in the senior class.

In addition to the in-school observations, I also shadowed eight students (four
boys and four girls) throughout the year. Using a nested sampling design, I recruited
students who had not intended to go to college at the beginning of the academic year. I
found potential subjects through in-depth interviews by asking about students’ plans after
high school, and by requesting introductions to their peers who wanted work upon
graduation. Based on the information that I obtained during the interviews, I contacted
work-bound students and recruited eight in total. With both they and their parents’
permission, I documented how they paved a pathway to work at an academic high school
where their classmates mainly prepared for college. I “checked in” with these eight
students every visit. In addition, I visited their families, workplaces (if they were
working), and churches. I also joined them on trips to other cities to find jobs or to apply
for vocational training programs. Through the observations of these key students, I tried to learn how they were treated by teachers, and how they reacted to this treatment.

In total, I conducted in-depth interviews with 56 students. Most of my interviews were conducted during the earlier stages of fieldwork. By using a subgroup sampling scheme (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007), I recruited student interviewees considering their class backgrounds, as measured by parents’ occupation and gender, to collect data from various groups of students. Those interviewed were not necessarily all work-bound students. The purpose of the interviews was to understand students’ general experiences at the school and their perceptions of college education and work. Moreover, I asked them about their families and friends to better understand their lives outside the classroom. In addition to student interviews, I interviewed ten teachers, including all senior class teachers, as well as five parents to acquire supplementary information for the study.

To analyze the field notes and interview transcriptions, I conducted an ongoing process of data analysis during the fieldwork, regularly reviewing field notes and interview transcripts and writing analytic memos (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). After finishing the one-year fieldwork, I revisited the materials to inductively identify the emerging themes, discuss connections to existing research, and raise additional questions. In the process, I paid attention to themes regarding the vocational aspirations, stigmatization, and emotional experiences of work-bound students and their self-retreat from school.
FINDINGS

“Why would You Ever Want to be a Cook?: The Stigmatization of Work

Immersed in a college-for-all atmosphere, teachers at Glory supported college matriculation, and criticized students’ work plans after college as inadvisable. To Glory High School, sending students to college is important to securing a local reputation as a good school. Teachers commonly say that they are “helping less qualified students to be ready for college education.” Mr. Nam, who has been teaching at Glory for 26 years, said that they have made a meaningful contribution to the local community by “helping students who are academically less advanced to go to colleges.” With his arms crossed, Mr. Nam shared the school’s recent achievement:

We have recently sent kids to some good colleges. The average academic records of our first-year students are usually the worst in the city. Yet, they eventually go to the same colleges that students at other high schools in Harbortown attend. This surprises many people. We are surprising parents and other teachers in Harbortown.\(^\text{13}\)

As teachers pursued the educational goal of college-for-all, they discouraged students’ vocational plans and tried to divert them to college. While doing so, teachers often stigmatized the working-class occupations that students pursued. They criticized working-class employment as unworthy by pointing out the less prestigious status of those careers. The teachers particularly belittled the less prestigious service jobs that some students pursued. They derided service jobs as “waiting on others,” without

\(^\text{13}\) Mr. Nam’s confident remarks on their performance is supported by their recent college attendance rates. Over last ten years, more than 90% of graduates had attended college. Over the last five years, the number had gone up to over 95%. As of 2016, 53% of graduates had enrolled in two-year junior colleges and 44% had enrolled in four-year universities.
acknowledging the core tasks that employees carry out. Their stigmatization of working-class work implied that those jobs would be inferior to the other jobs that the college-educated workers would have.

For example, Sun-ho had experienced an unfavorable interaction with his teacher when he pursued cooking as his future career. He had wanted to become a Japanese cook based on his “real experiences in the restaurant kitchens.” He dreamed of owning his own small diner “some day after some good years of experience” in the industry. He was committed to his career goal, and to realize this he had earned three out of four major cooking licenses including those for Korean, Western, and Japanese cuisine. He had been studying the Japanese language, hoping that it would enable him to master Japanese cuisine. However, he did not include college in his master plan. Based on his own cost-benefit analysis, going to college was not a rational choice:

If I were to go to college now, I would have to take out student loans. My mom and dad can’t afford to pay. But if I start working right upon graduation, I will make some money, plus save lots of money that I would otherwise have spent on a college education. That’s not all! I’ll have two years’ job experience as a cook by the time my friends are about to find their first job after two-year colleges. Therefore, finding a job without going to college could be a much better plan for me.

However, his master plan met an unexpected obstruction: Sun-ho’s class teacher, Mr. Choi’s criticism. Mr. Choi’s role as a class teacher was similar to that of a guidance counselor in U.S. high schools—helping his students navigate high school and transition to college. During the first counselling meeting of his senior year, Mr. Choi had discouraged Sun-ho from pursuing his dream job. According to Sun-ho, he had minimized the value of Sun-ho’s dream job by emphasizing its negative aspects. In his usual high-pitched cheerful tone, Sun-ho said, “He asked me if I would want to live washing dirty dishes
every day. I tried to explain that becoming a cook is not like that, but he wouldn’t let
me.” In addition, Mr. Choi reduced the work of a cook to serving “drunken customers,”
creating a negative image of a cook. Frowning his forehead, Sun-ho complained:

He asked me if I meant to spend my entire life slicing raw fish [to make sashimi dishes]
and cleaning up after drunken customers. He asked, “Do you really want to serve drunk
guys all night?” He kept asking me the same questions over and over. He might have
said it as a job, but I felt that that was disrespectful. As a cook, I might have to deal
with nasty customers sometimes. However, that’s not the point of the work.

Mr. Choi pushed Sun-ho to give up his vocational aspirations. When I saw Sun-
ho with Mr. Choi in the teacher’s office a week and a half after the initial meeting, Mr.
Choi was bringing up Sun-ho’s vocational aspirations again. He had invited other
teachers to join to persuade his student. Other teachers treated his dream in a similar way
as framing cooking as an unworthy job. Particularly, a male teacher stereotyped
becoming a cook as less manly. According to him, serving customers was not manly
work; serving others would not fit a man’s “qualification” and thus could not be an
ambition a man should pursue:

Sun-ho is standing awkwardly, surrounded by three teachers who are seated and facing
him. “He wouldn’t listen to me.” Mr. Choi complains about Sun-ho to his colleagues in
a playful manner. “Hey, you guys should stop him!” Mr. Nam asks what is going on.
Mr. Choi replies in a sarcastic manner, “This kid says that he will be a famous chef. So,
he says that he will not go to college.” Mr. Nam promptly hoots at Sun-ho half-
jokingly. “What kind of man would want to cook for a living? I’d rather take off my
penis than get stuck in the kitchen. You don’t deserve your penis!” Ms. Han is smiling
as if Mr. Nam’s joke sounds funny. Sun-ho mumbles, “It’s not like that.” Mr. Nam
reputes, “It’s like that! You are not qualified as a man if you choose to wait on other
people. As a man, you should be more ambitious than dreaming of a job setting the
table for customers. Think straight, kiddo!” Mr. Choi agrees with Mr. Nam, saying,
“Did you hear what he just said? Listen to him. Consider that there might be a good
reason when other people say “no” to what you are thinking.

Similar to Sun-ho, Da-in encountered her teacher’s persuasion when she pursued
hairdressing after graduating from high school. She had decided to become a hairdresser
the previous year when she had felt that “studying is not for me at all.” Her parents, who ran a small food truck, had supported her studies by enrolling her in several private college prep courses for a year and a half, but they were not helpful. Da-in apologetically said, “My two older sisters didn’t go to college, and my parents always felt bad about it. They wanted me to go to a good college. However, honestly, I think that it was just a waste of money because I was never interested in studying. Also, it’s embarrassing to admit, but I think that I am not smart. I’m still confused by ‘b’ and ‘d’. The two letters look the same to me. It might sound like a joke to you, but it’s for real.” She chuckled as if showing her embarrassment about what she had just told me.

However, Mr. Beck did not agree with Da-in. From his perspective, her career aspiration had been “incomprehensible.” During an interview with me, he criticized Da-in’s career aspirations as being “too naïve”; she had not considered the fundamental difficulty of her dream job, which involves serving her customers. Whereas Mr. Beck was more sympathetic toward his student’s vocational career choices than Mr. Choi, he still shared Mr. Choi’s perception that a less prestigious service job serving customers would be less worthy. Instead, he believed that Da-in should pursue a managerial position as her career goal through college. In his usual calm voice, Mr. Beck said:

I don’t feel comfortable with describing other people’s jobs in a negative way, but isn’t it the reality that people treat service workers badly? It’s not easy to wait on other people at all. However, students like Da-in never understand this. They are easily enchanted by a few dazzling famous people in the field. When a few successful hairdressers appear in TV shows, they assume that they will easily become one of them. However, they never realize what it is like to work in those fields as an ordinary worker…I am not sure if working in a shiny salon is what she might be dreaming of, but the major part of the work that she will carry on is washing people’s hair and sweeping the floor to clean up hair crap…I’m not saying that she should give up on her dream. However, she doesn’t need to be a hairdresser to be in the industry. She could work for a big hair salon franchise or be a manager at a good salon if she earns a degree.
Therefore, he tried to convince her that she should go to college and pursue “a bigger goal,” by which he meant a managerial job. In September, students were applying to colleges, and Mr. Beck had a meeting with Da-in about her career. Before the meeting, he told me that he wanted to give her a chance to think about her future before he “gives up on her.” However, the meeting left Da-in upset. According to her, Mr. Beck told her that hairdressing is “3D work,” which meant it was a dirty, difficult, and dangerous job. Also, she said that he told her to go to college so she could find a better job. Whereas Da-in admitted that Mr. Beck had made some good points about the benefits of going to college and pursuing a higher position in the industry, she felt that “he was nagging too much when he knows nothing.” Also, she felt insulted by his attitude of “ignoring people working in the hair industry”:

I know he had good intentions. I know that it might be good to be an important person, as he said. However, it’s so annoying. I know that I will have to do some dirty and menial jobs for several years before I’d be allowed to cut customers’ hair. It’s because there’re so many things that I need to learn before I practice. Also, washing customer’s hair is a sort of a skill to learn. It’s a part of becoming a capable hairdresser…I understand why he recommended college and told me to think about better positions in the industry, but I think that he has some prejudice about the hairdressing work.

As teachers were critical about students’ plan to have the working-class jobs because they saw that those jobs would not bring the students a “future,” they supported students’ vocational aspirations when they believed that the jobs would give the students “a successful life” (i.e., economic stability). For example, Young-jae who was preparing to be an excavator operator received teachers’ support. Particularly, his class teacher, Mr. Nam, openly supported Young-jae’s endeavors to be a worker. It was partially because that “he is a good boy”; but his family resources, which would enable him to have higher
incomes from the job, convinced the teacher that his choice was a reasonable one.

Young-jae’s father and two older brothers were all excavator operators. Recently, Young-jae’s father had established a small contractor firm with his two oldest sons. Given that Young-jae would have “a good support” from his father and brothers for his job, Mr. Nam thought that Young-jae could achieve a future which would be financially stable. He summarized Young-jae’s future, saying merrily, “that boy could be more successful than his college-going classmates. He could even make more money than me.”

