

Education & Poverty: Drawde Hawk Examines the “Korean Miracle”

Drawde Hawk from a young age was aware of an uncanny ability he possessed. Whatever he explicitly said automatically occurred. The methods by which his desires were fulfilled, however, were not specified. For example, when he asked for fifteen dollars, the money leapt from his father’s wallet. Realizing the potentially catastrophic nature of his powers, Hawk resorted to introversion. He began to lend deep thought to the method by which he wished his desires to be implemented, figuring that it would behoove him to think deeply about the roots of issues before seeking their solutions.

Now seventy years old, he resides in Washington D.C., the crib of American political power. Having studied economics and amassed a fortune, Hawk has little regard for politics; he devotes his attention largely to economics – particularly developmental economics. Discussion with anyone, however, is a dangerous proposition – a slip of his tongue could lead to widespread macroeconomic chaos. Consequently, he scrawls all his ideas down into a little notebook.

Today is November 11, 2007. Hawk, after a week of research at his library, has decided to write a short essay. He scribbles the following in his journal:

“One of poverty’s roots is the lack of education, which submerges many parts of the world. Illiteracy limits the number of jobs that a person can perform, consigning him to near subsistence labor and a life of poverty. His offspring pass through the same miserable cycle. Literacy is the necessary first step out of this cycle; a literate person can obtain vocational training and theoretical education, which in turn help him find a better job and snap the cycle.

“The Republic of Korea (South Korea) offers a good historical example. In the 1960s, Korea and Ghana had similar per-capita incomes; Korea now has an advanced post-secondary sector and a per capita income of about \$11,000 (US), compared to Ghana’s per-capita income of about \$370 (US)¹. The catalyst for this dramatic change was Korea’s post-independence decision

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to focus on education. It decided to use 10% of its gross domestic product for education²; the resultant benefits of this surge in spending have been huge. Korea’s literacy rate has risen from 22% in 1945³ to an impressive 97.9% today⁴. Korea ranks first among industrialized nations for the share of its population of ages 25-34 with at least a high school education⁵. In 2005, it ranked second in the world in math and science behind Finland, and third in university participation of the younger generation⁶. Between 1995 and 1997, 17.5% of Korea’s government expenditures were on education (a similar percentage exists today)⁷. In 1999 only 4.2% of Koreans lived under the poverty line⁸.

“Korea used an education program hand-in-hand with social and employment insurance schemes. The Korean government created the National Basic Livelihood Security System (NBLSS) and the Employment Insurance System (EIS) to help set a baseline living standard, and ‘to create various programs encouraging and supporting the self-reliance of recipients’⁹. The EIS consists of the Unemployment Benefits Program, the Employment Stabilization Program, and the Job Skill Development Program. The Employment Stabilization Program provides employers with loans for constructing childcare facilities and subsidies for hiring employees. In the Job Skill Development program the government gives subsidies to employers for training costs and for allowing employees paid leave to attend education programs. Another part of the Job Development program provides low-interest loans to workers for taking skill-building courses. Additionally, in 1999, the government launched a scheme under which families covered by the NBLSS could obtain financial aid for placing children five years and below in childcare programs (in addition to the pre-existing aid programs for children in secondary school)¹⁰. The government also offers vocational training to those unwilling to pursue higher education.

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“The link between the Korea’s education system and economy is quite clear; the educational system imbues the workforce with abilities and skills that can adapt to meet global demand. It is continuously evolving to meet the demand for new goods and services. In many secondary schools, vocational training is offered based on aptitude and interest¹¹. The great international demand for technological innovations, for example, has led Korea to be ‘the first country in the world to have high-speed Internet in every primary, junior and high school.’¹²

“Korea’s success has been largely possible because of the government’s conviction and the nation’s Confucian heritage.¹³ One potential risk is the polarizing effect that rapid economic growth tends to have; no such phenomenon has yet been recorded in Korea’s case. Korea’s example is certainly one for the world to follow.”

Hawk, pen clutched in his hand, felt an irresistible urge to speak. He mentally crafted a statement and began:

“Let all governments devote over 10% of government spending to effective education programs. Countries in extreme debt should be granted money for this cause by wealthier nations. Next, let the first stage of this education program be devoted to raising literacy, the second to vocational training, and subsequent stages to building theory and application based education systems. I want all countries to be amenable to such programs; may any barriers of corruption that inhibit the progress of this scheme disappear peacefully.”

Hawk never lived to see the effects of his statement; as an unassuming and humble man, the thought of wishing for infinite life had never crossed his mind. His contributions are impossible to overstate.

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