However, Mr. Nam emphasized that “his situation is different from most other kids” who wanted to be workers. He thought that “it will be like starting everything from scratch” for work-bound students because they did not have family resources that would enable them to become economically successful when they had working-class occupations. Whereas he was approving of Young-jae’s vocational orientation, he still believed that “it is a better idea to go to college when you don’t have a family who can help you because making a living is harder to do without a college degree in Korea.”

As Rosenbaum (2001) points out, teachers at Glory urged students to go to college while discouraging them from pursuing work. Believing that students’ vocational careers would not be helpful for their futures, teachers at Glory tried to provide different perspectives about the jobs that they hoped to have after high school graduation. They emphasized the negative aspects of working-class jobs and asked students to consider college as an option better than getting a job after high school. They particularly stereotyped service sector work by creating an image of the job as serving customers, which they described as inferior and undeserving.
“We need to Nip the Bud in the First Place”: The Stigmatization of Work-bound Students

Teachers at Glory also discouraged work-bound students by directly stigmatizing them. Whereas they were concerned about work-bound students’ life chances as workers, they were worried that their vocational aspirations could harm “normal students” who dreamed of going to college. They often believed that vocational aspirations could be “contagious”: When they had more students who wanted to get a job instead of going to college, other students could take this as a viable option. For example, in our conversation a few days after I began fieldwork, Mr. Beck called his work-bound students “nettlesome kids,” one of which was Da-in. Mr. Beck said, “It is torture for me to have those two girls. They keep saying that they don’t want to go to college. Let’s say that’s fine. Who can stop them when they say that they want to live a life as they please?” Mr. Beck paused and showed a brief smile as if he felt awkward about speaking ill of his students. He added:

But the problem is that those kids are a bad influence on other kids as well. Normal kids might think that it’s okay not to go to college because there are some kids who don’t go to college. If you have a couple of those students who are uninterested in studying at all and thinking about something else all the time, it’s going to be hard to have other students focused on college preparation. Other students might begin to think about work as a viable option when it is not. Therefore, we need to nip this in the bud when it starts.

“To nip this in the bud when it starts,” they would shame work-bound students in front of other students when they revealed their non-academic interests. Teachers thought that it was “selfish” of work-bound students to do anything related to their career preparation in the classroom because it could distract the academically oriented students. Ha-na’s experiences demonstrate the ways in which work-bound students were condemned by their teachers. Ha-na had been striving to become “a world-famous
baker,” and was committed to her career goal. She had studied backing theories and drilled herself with baking skills. During the study hall hours as well as several of her regular classes, Ha-na would bury herself in baking books and recipes.

However, Ha-na’s enthusiasm for baking collided with teachers’ efforts to have students focus on studying. This upset her class teacher, Mr. Kang. He had complained about Ha-na to his colleagues when he had seen her studying her baking books:

He storms into the teachers’ office and lets go of a deep sigh in the air. He flops down before his desk and says in an angry voice, “She’s driving me crazy.” Ms. Kim, sitting next to Mr. Kang, asks him in no time, “Who? Who are you talking to?” Mr. Kang names Ha-na. Reclining in his desk chair, Mr. Kang says in a calmer tone, “I’ve told her not to open cooking books, baking books, whatever, during study hall hours so many times. When I went to my classroom, she was doing that shit again. I gently said to her, “Put your books back in your bag. I don’t think that it’s a good idea to bring cooking books to school.” Then, this chick stared at me with eagle eyes. How disrespectful! Her attitude left me speechless.” Mr. Nam supports Mr. Kang by saying, “The kid opened a cooking book and copied the recipe during my class, too. She’s troublesome. Just ignore her. That’d be better for our mental health at least.” Mr. Kang raises his voice, “How can we ignore those kids? They are bothering other kids too. I don’t care if they ruin their own lives. However, why would they ruin others’, too?”

Mr. Kang understood that Ha-na’s vocational efforts were hindering other students’ focus on studying. During an interview, he explained why he felt that Ha-na was affecting other students, “When I allow one student to do something else, others will immediately ask, ‘Why not me?’ So, I have to be tough on students like Ha-na sometimes.” In addition, he considered her constant effort to develop her baking skills during the school day as a sign of her selfishness. “She can bake whatever she wants at home. Why should she open her baking books and show them to other people? You have no idea how many times I have begged her not to do so. I think that she is just being selfish. She doesn’t care about her friends. She is only thinking about herself.” Mr. Kang felt that he needed to discipline Ha-na about her selfish behavior in the classroom:
Mr. Kang silently entered the room through the back door to make sure his students were all studying. Ha-na was sitting in the last row, which was right in front of the door. This made it easier for Mr. Kang to notice Ha-na doing what he had told her not to do just a day ago. “What did I just tell you yesterday?” Mr. Kang’s deep loud voice resonated in the entire room. Ha-na turned around and saw her teacher. Then, she rapidly flipped the note that she was working on, so as to hide it. “Didn’t I sound serious enough to you yesterday? Are you ignoring me?” Mr. Kang snapped her note from the desk furiously. Waving it to her face, “When I tell you not to do something, don’t do it. If you are a student, behave like it.” It seemed that Ha-na stopped herself from talking back to her teacher. She stared at him sharply. “I’m throwing it away!” Mr. Kang tore her note violently and held the crumbles in his hand. Ha-na did not say anything and looked at his hand. “Don’t put anything irrelevant to your studying on your desk. I’ll take it away. Pretend to study at least. Think about your friends who are trying to study, too.”

As the interaction between Mr. Kang and Ha-na shows, work-bound students’ aspirations were seen as interfering with other students’ academic endeavors. This caused teachers to discourage work-bound students from influencing their peers by shaming them as “selfish.” Moreover, teachers stigmatized work-bound students by claiming they were pursuing an easy life and did not believe in hard work. As the experience of Tae-hee below shows, teachers were worried that work-bound students’ attitudes toward the life—who they believed to be “lazy”—might thwart other students. They were concerned that other students might consider work to be a viable option if work-bound students’ career plans were accepted.

Throughout her high school years, Tae-hee had to debate whether she should go to college or find a job. Her father, a temporary construction worker, had been discouraging Tae-hee whenever she brought up going to college, as he could not afford to support her through college. He had hoped that Tae-hee would follow her older sister’s path: finding a job at a semi-conductor assembly factory. However, Tae-hee felt uncomfortable about her future. She was afraid that she might be excluded from her peers if she did not go to college. This made her debate her career options—work or college—for
the entire year. Tae-hee was anxious all day of the last day of the college application
deadline. “Should I just apply to any school and any major?” She asked me the same
question more than a dozen times. Ultimately, she gave up on the college application, and
this devastated her. Her frustration grew when her father was not sympathetic to the
emotional struggles she was experiencing. She felt that he had not acknowledged her
sacrifices for the family.

In contrast to what Tae-hee had been experiencing, her teacher Ms. Han had
assumed that she had chosen to work because she was afraid of the challenges of college.
Whereas Ms. Han knew about Tae-hee and her family’s financial difficulties, she had still
recommended that she go to college. In September, Ms. Han nagged Tae-hee to choose
the schools to which she wanted to apply. As her request was repeated daily, Tae-hee
finally confessed that she would not apply to college. Ms. Han immediately called her to
the office. Tae-hee was with Ms. Han in the office for about 20 minutes. When she
returned to the classroom, Tae-hee silently walked back to her desk and started to cry. A
few students flocked around her, asking if everything was okay. Tae-hee did not say
anything, but continued to cry. Her shoulders jolted up and down. Two of her close
friends had her stand up, and took her out of the classroom to get some fresh air.

After spending a few minutes in the hallway with her friends, Tae-hee told them
what had happened. According to her, Ms. Han had scolded Tae-hee for saying that she
would not go to college. Sobbing, Tae-hee had said, “She asked me if I was crazy.” Her
two friends nearly in unison said “Fucking bitch!” They tapped Tae-hee’s shoulders and
hugged her from both sides. Tae-hee told her friends that Ms. Han had assumed that she
was giving up because she was afraid she would not get into a good school. Trying to
remain calm she said, “I tried to talk about my situation, but my mouth wouldn’t open. So I kept quiet. Then, she was yelling at me like, “You should think about how to go to a good school and how to be a successful person. I know that your family is having some hard times. But that should make you tougher and more brave.” She said that I was a lazy person, that I am going to the factory because I am lazy and I don’t want to exert myself. She said that I am choosing this because I don’t want to study hard.” Tae-hee began to sob. She screamed, “who would want to go to a factory? Who does she think she is? She knows nothing.” She remained emotional for several minutes. The three of them stood at the end of the hallway for the entire study hall hour, which lasted 50 minutes.

The next day, Ms. Han asked Tae-hee to talk to her again. According to Tae-hee, Ms. Han was apologetic. Yet, the second meeting made Tae-hee even angrier about her teacher. Tilting her head and shaking one of her legs, Tae-hee complained to me, “She quietly called me to visit the office. Can you guess what she asked? She asked me not to talk about my plan to anyone in the class. She said that it might influence my friends who are not under much stress.” During the meeting, Tae-hee had not understood why she had asked this. However, Tae-hee later came to think that Ms. Han might not have wanted her other students, especially the low-achieving ones, to pursue a plan similar to that of Tae-hee. In a stern voice, Tae-hee said:

She pretended that she cared about me. But you know what? She was worried that one rotten apple would spoil the barrel. She wanted me to shush me because she was worried that other kids would say that they wanted to get a job. Now I understand why she asked me to shut up about my plan so politely in the classroom.

During my conversation with her a few days later, Ms. Han admitted what Tae-hee had told me. She said that she had asked Tae-hee not to talk about her career plans
with other students. Mr. Han did not “want other kids to be distracted when they are not very eager about studying.” Ms. Han proclaimed, “Low-achieving kids are like reed. They are swinging all the time. One day, they want to go to college. The other day, they don’t want to go to college anymore. Tae-hee’s choice could push them to choose not to go to college. They cannot make a decision that they will regret later.” Particularly, she was worried that students were leaning toward “the easy way” that Tae-hee had selected. In a serious tone, she said, “It might be tempting to take the easy way. When their friend says, “I am going to a factory to work,” it could sound tempting to students who are not interested in serious studying. They might think, “Oh, that sounds like a plan. I want to work in a factory!” They are now under lots of pressure because of the applications, so they might be more vulnerable to other options including work. Everything but studying seems like a good plan to them now.”

Demonstrated by the experience of Ha-na and Tae-hee, work-bound students were treated as “problem children” who led college-bound students astray. To maintain a college-for-all environment, teachers minimized the influence of work-bound students over other students by shaming their non-academic aspirations and endeavors.

“Courage to be Ignored”: Emotional Distress of Work-bound Students

The work-bound students at Glory felt various levels of emotional distress, especially when their teachers stigmatized their vocational aspirations as illegitimate and harmful. Many students reported that they felt insulted and generally upset. As Tae-hee’s instant emotional reaction to Ms. Han, who called her “lazy,” shows, work-bound students could be hurt by the ways their teachers treated them. For example, Ki-min, a boy who planned
to apply for a factory job after he graduated from high school and finished his military service, complained about his teachers during our interview, especially with regards to their attitudes toward work-bound students. He was upset that work-bound students were characterized as “the problem of the school,” and their behavior was negatively interpreted. Particularly, he was upset by what he perceived as his teachers’ unfair treatment of work-bound students and favoritism towards college-bound students, especially those with a good chance of getting into prestigious colleges. At one point during the interview, Ki-min raised his voice:

We are not human beings to the teachers. Only those kids with good academic records are human beings. Work-bound kids are nothing to them. Teachers assume that we are the problem of the school. They think that we are ruining the school atmosphere while being idle and interfering with other kids’ study. Honestly, we don’t do anything wrong. I don’t study hard, but it doesn’t mean that I do anything harmful to the other kids. But teachers always see us in a negative way. Even when I do the same thing as other college-going kids would do, they scold only me, not others. Can I tell you something? I don’t smoke but some other good kids do. They all smoke, but I don’t. You know why? It’s because they will be cruel to me if I get caught smoking. However, they will say like, ‘Oh, I know that you smoke because you are stressed out. But don’t smoke. It’s not good for your health.’ I feel fucking upset when they discriminate against work-bound kids.

Similarly, Eun-mi was angered by the negative interactions she had with her teachers. She hoped to find a career in the beauty industry as a hairdresser or makeup artist. Understanding that teachers’ attitudes toward her vocational aspirations were derived from their stereotyping of working-class jobs, Eun-mi said:

When you tell them that you want to be a hairdresser or a makeup artist, they treat you like you’re a loser. Of course, it’s a good thing if you can be a judge, lawyer, or teacher, someone everyone would respect. However, not everyone should be a judge or lawyer, right? However, teachers only value those occupations and look down on other jobs. Though they say that all occupations should be respected equally, I can sense that they ignore some occupations that they do not value. So when their students pursue one of those jobs, they say, ‘why would everyone want to do something like that?’ I can sense that they look down on work-bound students because they think that our goals are too
low. (Interviewer: How do you feel about it?) That’s very disturbing. Especially when they talk about the beauty-related jobs badly, that bothers me a lot.

The emotional distress that students had from the interactions with teachers made them be secretive about their vocational orientation. In turn, it created emotional tolls for work-bound students. Soo-jin, for example, completely hid her plan to be a professional backup dancer throughout the senior year. To realize her dream, she practiced at home every day when she went to school and took dance classes when the school was off. She practiced every night. Her classmates knew that she was skilled at dancing and enjoyed it. However, nobody did know that she was preparing to become a professional dancer. She was very discrete. For example, she was constantly tired because she practiced almost every day. When Ms. Han, her classteach her taking a long nap during a self-study hour, she told him that she was tired because she had studied late the previous night. Another time, she told a teacher she was tired because she was sick, but neither of these excuses were true.

She explained that these lies were “inevitable.” Even though she felt bad about lying to her teachers, she refused to tell them the truth for two reasons. First, she thought that she would be stigmatized once she was honest about her plan. In her first year, she “naively” consulted her class teacher about her future career aspirations. However, his reaction was cold. She recalled:

I felt that he scorned me. It might be just the way I felt when he didn't mean any harm. However, he said something like I was insane or I was not thinking straight. I just wanted to tell him that I didn’t want to participate in evening self-study hours because I wanted to practice dance at night. From that meeting, I learned a good lesson. People here don’t respect my dream. I already knew how people thought about professional dancers. You know, Korean people never think fondly when someone says she is a dancer. They have this look, and I don’t want to get that look.
Even though her strategy helped her to secretly pursue her dream, it cost her emotional labor. She was constantly worried that her teachers might find out that she was lying. To disguise her intent, in September when her friends applied for colleges, Soo-jin applied for three two-year junior colleges. She chose the majors that her closest friend chose. In a cynical tone, she explained, “If they know that I applied, they wouldn’t bother me. They are not interested in students who are going to two-year colleges. They don’t care. I had to spend some money on the application fees, but I don’t want to deal with the nagging if I didn’t even apply.” I asked her what she would do if she got admitted. In a serious manner, Soo-jin said, “I am not going to any school. I don’t even remember to which schools I applied.” In February, she told me that she got two admission letters, but she did not enroll. A few weeks later, she left for Seoul to seek opportunities to become a dancer. Once again, she asked me not to tell anyone about her plan.

In addition to frustration about teachers’ treatment, work-bound students felt anxiety about their career choices, which caused them to doubt their future social status. For example, Mr. Kang’s anger toward Ha-na’s “misconduct” during a self-study hour made Ha-na upset about her teacher and the school. After Mr. Kang went back to the office, Ha-na stood up and left the room with tears in her eyes. I followed her. She was silently looking at the golden ginkgo trees that hung over the windows in ivory plastic frames. I asked her if she was okay. “If I could, I would drop out of this school right now. I’m sick and tired of coming to school to do nothing but get yelled at.”

At the same time, Ha-na partially blamed herself for her teachers’ harsh treatment. Whereas she felt that it was not fair to be treated so badly, she convinced herself that it
was unavoidable that as a baker, she would face a life with little social respect. Her perspective was confirmed by our conversation in December. I accompanied her to Seoul for a job interview at a large bakery. On our four-hour bus trip, she showed me some pictures of the cakes she had recently made. When I expressed my surprise at how beautiful they were, she humbled herself, saying, “It’s not a big deal. I think that I am good at this kind of thing.” She paused for a while, then continued, “But I am not sure if it’s a valuable skill. It’s not English or Math.” I said that she had a very useful skill, to try and comfort her. However, she countered that her skill would not bring her social recognition:

I will have an okay life if I become a baker. However, I guess that people won’t see me favorably once they know that I am [just] a baker. Teachers ignore me. They are just ordinary people. They think that I am lower than students who study well. What can they do? They are just ordinary people.

She understood that her teachers’ attitudes reflected their social perception of her as a future low-status worker. Though she persisted with her career goal and eventually worked at a famous bakery in Seoul after her graduation, her anxiety about her future social recognition troubled her throughout the year.

Sometimes their anxiety about a future as workers motivated students to change their career plans from work to college. Similar to Ha-na, the teachers’ reaction to Sun-ho’s career goal – becoming a cook – escalated his anxiety about his future status. When I met Sun-ho, he frequently discussed his fear about his future as a cook. Most of his friends were concerned about their post-high school trajectories, at least to a certain extent. Many students vaguely asked themselves if they would be able to achieve “stable lives,” which they imagined to be middle-class experiences with stable jobs and decent
incomes. However, very few students who were aiming at college regularly confessed their concerns about how people would see them in the future. Sun-ho frequently expressed his concern about his social position as working-class in Korean society; he believed it to be a place where “everything is determined by the college from which you graduate.” For example, Sun-ho once said sarcastically that his classmates “will be much better off than me, including those who are going to shitty two-year colleges that’d admit anyone, maybe even dogs and cows. I will be the loser because I won’t be educated much.” To Sun-ho, the teachers’ derisive comments confirmed that his concerns were realistic. When we had a conversation in April, he brought up a particular incident again. “You heard what the teachers said about the job. When teachers who care about me say bad things about cooking, it’s obvious how people who don’t care about me will think of me in the future.”

Sun-ho’s anxiety continued until he finally applied as a culinary major at a junior college he had criticized as a place that “would accept anyone if they pay.” Sun-ho had debated whether he would apply for college that summer, which was still a few months before college applications were due. When he determined that he would pursue a career in the culinary field, he adjusted his goal. On the last day of college applications, Sun-ho applied for admittance to a school in the neighborhood. After the application, he came and told me what he’d done. He gave me a big mild smile and said, “I feel relieved. Honestly, I feel relieved to be one of them.” When I asked why he changed his mind, he said in serious manner:

Because everyone says so? When everyone stops me from doing something, there must be a good reason. I think that I should listen to their voices. Teachers all try to discourage me from being a cook right after high school. My mom feels that the
teachers might be right, though she thinks that it’s up to me. I thought that I would always remain anxious if I didn’t go to college. What if people think of me negatively? Oh, are these people ignoring me because I am a high school graduate? I didn’t want live worrying about how other people would think about me. Instead of becoming a cook, I might find a different way. I already have culinary licenses. I will have a college degree. They will bring me something good all together. I should find a way after I start college.

The work-bound students at Glory were found to emotionally struggle because of interactions with teachers they felt to be harsh and unfair. For these students, as Tae-hee said, “choosing to work takes courage to be ignored.” Making their way to vocational careers in an academic high school caused them substantial emotional distress. Students often reported anger and frustration as their primary responses to teachers’ stigmatization of their vocational aspirations. They felt anxious about their future social status as workers. The experience sometimes left them in doubt about their career choices, to the point that some eventually shifted to college. Indeed, out of the eight students I followed over the year of my fieldwork, two boys and two girls changed their career plans and applied for college, though one of the girls did not enroll.

**DISCUSSION**

Critiques of the college-for-all society have discussed the negative impacts of expanding college opportunities on young people’s lives. Indeed, easier access to college can dampen students’ academic endeavors (Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum 1997). Going to college is still expensive for low-income students (Goldrick-Rab 2016; Hamilton 2013). Some students struggle to transition to adulthood, even with college degrees (Robst 2007; Furstenberg 2008). Yet earlier studies on this topic are limited because they heavily focus their discussion on youth who are headed to college. The college-for-all society not only
affects youth who go to college, it also shapes the life experiences of work-bound youth who choose not to attend university and instead select vocational careers. In a society where college attendance is the normative ideal, becoming a working-class laborer can be difficult. Moreover, since these students’ level of educational achievement is relatively lower than many of their college-bound peers, their social status can be less favorable, especially now that college is imagined as a rite of passage for most young people. However, educational sociologists have not sufficiently studied work-bound youths’ transitional experiences in a college-for-all society.

This study illuminates the hidden costs of the college-for-all society by examining the stigmatizing interactions between teachers and work-bound students in a South Korean high school. In a school where college admittance has become a primary educational goal, teachers were found to negatively portray the career plans of working-class students and describe the students themselves as undeserving of attention. Teachers chastised work-bound students for their “selfishness” because they believed that their presence in the school and their insistence on non-academic interests would hurt the college-for-all atmosphere. Many teachers actively tried to prevent certain students’ vocational aspirations from affecting the “normal kids.” Thus, work-bound students faced substantial emotional distress because of their teachers’ harsh treatment. They frequently reported frustration and anxiety. Sometimes, this led them to change their plans altogether and apply for two-year colleges.

It is possible, of course, that some work-bound students’ attitudes toward authority figures shaped teachers’ negative perceptions, and these spilled over to any students who aspired to work. In a classic study, Willis (1977) documented how work-
bound boys in a British high school transitioned to working-class workers in an aggressive social subculture. The hostile relationships they forged with school authority figures helped them to “win symbolic and physical space from the institution and its rule, and defeat its main perceived purpose: to make you ‘work’” (26). However, the subculture theory does not explain work-bound students at Glory. Most of these students were closely conformist. They tried to observe the school codes and rules. They showed deference to their teachers. They rarely “talked back” or made distrustful remarks. Moreover, many of these work-bound students were afraid of being stigmatized as deviant for their deviant behaviors (e.g., smoking, drinking, skipping classes). Because they were aware of their status in the school, as Sun-ho said, they tried to “be careful not to make extra trouble.” In other words, work-bound students were self-policing to avoid confirming the stigma; they avoided engaging in the types of misconduct that might be visible to their teachers.

Teachers’ shaming of students who aspired to be workers does not necessarily imply that the teachers had a hostile attitude towards the working-class in general. Their negative characterization of working-class work and work-bound students may have been a strategy for convincing work-bound students to change their career orientation from work to college. They knew that many students would eventually become workers, even with college educations. They understood the labor market mismatch and educational issues that some less-resourced junior colleges face. Despite this, the teachers may have genuinely felt that college would be a better path for their students. They understood that it would be difficult for their students to achieve better lives without college educations, especially now that university degrees are needed even for entry-level jobs. They may
have known that their students would feel bad about the interactions, but felt it to be their obligation to show them the risks, even if it seemed harsh. Therefore, this study should not be interpreted as making a moral judgment of teachers. The purpose of this research is to understand the ways in which the college-for-all society guides daily interactions in high school.

One interesting area for future research is determining whether the emotional distress that work-bound youth feel lasts after they become workers. Sennette and Cobb (1993) documented the ways in which urban working-class individuals experienced disturbing inner conflicts and an ambivalent sense of their own social worth. Conceptualizing their inner struggle for dignity as a hidden injury, they showed that working-class workers struggled to find dignity in a society in which the middle-class lifestyle was regarded so highly. Likewise, in a college-for-all society, work-bound students could bear long-lasting emotional scars, even after they graduate high school and begin working. As a college education becomes the dominant social means of channeling youth into adult roles and alternatives to university become fewer and fewer, high school workers could experience harsh treatment in various institutional sectors (e.g., employment, law enforcement, marriage, etc.).

This study also leaves unanswered an important question regarding work-bound students’ agency. Though many teachers at Glory negatively stigmatized work-bound youths’ vocational aspirations, many of these students persevered and pursued their dreams. However, this study did not examine how they overcame their emotional distress and made their own pathways to employment, despite their negative experiences at school. Indeed, Sol proudly described her graduation from high school and the start of her
new career as a dancer as a “victory in the war against teachers.” Whereas many of these
students’ interactions with teachers were hurtful, she felt that she had overcome a hurdle
and made her dream come true. In addition, the literature shows signs that work-bound
youth can create dignity for themselves as workers. Woronov’s study (2011: 82) about
Chinese vocational high school students showed that some students sought “new forms of
dignity in spite of the stigma” as educational failures, by finding opportunities to work in
the service sector. Overall, young workers without college educations could become
second-class citizens in a college-for-all society, yet many are trying to secure social
respect and recognition for themselves as proud workers. Their efforts should be further
studied.

One policy implication of this research is that our effort to achieve equality in
college access may, ironically, create unequal educational experiences for work-bound
students. This work has revealed that work-bound students’ discrimination and
stigmatization in school is guided by the very ideals that drive the college-for-all
movement. As Lamont (2009) has suggested, every society needs workers. However, in a
society where college education is the primarily normative pathway, there exist numerous
young workers employed in the manufacturing and service sectors. To support their
transition, we should attempt to create an egalitarian school environment where students’
non-academic aspirations are equally respected and supported. For example, schools
should support students’ various educational needs and occupational aspirations. Also,
we need more teachers who are knowledgeable about vocational trajectories and
understand the educational needs of work-bound youth (Brinton 2010; Schneider and
Stevenson 2000; Cantor 1989). These efforts will make school more equal for all

82
students, regardless of their career orientations, and they could serve as an important step in achieving educational equality, an ideal that the college-for-all society hopes to embody.
Table 2.1. Information of Eight Focal Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Father’s Occupation</th>
<th>Mother’s Occupation</th>
<th>Original Career Plan</th>
<th>Final Career Destination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Da-in</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Food Truck Owner</td>
<td>Food Truck Owner</td>
<td>Hairdresser</td>
<td>Junior College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha-na</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Store Clerk</td>
<td>Office Assistant</td>
<td>Baker</td>
<td>Baker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tae-hee</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Construction Worker</td>
<td>Passed Away</td>
<td>Junior College or Factory Worker</td>
<td>Factory Worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soo-jin</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Taxi Driver</td>
<td>Passed Away</td>
<td>Dancer</td>
<td>Dancer (Did not enroll after acceptance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun-ho</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Restaurant Server</td>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>Junior College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young-jae</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Excavator Operator</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>Excavator Operator</td>
<td>Excavator Operator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jae</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Factory Worker</td>
<td>Hair Assistant</td>
<td>Junior College or Looking for a Job</td>
<td>Looking for a full-time job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ki-min</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Construction Worker</td>
<td>Cleaner</td>
<td>Factory Worker</td>
<td>Junior College</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Original career plan refers to the subjects’ post-graduation plans that they claimed in the beginning of their senior year. Final career destination refers to the actual career that they chose when they left Glory.
Table 2.2. Characteristics of the Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Plan in the beginning of the senior year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working-class</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-class</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: “Undecided” means when respondents told me that they were not sure about their career plan after their graduation. They were debating whether they should go to college or begin to work after they finish high school.
REFERENCES


Chapter 3

Gendered Narratives of Transition to Adulthood among Young Workers in South Korea

I was sitting at the dining table in A-ra’s home with A-ra and her boyfriend, Se-yoon, on a Friday evening. A-ra, a twenty-year-old convenience store cashier, generously invited me to hang out with her and Se-yoon, a twenty-one-year-old assistant cook, at her small, sparsely decorated three-bedroom apartment owned by her parents. A-ra and Se-yoon had agreed to participate in interviews for my study. Sharing ddeok-bbo-kki, a common Korean street food, the three of us pleasantly bantered until A-ra asked me to remind her of my research topic. Regardless of my intention to casually introduce the research to the potential interviewees, the subject triggered a good-natured argument between A-ra and Se-yoon on their different perspectives about what it is like to be a worker with a high school education in South Korea. When I explained to A-ra that I would like to know how working Korean high school graduates view their journey of becoming adults in Korea, A-ra, nodding her head, bluntly said, “I think that a high school graduate is now a loser in Korea.” Her sudden remark stopped our conversation short. Unsure of how to respond, I asked why she believed that. She explained, “I couldn’t understand why parents and other adults kept telling me to go to college until I actually started living without a college education. Having experienced what it is like to live without a college degree in Korea, I now see why people always talk about college.” Quietly listening to A-ra, Se-yoon countered, “That’s absolute nonsense. There are people who become successful without ever having entered a college classroom. I can live a happy life without a college education at all.” A-ra half-jokingly rebuked Se-yoon, “You’re just naïve. I think that you don’t think thoroughly.” She chuckled as if trying to
subdue the serious atmosphere. Irritated by what A-ra said, however, Se-yoon coldly talked back to her, “I think that you are too negative.”

Their starkly different points of view on what it is like to live as a working high school graduate led me to refine my research question: How do male and female work-bound youth—young adults who join the labor force with only a high school education—construct their narratives of their transition to adulthood differently? During my journey to find answers from twenty-seven Korean young adults in the workplace, I repeatedly encountered gendered narratives liked the one A-ra and Se-hoon presented. Whereas both male and female participants reported that they had experienced in a somewhat haphazard way a precarious transition to low-paying service jobs or “irregular” industrial jobs, they interpreted their transitions to work in surprisingly different ways and presented opposing perspectives about their future social status in Korean society.

This chapter shows the opposing narratives forged by male and female young workers. Particularly, I argue, these gendered narratives are derived from diverse institutions that shape the transition to adulthood in the social environment of South Korea (hereafter Korea). For young women, college is the utmost important institution for their transition into adulthood and social status among the generation of millennials. For young men, college matters far less. Instead, military service serves as a pivotal institution that molds them into “real men” and enables them to achieve full status as adults in Korean society. By discussing these differences, this chapter investigates the subjective experiences of work-bound youth in Korea, in which their journey to adulthood has become increasingly unsettling for both men and women.
THE PRECARIOUS JOURNEY TO ADULTHOOD

The transition to adulthood has recently drawn diverse social attention in many postindustrial countries (Arnett 2000; Furstenberg Jr 2010; Hogan and Astone 1986; Newman 2008) including Korea (Kim, Lee, and Park 2016; Park 2013; Park 2016; Park and Sandefur 2005). Particularly, in Korea, public discourse and scholarship has shed light on the uphill battle toward adulthood, with which college-bound youth have been grappling (especially for completion of education and entry into the labor market). By contrast, relatively limited attention has been paid to the transition experience of work-bound youth, since the proportion of this population of young adults has gradually decreased and their transition to adulthood has become a minority trajectory.

The transitions of the work-bound youth deserve more attention. Although there are increasingly fewer work-bound youth, they still form a substantial number of young adults in Korea. More importantly, as Lamont (2000) argues, every society needs working-class workers—for example, janitors, bus drivers, street cleaners, and restaurant servers—even in the postindustrial economy. In this new economic regime, where knowledge-based work is dominant, traditional working-class workers coexist with knowledge workers. Whereas some youth choose to be working-class workers to achieve adulthood, the nature of work and life opportunities that they face has been drastically changing. Therefore, we need to investigate the life experiences of work-bound young adults in the shifting economic and social landscape.

Like their peers in other industrialized countries, Korean work-bound youth has experienced an increasingly precarious transition to adulthood due to a shift in economic and educational structure. Their journey has become bumpy as the labor market has drastically changed since the financial crisis of 1997, which severely hit workers at the lower end of the economic hierarchy, including work-bound youth. Whereas Korean capitalists had actively sought the flexible use of the labor force, the financial crisis accelerated the neoliberal
transformation of the labor market (Koo 2001; Shin 2010). The restructuring of the economy caused the number of full-time industrial jobs to shrink rapidly, and the size of the *irregular workforce*—people working in irregular jobs—to increase sharply. This shift in the labor market meant that the work-bound youth—often less competitive than their college-bound peers in the labor market—are now more likely to transition to irregular jobs—jobs without job security (Lee 2002; KLI 2006).  

At the same time, the power of labor unions waned and the scope of the labor movement became restricted; “those radical, resistant, and class-conscious workers now represented a shrinking minority in most large heavy industries” (Koo 2001, 210). Work-bound youth hired by small firms and in the service sector are less likely to be protected by labor unions and corporate welfare. Moreover, in Korea, workers in irregular jobs are paid on average substantially less than regular full-time workers (approximately 60 percent; Geum 2007), meaning that the work-bound youth now expect lower income as well as less job security from their jobs. Overall, like their counterparts in other postindustrial countries (Weis 2013), Korean work-bound youth are losing their economic ground in the neoliberal labor market, making their transition to adulthood a daunting task.

In addition to the labor market shift, the educational structure has changed unfavorably for work-bound youth. With the emergence of the mass higher-education system, work-bound youth have arguably lost institutional guidance for their transitions (Brinton 2011; Cook 2016; Krei and Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum 2001). In Korea, secondary schools are heavily focused on academic education without providing an alternative pathway to college. Korean vocational

---

14In 2015, among Korean youth aged fifteen to twenty-nine, regardless of their educational level, about 64 percent were hired for irregular jobs (KLI 2016). Particularly, the proportion of workers with only a high school education engaging in irregular work was much higher than that of workers with a college education (45.7 vs. 19.3 percent for men; 55.1 vs. 24.2 percent for women). This statistic shows that the work-bound youth are much more vulnerable than their college-educated peers in the labor market.
education—which usually occurs within vocational high schools (30 percent of all high schools in Korea)—emphasizes general skills and has not been sufficiently developed to train students in specific occupational skills (Park 2013). Therefore, Korean work-bound youth now take an unguided journey to becoming adults with little educational support.

Furthermore, work-bound youth are marginalized socially because they are not headed for college. Korean culture has long emphasized educational achievement as a desirable goal. Because college degrees are associated with good life choices, attending college is the dominant cultural script for young adults in many countries (Baker 2014; Meyer 1977). Korea is no exception. There is a social hierarchy among young Koreans, in which social status is often determined by their educational ranking and the type of college they attend (Abelmann, Park, and Kim 2009). Therefore, work-bound youth are unavoidably positioned on the lower rung of the social hierarchy and commonly stereotyped as those less capable or as outsiders who stray from the mainstream pathway to adulthood. In other words, their transition is seen as less desirable and less normative.

These structural changes in Korean society—the emergence of the neoliberal labor market and the mass higher-education system—have changed the nature of the transition to adulthood for work-bound youth in last few decades. Modern work-bound youth face a journey to adulthood that is tougher and riskier than that of their college-bound peers and the work-bound youth of the past. Although some researchers explore the labor market outcomes of high school graduates, there are surprisingly few studies on non-labor market outcomes. More importantly, researchers rarely examine how work-bound youth subjectively make sense of their precarious transitions to adulthood, and this process calls for close scholarly attention.
GENDERED NARRATIVES OF WORK-BOUND YOUTH

Whereas it becomes harder for all work-bound youth to achieve adulthood, gender further shapes their transition to adulthood in a distinctive way. Many quantitative studies of this transition among Korean young adults have documented the gendered pathways to adults: men and women achieve diverse benchmarks of adulthood through different pathways and timings (Park 2013; Park and Sandefur 2005). Research on gendered patterns as well as the overall trends of the transition trajectories among Korean youth is incredibly important, but as Bo-Hwa Kim and her colleagues (2016) point out, we do not yet know how Korean young adults subjectively understand the gendered transition experience. Furthermore, very few empirical studies examine how male and female work-bound youth narrate the precarious transition, and how gender shapes their meaning-making of the transition.

Institutional Structures and Gendered Transition to Adulthood

In particular, the transition to adulthood is critically shaped by what Acker (1992) terms “gendered institutions.” According to Acker, “the institutional structures of a society are organized along lines of gender,” which create different expectations and opportunities for men and women (Acker 1992, 567). The major part of being an adult is learning social expectations and roles, both which are defined by various institutions. In other words, transition to adulthood means that youth acquire full membership in society by achieving diverse institutional benchmarks, such as having full-time jobs or getting married. As Acker supposes, given that gender organizes the social expectations embedded in institutions, young men and women follow different trajectories for becoming adults. Therefore, when we examine the transition experiences of young people, it is crucial to understand how gendered institutions in a society structure the coming-of-age narratives among work-bound youth.
In Korea, a few specific institutions are of importance for the gendered pathway to adulthood. For men, the military is a pivotal institution penetrating their transition and shaping their manhood. Compulsory military duty is only required for men and has long been the prerequisite for paid workers and primary breadwinners (Moon 2005). Not only did the compulsory military service create docile male nationals (*kungmin*), but its completion also enabled young men to secure their positions in the labor market and hence become family providers. Even nowadays, men often should finish military service to apply for regular jobs, and the completion of military service qualifies them for higher pay and faster promotion. Therefore, military service is one of the most important benchmarks for Korean male youth, which has a critical impact on the rest of their journey to becoming adults.

Female work-bound youth, by contrast, do not have distinctive institutions channeling their work-related transitions. For example, though women were mobilized as factory workers in the industrializing economy (Moon 2005), and more women are now participating in the labor market, they are marginalized in the workforce. Women are paid substantially less than their male colleagues (Kim and Shirahase 2014; Seguino 1997), the glass ceiling remains firm as promotions are limited (Cho, Lee, and Jung 2014), and discrimination and penalties against female workers, particularly those with children, are substantial (Brinton, Lee, and Parish 1995). Therefore, female work-bound youth encounter severe constraints when they transition to the labor market and attempt to achieve independence through work.

At the same time, the emergence of mass higher education often constrains the female work-bound youth’s transition. Given the rapidly increasing number of female college graduates in Korea and the lack of lucrative jobs for them, the competition for middle-class occupations in the labor market tends to become more intense for female workers. Therefore, young women with less education than other job-seekers likely encounter substantial obstacles when they seek better-paying regular jobs with secure benefits.
Due to their lack of a college education, these women also might face difficulty in acquiring a spouse who can help them achieve economic stability. Because of their disadvantaged status in the labor market, young female workers often view marriage as a particularly important institution for their transition to adulthood (Kim, Lee and Park 2016). Yet, their low educational status can be an obstacle when they try to achieve the transition through marriage. The division of household labor between men and women within families remains highly rigid. Korean women take care of the household economy (Nelson 2000) and play a pivotal role as an “educational manager” for their children’s academic development (Park 2010). Therefore, women’s education is crucial: it signals their domestic competence as productive wives and managerial mothers. In other words, women’s education is an important cultural resource for the family. Since work-bound young women lack this essential resource, they are less likely to be perceived as marriage material.15

Given that the institutional structure which channels the transition to adulthood is gendered, the narratives of young workers—the ways in which they understand their transition to adulthood—could be varied for genders. However, this gendered subjective understanding has been examined only insufficiently in the research of the transition to adulthood, especially in Korea.

METHOD AND DATA

Studying the gendered narratives of young workers gives us a nuanced understanding of the transitional experiences of young workers. For this study, I interviewed twenty-seven work-bound young women are less likely to be married than women with more education (Park, Lee, and Jo 2013; Raymo et al. 2015). Moreover, because of homogamy (i.e., status matching within marriage), they are also unlikely to marry men with a higher socioeconomic status, which would help them to achieve economic stability (Smits and Park 2009).
bound youths (fifteen males and twelve females) from the ages of eighteen to twenty-two between November 2013 and January 2015 (Table 3.1). All interviewees graduated from high school except for two male high school dropouts, and one was a male college dropout. All interviewees were residents of Harbortown. This town is in a southern part of Korea and is well-known for its industrial district, which has helped the local economy remain vibrant since the 1960s.

The industrial district in Harbortown is the fourth-largest chemical industrial district in the world. There are more than 150 companies employing more than 16,000 workers. Full-time workers in large companies have enjoyed stable economic well-being thanks to relatively high wages and generous benefits. For example, these large companies provide their employees with a wide variety of medical benefits, paid leave, and educational benefits for the employees’ children. Numerous small subcontractors also support the district. Workers hired by the subcontractors are less likely to enjoy the same level of the economic well-being, benefits, or job security as employees of large companies. Also, they are rarely unionized. In addition to factory work, these workers hold diverse jobs in the service sector, including professional service jobs and less prestigious work as delivery people and sales clerks.

At the time of the interviews, more informants worked part time in the low-wage service sector and less often full or part time in the manufacturing sector at the bottom of the industrial hierarchy in Harbortown. Eight of the fifteen male respondents worked at convenience stores, gas stations, restaurants, and Internet cafés. Another five male respondents delivered Chinese food or pizza. The other two were temporarily employed by subcontractors in the industrial district. Work was similarly reported by women. Nine of the twelve female respondents worked at convenience stores, restaurants, and Internet cafés. Two female respondents were sales clerks at women’s clothing stores. Only one female respondent worked full time at a manufacturing factory in a city near Harbortown.
I recruited the interviewees by using a snowball-sampling method. I initially contacted high school teachers and asked them to introduce me to their former students who did not go to college. After I met two female respondents, I asked them to introduce me to their friends who were also not college-bound. Before an interview, I usually tried to build rapport with the interviewees by hanging out with them or visiting their workplaces. During the interviews, I asked mainly about their educational and job experiences: how they made the decision not to go to college, how they felt about these decisions, and what their plans and aspirations were. The interviews lasted from one hour and twenty minutes to three hours. With the consent of the respondents, I audio-recorded and transcribed all interviews. After every interview, I wrote a set of field notes about the tones, gestures, and facial experiences of the respondents and the general atmosphere of the interview.

To analyze interview transcripts, I used open-coding techniques. After reading the interview transcripts several times, I added conceptual labels to narratives that described relevant events, experiences, and feelings reported by the interviewees. Next I analyzed themes across interviews to identify meta-themes. I documented the differences between the narratives of the respondents. I captured the differences not only between individual respondents to find the deviant cases within the sample but also between male and female respondents to understand if there was any systematic difference in their narratives.

“IT JUST HAPPENED”: DRIFTING TO PRECARIOUS WORK

Min-cheol, an eighteen-year-old high school dropout working at an Internet café, has been pursuing financial—if not full—independence from his father since he was in eighth grade. Although he is now living in his father’s house and rarely has had a stable job, he has “not

16 All names presented in this chapter are pseudonyms.
received a single penny” from his father, a construction worker, since he started his first job at a
convenience store. Not only does Min-cheol pay his own bills, he also helps his father support the
family. Min-cheol helps his father pay for his older brother’s college education. Min-cheol feels
obligated to do so until his brother “becomes financially enough to help [his] father back” when
he graduates and gets a job:

My dad pays for his tuition and stuff. And I am paying for his monthly rent, which is
400,000 won [approximately $350]. It’s almost half of what I am earning now.
However, I don’t have any hard feelings about it. Rather, it’s fortunate that I can help
him. He can’t give up on his education. We don’t need to have two dropouts in our
family. My brother should finish college and have a better job than mine. When he gets
a well-paying job, then he can help the family. Until then, I have to help him.

When Min-cheol was young, he did not plan to achieve financial independence earlier. Nor
did he expect that he would be hopping from one job to another after the “completion” of his
education. According to Min-cheol, his transition to work occurred in a less deliberate way.
When I asked him to explain how he began his first job, Min-cheol pondered for a few seconds
and then said:

It just happened. It’s not like I was thinking hard about getting a job. I was only an
eighth grader. I was naïve and had no idea about what I was doing or what I wanted to
be in the future. I guess that I just happened to start working and just kept working until
now. I needed money, so I just worked. I continue to need money, so I have kept
working.

To Min-cheol, who began working when in middle school, “money” was an economic
means to fulfill the materialistic desires of a teenager. He did not consider getting a job early to
help his father. Growing up in a less affluent family meant that he had to live on instant ramen for
days when his father did not give money, and it meant losing chances to socialize with friends.
He felt that he did not have enough money to “hang out with friends.” He remembered that as a
teenager, he wanted to do many things, which usually required money. He said, “I wanted to go
to an Internet café with friends [to play computer games], buy something good for my then-

---

17 Min-cheol said that he did not plan to go back to school. He considered that as a high school dropout he had completed his educational career.
girlfriend, or buy clothes—stuff like that. You know, teenagers should wear the same clothes as other kids wear.”

According to Min-cheol, being unable to participate in the consumeristic teen culture meant that he was not able to join the peer network. To a young boy, it was more bearable “to have to eat the same instant noodles for three days” than to miss out on hanging out with friends. Even though he thought that he was not in a state of absolute poverty, he felt bitter about his sense of relative poverty. Min-cheol vividly remembered one day when he had to decline an invitation to go out with his friends. Looking down and playing with fingers, he said, “Probably it was when I was a seventh, no, eighth grader. After a midterm exam or something, my friends wanted to go to play computer games at an Internet café. ‘Hey, let’s go!’ They asked me to join. But I couldn’t. I did not have any money in my pocket, not even a single penny. I said, ‘No. I don’t have money. You guys go. I’m just going back home.’”

Even though he pretended to be “cool about it” when he told his friends to go without him, he hurt. When asked how he felt as he was walking back home alone, Min-cheol said, chuckling, “It was fucking embarrassing!” That embarrassing feeling of deprivation led him to begin his first part-time job impetuously. A few days after the incident with his friends, Min-cheol unexpectedly came across a job ad posted in a front window of a convenience store on his way home from school and decided to apply on the spur of the moment. He said that he was thinking when he saw the ad, “Fuck, I don’t know. I should make money on my own if my dad can’t give me.” Min-cheol was afraid that he was too young to work legally. However, according to him, “The owner [of the convenience store] let me work without asking further questions when I lied that I was seventeen.” The day after his application, Min-cheol started working in his green uniform. He continued in that first job until he stopped attending high school.

After he dropped out, he became a full-time worker in an irregular job. Even though he worked six to eight hours a day for at least five days a week (depending on his employer’s
request), throughout his five years of work experience he has not had any employment benefits that would go to full-time workers. Min-cheol said, “I’ve never had unemployment insurance or health insurance or even signed a proper employment contract.” His jobs have barely paid minimum wage, and the wages were always determined by the “owner’s generosity.” According to Min-cheol, he is paid slightly more when he “meets a good owner [of the store he works at]” and paid less when he does not. When an employer treated him badly or the work was overly demanding, Min-cheol just “took some time off” from work. However, when he became short on money again, he had to return to one of “those boring jobs” for which he did not feel rewarded:

As the proverb goes, “Necessity knows no law.” It is shitty to work at Internet cafés or convenience stores. There is no future with these sorts of jobs, I know. However, I have to do any work given to make ends meet before I find a real job. Also, after I left high school, I couldn’t ask my father to support me in any way. It’s embarrassing when you ask your parents to help you when you are not a student any more.

Changing jobs often, Min-cheol became caught up in similar types of irregular work. He did not plan on continuing his part-time job as a convenience store cashier for an extended period when he handed the job application to the store owner. Yet, Min-cheol hopped from one service job to another in the poorly paid service sector. Particularly, since his older brother started college in Seoul two years ago, he had to be more financially responsible. It was getting harder for him to stop working and pursue different careers in which he might feel more fulfilled. As one thing led to another, the part-time work that he decided to take in an impulsive way as a teen has gradually turned into a quasi-permanent situation as he becomes a young man.

Most respondents—both male and female—reported that they had gone through transition experiences similar to Min-cheol’s. Although they haphazardly started part-time jobs to pursue teen consumeristic culture, they gradually slipped into jobs “with no future,” and a temporary job situation turned permanent one. Furthermore, their risky transitions to irregular work were further shaped by their lack of college education. As A-ra’s narrative demonstrates, respondents found it challenging to move from their current part-time irregular jobs to full-time regular jobs. Nineteen
of them—including all female respondents—reported that they have attempted to improve their jobs, but no one has succeeded in doing so. They commonly point out that they could not get a better job than they had at the time of the interviews, since college education has become the prerequisite for entry-level jobs and college serves as an institutional broker between its graduates and employers.

Like Min-cheol, A-ra, the pleasantly cheerful twenty-year-old whose comments opened this chapter, started her first part-time job when she was a second-year high school student to satisfy her materialistic needs as a teen. A-ra remembered that “buying cosmetic products and clothes” was her initial purpose in getting a job. According to A-ra, to a teen girl who cares about her reputation among peers, work meant “earning extra allowance to enable her to buy ‘necessities’ that any [teen] girl needs to have.” A-ra explained that she chose to work without considering the consequences, hoping to have more disposable allowance to buy herself clothes or cosmetic products that her peers were obsessed with:

You know, [as a teen girl] you can’t go out without wearing makeup. You can’t even go to school without makeup. You can’t even go to school in the morning. It is an embarrassing thing to do. Looking back, I was very naïve to begin working to make some money to buy stuff. However, I then had to do it, because I wanted to get new clothes and cosmetic products. It’s because that’s what all other kids around me would do.

A-ra did not feel that it was okay to ask her parents to pay for what she wanted to buy. She felt “the sense of constraints” (Lareau 2011): A-ra felt uncomfortable talking honestly to her parents, street vendors who sold sportswear, about what she wanted to possess as a teen girl. She did not want to put an additional financial burden on her parents’ shoulders when she knew that “they were already working hard enough to make ends meet.” A-ra said, in a subdued voice, “I couldn’t tell them to pay for everything I wanted. I couldn’t tell my parents to buy me luxuries when they were working hard to raise my brother and me.”

As a solution to her dilemma, A-ra chose to work at the end of the spring semester of her
second year of high school. She started working at a convenience store a fifteen-minute walk from home. A-ra described it as a fun experience when she first began. “It was fun to work at the store. I liked meeting and chatting with people. It was fun to scan stuff, receive money, and put money into the cash drawer. Also, the money was not bad for a teen. It was enough to buy what I wanted.” Despite her initial excitement, she never expected to continue working at the convenience store. “I didn’t imagine that I would be still scanning barcodes behind the counter at twenty years old. I thought I would be doing something better when I graduated from high school.”

After graduation, A-ra began to think more seriously about having a “real career” as an adult. She half-jokingly described a real career as “those jobs for which you wear a nice suit, looking professional.” However, in contrast to her ambiguous expectation, she has worked as a cashier at the same convenience store for almost three years. She tried to find a way to become a wedding planner while working. She enrolled in a few classes to get licenses, believing that she would be able to leave her current job and have a more rewarding job that could provide better salaries and social reputation:

I’ve spent quite a fortune to get licenses relevant to the [wedding planning] job. I thought that I would get a job once I have a few licenses. I had three licenses—one in makeup, one in wedding planning, and one in facial massage. It took over year and a half of classes and license examinations, though there are a few more license examinations to take to be more advanced in the field.

However, A-ra has recently realized that having a few licenses might not be sufficient to obtain her career goal. She gradually found out that she needed something more than licenses: a college education. A-ra found that she was facing a competition with college graduates:

There are numerous colleges with the wedding-planning major here and there, including some four-year universities. Every year, these schools release hundreds of graduates with licenses plus college degrees. I believe that employers would prefer those with college degrees to high school graduates like me. If I were the employer, I would hire people with degrees, even from less prestigious two-year junior colleges, not a high school graduate.
A-ra is also worried that college graduates are in better positions because they have the institutional support that she does not have. In her perspective, college provides more than degrees. She thinks that college bridges job seekers and employers “to make their schools look better by helping more graduates to get jobs.” Since college students likely have more institutional support whereas she should find a job on her own, A-ra feels that “college students have far more advantages in the labor market.” And she believes that the competition with institutionally supported college students makes it harder for her to find full-time jobs:

I’ve heard that college professors know employers well and that they have good relationships. Moreover, I’ve heard that college professors arrange job opportunities for their pupils because they want to make their schools look better by helping more graduates to get jobs. However, I should do everything by myself. The license classes do not help me to find jobs.

In fact, her experiences in the labor market after her graduation have proven that her concern is not entirely flawed. A-ra has applied for four entry-level jobs related to wedding planning in a year. However, she has not received any callbacks from employers and has not had any interviews scheduled. She wished to apply for more jobs, but there were not many openings. “I’ve been totally ignored [by employers],” she said when she bitterly summarized her experience from the past year.

Whereas A-ra’s experience in seeking a new profession has been unfruitful, her part-time job begun as a teen has gradually turned into a full-time job. When she began, she used to work eight hours, two days a week. She now works more than forty hours a week. Yet, her hourly wage has barely increased (approximately forty-five cents over three years), and she is still not protected by the social welfare to which full-time workers with regular jobs are entitled (e.g., unemployment insurance and health insurance). She still believes that her current work is only a temporary way to pay her bills every month. However, this temporary situation is being prolonged as her plan to transition to a better job—that is, becoming a wedding planner—has not been successful:
Looking back, I happened to keep the job. It’s like the law of inertia. Even though I didn’t want to keep the job, I am doing the same job because I am used to it. I can’t think of any better jobs that I can easily find now. They will ask for college degrees anyway. I will keep applying for wedding planning jobs, but I am not sure [if I can find one]. I should keep working here [at the convenience store] until I find a job as a wedding planner.

As Min-cheol and A-ra recall, their transition to irregular work “has just happened.” They have drifted to work without sufficient consideration or deliberate preparation. Both man and woman began work in a hasty way, to pursue materialistic needs as teens. As they hoped to participate in the consumeristic peer culture without asking their parents for money, they decided they wanted to be financially independent from their parents from an earlier age. They initially chose work as a short-term strategy to deal with their materialistic needs. Although they initially planned to work temporarily in these jobs, their work situation has become prolonged and they are trapped in irregular work that helps them maintain some financial independence from their parents.

“A LIFE WITHOUT A FUTURE: THE PERPETUATING TRANSITION OF FEMALE INFORMANTS

As the cases of Min-cheol and A-ra demonstrate, both male and female respondents experience a haphazard transition to work that they find less rewarding. Despite similar patterns, however, the subjective understanding of the transition diverges between male and female informants. In the study, the female informants were often anxious that the transitional period in their lives, into which they had stepped in an unplanned way, might become their permanent social status. Their anxiety came largely from their understanding on the salient role of a college education, which they lacked, in shaping a young woman’s transition to becoming an adult in the Korean context. Female informants saw a college education as a practical and cultural means to achieving a
legitimate status as an adult even though they chose not to pursue college education. Therefore, they were anxious that their journey to becoming a self-sufficient adult might be unsuccessful because they did not go to college. Particularly, female informants were concerned about their future as a worker only with a high school education in three ways.

First, young female workers in this study were worried that their transition might last endlessly as high school workers would be penalized in the labor market due to the mass supply of better-educated workers. For example, when Hyun-joo, a reserved twenty-one-year-old server at a local coffee shop, graduated from high school, she planned to transition to a stable regular job, preferably an entry-level office job. Like other female informants, she expected to work in the low-status service industry only for a few months before she found a permanent job. However, she had recently realized that it might not be an unattainable goal to find an office job after she had a negative experience in the job market.

A few months before the interview, her mother who were working at a cafeteria of a refinery in the Harbortown industrial district introduced a job opportunity to Hyun-joo through her personal network. She happened to know “someone who knows someone” in her company’s human resources department. Hyun-joo was first very happy about the opportunity because she thought that the job would be “more stable” than any other job she had had. She would not need to change jobs when she felt that the employers mistreated her, or if her “fickle employers” unexpectedly fired her without a good reason. She was also excited about having a fixed work schedule and long-term job security. In addition, she could expect a pay raise based on seniority as well as diverse corporate benefits, including paid leave. Moreover, this opportunity could allow her to escape her precarious work, which she felt was more like a teen job. To Hyun-joo, overall, the job would bring her a brighter future:

I was excited about the job that my mom told me about. It is not easy to find this type of job opportunity [in Harbortown]. [If I had had the job.] I would be eligible for benefits like unemployment insurance and pensions. I was told that I would be able to
continue to work even after I get married. Not many companies would allow their female workers to keep working after having a baby. I thought that the work was good for me in the long run. [Also, if I had had the job.] I could save some money because I now had a stable job. I even daydreamed that I could use my savings to travel abroad for a vacation or prepare for getting married.

Hyun-joo had firmly believed that she would get the position because she had this “string” to the person in the HR. She was hopeful. However, when Hyun-joo applied, she had to compete with another female candidate who recently graduated from a four-year college in Seoul. Hyun-joo found out through her mother’s network that the other candidate came back home after she had graduated from college and failed to find a job in Seoul where she went to school. The other woman with a college degree eventually earned the job that Hyun excitedly expected to get. This experienced frustrated her severely. Letting out a short sigh, Hyun-joo gently blamed the “boomerang kids” who would reduce her opportunities in the labor market. “How could I get a job when a graduate of a four-year college in Seoul came to this small city to find a job? I don’t understand why they paid expensive college tuitions only to become a secretary in this small town.”

While she was critical about the college-educated job seekers who were looking for a job in the low-status white-collar jobs, Hyun-joo also understood the power of the labor market mismatch— the oversupply of college-educated workers and the lack of middle-class occupations for them—in limiting her chance in the labor market. She thought that the mass supply for college graduates in the labor market pushed college-educated job seekers to pursue less prestigious jobs, which further disadvantaged high school graduates in the labor market:

I know that college graduates, even from four-year schools, are struggling these days. I’ve been told that there are very few jobs available to young people in general. A lot of people now have college educations, and they cannot find jobs. Naturally, the job market cannot be favorable for people like myself. Who would choose a high school graduate over a college graduate when they pay the same salary?

Her failure to get the office job made her anxious about her future. She became less optimistic about having a stable white collar job. She said, “How can I imagine getting a better
job on my own when I couldn’t with good help?” Therefore, she was anxious that she might have
to continue the irregular part-time service work indefinitely, which she felt to be “a life without a
future.” Being trapped in the current work situation meant to Hyun-joo that there would be no
progress in her life and hence she might be unable to complete her transitional journey to be an
independent adult:

To be honest, I feel that I am living a life without a future. I am doing the same thing
ever day without any hope for the future. The real problem is that I have done this
kind of job for many years, like four or five years already, since high school. My life
has been the same since then. I am still living with my mom. She pays the bills. I
manage to make my allowance and pay my phone bill, but that’s it. I am no different
from [the way I was in] high school. Nothing has changed. I don’t feel like I am an
adult, even though I am an adult in a legal sense. Probably, I won’t ever be able to feel
that I am an adult if I keep living like this.

Second, female informants in the study were anxious that they would not earn social
respect as a worker with high school education. They were worried about their future status as
marginalized social members in the college-for-all society. Particularly, they considered a college
education as a sign of the better personhood as they believed that college education could make
people intelligent and advanced. As they did not have a college education, they felt that they were
“inferior” or “lesser adults” who would not be able to earn social respect while their college-
going peers could expect a better treatment from the society.

For example, Joo-hee, a cheerful twenty-one-year-old waitress, understood that she held a
lower social status compared with her friends who were headed to college, including two-year
junior colleges. A social gathering that she had with her old high school friends who came back
home for a winter break helped her to develop the idea about her less favorable social status in
Korean society. While she was meeting her friends at a bar, she felt great discomfort. She felt that
her friends changed substantially whereas she “remained the same.” To her, her friends were
living in “a new world.” She thought that college provided them with a valuable chance to
transform themselves from an adolescent to a culturally sophisticated young woman. In a bitter
Joo-hee recalled her impression of her old friends at the gathering:

They looked like, what should I call, new women? They clearly seemed to have a refined style while I looked like a high school girl. It was so good to see them in a year, but I felt that something was different. [Interviewer: What did you feel different about?]
I feel uncomfortable being with them even though I know that they are still good friends of mine. They meet new people from all walks of life, navigate college culture, and try out different things. I think that they are growing up to be adults through all new experiences given to them.

The discomfort that she had during the meeting came from the cultural chasm that she felt between her friends and herself. When I asked her how she felt different about her friends, she said, “Probably how they wore. No, probably the way they spoke might have made me feel that way.” Joo-hee felt exotic and distant when her friends uttered various jargons that college students often used, such as “major,” “general education courses,” or “term papers.” To Joo-hee, those words made her friends look more culturally advanced. Compared with her friends, she felt that she was “left behind” as having been in the same environment while her friends were exploring “a new world.” She took her unchanging life circumstances as a sign of her extended adolescence period:

Compared with my friends, there have been no changes in my life. They left high school to become college students and to live independently from their parents. But I did not experience that sort of change. I have been basically the same since high school. I think that I look more like a high school kid compared with my friends at college. I am in the same neighborhood, meeting the same people. I’ve never been outside this world. I felt as if I became a little bit, how can I say, inferior? Or, lower, lower being. I thought to myself, ‘They are living in a new world while I am working in this dull uniform.

Moreover, Joo-hee was concerned that due to her lack of college education, which made her culturally “inferior to the friends,” she might not be able to earn social respect as much as her college-going peers. She was ambivalent about the social hierarchy system, which was shaped by educational achievement. On one hand, she thought that “it’s not treat people differently based on their educational level.” On the other hand, she felt that “it makes sense that they [college graduates] receive a better treatment [than high school graduates] because they are educated and
knowledgeable.” This understanding of the educational hierarchy created her a fear when she thought about her own life because it was obvious to her that “people might ignore people like me.” She explained her anxiety, “When people look at me and my friends, they could tell that my friends are more educated. They speak differently. I speak like a teenager because I’ve lived like a teenager. Looking at myself, I worry no one would treat a person nicely when she behaves like a teenager.”

Finally, female informants in the study were concerned about their womanhood. They thought that their educational status would affect their marriageability adversely: They were anxious that they might be a less desirable woman in the future marriage market as a high school graduate. It hurt some informants severely because they believed that marrying a “decent man” is a crucial way to achieve independence from parents and that they might not able to have a stable marriage because they did not have a college education. A decent man was defined as those males with the economic capability to support their nuclear families. For example, Su-ji, an outgoing twenty-two-year-old convenience store clerk, hoped to meet “a decent man” to marry in the future:

Having a good family with a decent man? I might sound like an old-timer, but I think that it is still important. I’ve always said, “You will ruin your life if you meet the wrong guy.” There must be a good reason that people keep saying that. [Interviewer: What do you think makes a decent man?] There might be many things to consider, but probably a man with economic capability? I think a man who can provide for his family is a good man. At least, I want to meet a guy who has the economic capability as my future husband.

Su-ji understood that it would be crucial to meet a decent man to have a stable future because of her limited opportunity in the labor market. Unlike college-educated female workers who might be able to enjoy the freedom from marriage as they would have a sufficient earning power, she felt that marriage would be a necessity for her when she wanted to be independent from her parents:

When a woman has a means to live by herself, like having a good job or making lots of
money, I think that she doesn’t need a husband. She can enjoy her life freely without being chained to anyone. But how many women can live like that? Probably a few who appear on TV? Especially for women like me with [only] a high school diploma, it is almost impossible having those jobs that pay enough to live alone. So, women like me can’t help but want to get married to men with economic capabilities. Otherwise, I will end up living with my parents at the age of thirty, and that will mean that I am such a loser.

Despite this perceived importance of marrying a “decent man.”

Su-ji was pessimistic about her chance to meet someone with a sufficient financial capability. She felt that her current job, a convenience store cashier, would make her a less attractive woman to many men. Therefore, she expected her marriageability less optimistically:

I always feel that male customers ignore female cashiers like me. They ignore women like me. They talk badly to people like me. I can clearly see that. Those men are usually older men, but young men wouldn’t be that much different. They just don’t say it loudly. I don’t think that I will even be able to get married ever. Who would want to marry an old woman working at a convenience store? Probably a guy working at the same store.

In addition, Su-ji was skeptical about her chance in the marriage market because of her lack of a college degree. She thought that college education was crucial when a woman was searching for a mate because it could signal their ability to be a capable mother. As articulated by researchers (Nelson 2000; Park 2010), she understood that education as an indispensable resource for a woman to be a productive wife and mother in the Korean context. Particularly, she thought that men would prefer women with a better education because it would enable a mother to help children’s education in a more effective way. Therefore, she bitterly understood her status in the future marriage marker pessimistically given her educational level:

Wouldn’t men prefer a woman with a college degree to one with [just] a high school diploma? Even guys who only graduated from high school would think that their wives should be college graduates so they could educate children well. I am not sure whether I can teach my own children even at the elementary school level. Elementary school math is hard. So I probably won’t be able to teach my own kids later.

Overall, a feeling of anxiety and unsettledness penetrated the narratives of female work-bound youth in this study. Their transition to work in the era of mass higher education in Korea made them feel that they might face a never-ending journey to becoming an adult. Contrasting
their transition-to-adulthood trajectory to the one enjoyed by their college-attending friends and projecting their future meager status in the college-for-all society, female work-bound youth share deep concerns about both their present and their future status in Korean society.

“UNTIL THE MILITARY STARTS”: THE PROGRESSIVE TRANSITION OF MALE INFORMANTS

In contrast to their female informants in the study, the male informants presented relatively optimistic interpretations about their transitions. Not only did they think that their unstable work situation would not last long, they also thought that they would be able to make a successful transition to a respectable male worker in the future. Their confidence in their future, which is starkly different from female informants’ pessimistic understanding about their future status, was derived from their distinctive understanding of two major social institutions shaping young Korean males’ transitions to adulthood: college education and the military service.

About college, they understood that college education was “a matter of choice,” not a rite of passage for everyone whereas they were aware of the prevalent college-going norms among their peers. Whereas they generally agreed with the benefits of college education in life chance, male respondents felt that going to college would mean to them a waste of resources. For example, Chang-woo, a reserved twenty-two-year-old, was confident about his career choice to work as an assistant cleaner at a subcontractor. His job was helping experienced workers to clean factory facilities in the industrial district. Whereas he was discontent with his current job, he felt positively about his decision to work before his military duty instead of going to college:

My job doesn’t pay well. It’s also physically demanding. I am just doing it to get by before the military service. I want to help my parents to support the family a little. I don’t seek a job satisfaction or a bright future out of this job. I am just looking at money [I earn from my work]. I wouldn’t be regretful for not going to college though. I knew that I was not college material. [I knew that] I would fail to graduate even from
the least prestigious two-year junior college that would be willing to accept anyone. Why should I go to college when it was obvious that I would become a loser?

Also, Chang-woo criticized those people who go to college only to “save face” when they are not sure if college would help their future career. He firmly said, “Some people in Korea go to college simply to avoid embarrassment.” Compared with female respondents who thought of college education as the utmost capital in the Korean labor market, Chang-woo understood that the benefit of a college education might be selective: it can be less helpful if one chooses to attend college just “to be like everyone else.” From his perspective, one should decide to go to college as a strategic choice calculating the expected benefit of the education in the future career trajectories and the costs that college education would involve. And hence, for him, college education would be “useless”:

Working hard at a factory while making a little money is better [for me] than spending a great deal of money to go to college. Why should I squander money to look good to others? I think that going to the factory is a right choice for me. I don’t make lots of money. However, at least I didn’t waste money on a college education that would be useless for me.

Similarly, other male informants were skeptical about the practical value of college education. Based on their personal observation of those individuals who failed to find a lucrative job with a college degree, they were critical about college education. For example, Sun-ho, a pleasantly talkative twenty-one-year-old convenience store clerk, criticized that “college has become high school.” Like Chang-woo, he believed that college should be a matter of choice. Sun-ho raised his voice at one point of the interview, “I could’ve gone to a two-year college in my neighborhood, but who would value a degree from that college? Honestly, everyone has a college degree. You can get one only if you can pay even though you are really dumb.” Sun-ho’s skeptical perspective about college education was supported by his encounters with college graduates at his workplace or exposure to similar types of service jobs that he believed would not necessarily require a college education. He confidently said:
I’ve seen people who are working at convenience stores or gas stations with college degrees. I have a co-worker who graduated from that college that I was thinking about applying to [when I was a high school senior]. He is much older than me, but he is working with me at the same convenience store. Whenever I see him, I am saying to myself, “I’m glad that I didn’t go to college!”

In the meantime, Sun-ho saw that the social skills he had built from diverse “work experiences in the real world,” rather than college education, could be a better asset to his future career. He thought that he would have a competitive advantage, especially compared with job seekers with an associate degree, because he had “real experiences” from his work. However, according to him, his college-attending peers would “know nothing about the real world” because they had been “locked up in the glass house” under the protection of their parents and educational institutions. Therefore, in his view, his peers would lack real-life skills that he possessed, including the ability to network with people from all walks of life and communicate with social superiors:

Of course, they [friends at two-year colleges] must be smarter than I am. But, they have no idea what the real world looks like. I know it because I have been working since I was young. Also, I’ve gone through the ups and downs of life while they’ve been stuck at school. I am not sure, but if I were an employer, I would hire someone like me who has a great deal of experience compared with those with zero experience but college degrees.

While they rejected an idea that college would be necessary for a better future, male informants considered military service—which is mandated for every Korean man who has the physical capability to carry it out—as a pivotal institution for their successful transition to adulthood. To male informants, the opportunity to participate in military service was crucial in three aspects.

First, male informants believed that compulsory military service would provide a chance for them to put their unsatisfying jobs to an end. Joining military service was a sort of “evacuation plan” for them. Whereas they regarded their current job as a mere stopgap, they could see the current situation as bearable because they would leave soon for military service. In
other words, the prospect of military service helped them to see the unsatisfying presence as a temporary situation between adolescent and a new chapter of their lives as a grown-up man.

Hyun-sik, a stout twenty-one-year-old who describes himself as social, was excitedly waiting to begin his military duty in the navy. Part of his excitement about military service was from his expectation that he would leave the job soon. He was working as a delivery person at a local diner six days a week from eight to ten hours per day depending on his employer’s request. When asked to describe his job, he immediately poured out complaints about it. His major dissatisfaction as that the job was overly dangerous and did not pay sufficiently. He summarized his work as “I expose myself to the danger of death only to make a little money to get by.”

Despite his dissatisfaction, Hyun-sik would not leave his job for another three months because he would “restore the freedom” soon when he begins his naval duty. For now, Hyun-sik needed to keep the job to make a living and save some money to spend before joining the military. Considering his anticipated military service, his job could be accepted as a bearable situation that otherwise would motivate him to seek escape or feel more pessimistic about his options. He projected, “I plan to continue the delivery work only until September. I will throw the motorbike key to the boss and quit my job on September 30th sharp.” Hyun-sik emphasized the exact date he plans to leave his job and continued, “I wouldn’t leave the job [until then]. I will tolerate this dirty job until September. After that, good-bye, zaijian!” He emphasized that he would be able to leave his job soon by saying “good-bye” in English and Chinese in turn.

Another expectation among male respondents is that the military service period will serve as a “timeout” during which they can achieve maturity as men. Whereas they see their current work as a temporary situation that will simply pass, they interpret the two-year military service as a meaningful period when they can explore their identity and plan. They generally consider the military service as an essential developmental period that they need to go through to be a real man with psychological maturity and a sense of responsibility as a future breadwinner.
Second, many male informants considered the military duty as a chance to design the future trajectories of their lives. For example, like many young workers in the study, Kyu-tae was excited about military service. He thought that the military duty period would give him an opportunity to “seriously think about general things about my life such as my aptitude, my career, and what I want to do for a living.” Based on the advice that he has gathered from older men around him (i.e., older male friends and male family members), Kyu-tae especially expects that the strictly structured military lifestyle would be beneficial for his personal development.

Particularly, he believed that the disciplinary life style and the substantial restriction on his personal freedom during his duty would be helpful for him by having him reflect on his earlier life and make a concrete plan for the rest of his life:

You know, I was told that I would get to think about life in many ways. To be honest with you, I have lived without much discipline so far. I’ve lived just as I wanted. However, as you know, the military is different from the rest of society. There are many rules that you should obey and the schedule that someone else sets up for you. It’s a real world. You’ll never be allowed to behave as you would in the civilian world. I think that the strict lifestyle [in the military] will give me a chance to look back on my own life and reflect on myself seriously.

Particularly, he anticipated that he would benefit from the military duty as he would be able to “grow up to be a mature man” during his service. He expected that the military service period would be transformative experience: he would change from his old self, whom he described as a “childish and irresponsible kid” to his new improved self, whom he would be able to call “a real man” (jin-jja nam-ja). To Kyu-tae, a real man was not simply a man with psychological maturity; a real man would refer to a male with a mental readiness to take full responsibility for his family (i.e., his wife and children). In a solemn manner, Kyu-tae said:

I think that the military will make me a real man. [Interviewer: What do you mean when you say a real man?] When I leave the military, I will have a better plan for what I want to do for a living for the rest of my life. I don’t have any plan for now, right? Also, I think that if I figure out a better plan for my life, I will be a man who at least knows what to do to, not starve his wife and kids.

Finally, military service had importance for male informants because they believed in the
practical value of the military experience. They thought that the completion of military duty would give them a leg up in the labor market. In their perspective, the military service made a prerequisite for a secure position in the labor market, especially in the traditional manufacturing domain. Many male respondents—twelve out of fifteen—hoped to find jobs in one of those manufacturing firms in the town after military duty. They expected those jobs to provide more stable life conditions than the underpaying service sector jobs that they had. They believed that military service would be helpful for achieving their goal.

In their view, one practical benefit of completing military service was that they would obtain a social status as a “normal Korean man” (*jeong-sang-jeog-in han-gug nam-ja*) with physical health and mental soundness who can work. Nam-il, a twenty-year-old busboy at a Korean barbecue restaurant, remarked, “Men with military experience are 180 degrees different from those without.” He explained his understanding of the social meaning that military service had in Korean society:

> When you finish the military service, it is a sort of certificate showing that you’re a man who can deal with physical and mental challenges. It shows that you are a normal Korean man. [Therefore], people will treat you better and give you lots of respect. You can think that the military is something like that. When you tell other people that you finish the military, they will automatically think of you as a man without a problem, a normal man.

Based on his understanding of the positive aspect of military service, Nam-il expected that his chance to have a lucrative manufacturing job would be improved once he finishes military service. To him, military service was of importance because he believed that one’s military service record would confirm his physical and mental capability to carry out physically challenging tasks at work. Therefore, he applied to the navy, which is usually considered to be tougher than other military organizations in Korea, hoping to be “a stronger man.” In a confident manner, he explained his plan:

> From my perspective, employers would prefer those men who were in the navy because it means that they are stronger. The work that I want to do in the future is physically
tough and mentally stressful. Obviously, those from the navy will fit the job better than other men who were in the army or the air force because navy men are stronger. One’s experience in the navy says that he is a stronger man, and I think that employers would prefer men from the navy.

Overall, compared with their female peers who interpreted their transition in a pessimistic way, male respondents in the study presented an optimistic perspective about their current situation and their future status as an adult. The female respondents constructed their narratives based on their understanding of the role of a college education in shaping the transition to adulthood among Korean young people; by contrast, the male respondents projected as the most important institution for their transition the military service, which would help them to achieve a social status as respectable men in Korea.

**DISCUSSION**

This study showed the ways in which female and male young workers constructed their narratives about work and the future. Male and female informants in the study presented starkly different narratives on their transitions, which reflected their understanding of major social institutions challenging young people’s transition to adult roles in Korea—college and military service. Female informants in the study shared pessimistic narratives about their transition. They were concerned about their future status as a worker, a woman, and a person as they directly linked their social status as their educational status. By contrast, male informants presented optimistic narratives. While they did not agree with the idea that everyone would benefit from college education, they felt that college would cost them time and resources. Instead, they believed that military service participation would lead them to a better future by giving them an opportunity to plan their lives ahead, a chance to be a respectable man, and a way to become a capable working-
class worker.

These gendered narratives indirectly demonstrate the multifaceted institutional obstacles that female young workers might be faced in Korean society. As many informants in the study pointed out, less-educated female workers likely experience dual disadvantages in the labor market. They are not only penalized for being a woman (Kim and Shirahase 2014); they are also disadvantaged because of their educational achievement (Lee 2002). Therefore, to female work-bound youth, becoming an independent adult with a secure job could be a challenging task. In the meantime, their social status could be further disadvantaged because marriage might not be a viable option for them when they pursue the transition to adulthood. As informants articulated, without a college education, they would be seen as a less capable mother for children’s education. Considering that educational homogamy is increasingly more salient in Korea (Smits and Park 2009), their status in the marriage market would be further disadvantaged.

Meanwhile, male informants’ narratives illuminate the roles of military service in manhood of Korean men. Despite an increasing tendency among the younger generations to avoid military obligations and the declining benefits of military service for employment, the positive narrative of the informants in the study show that military service could provide the “symbolic recognition” for working-class young men (Moon 2005, 130). To these men who often lack the resources to attain economic stability, the military could mean an institutionalized opportunity to become a respectable male in a traditional notion—a capable worker and a responsible breadwinner.

However, with the interview data in the study, it is hard to examine to what extent their understanding on the roles of military service in their future is realistic. It is unclear if military service would be as beneficial for their future transition as male informants imagined, which would require future research.

Another interesting research question that this research leave is the ways in which various social institutions shape diverging pathways to adulthood. The opposing narratives of male and
female young workers hint that it is worth further investigating how social institutions serve for young people’s transitions in different ways across social groups (e.g., socioeconomic class, gender, and race). A systematic study of the roles that various social institutions play in young people’s journey to adulthood could enhance our intellectual understanding on the nature of the transition to adulthood in the Korean context. Moreover, it will help us to develop better social policies which assist the smooth transitions of various social groups.
Table 3.1. Respondent Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-status service sector</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed by Manufacturer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed by Subcontractor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Dropout</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Dropout</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Full-time employment is considered when a respondent worked for more than 40 hours a week.
REFERENCES


