

Happy Mutant in Daechi-dong

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Living in Sin?

It has been said that the most unfortunate teenagers in Korea are students with low grades living in Daechi-dong, an affluent region of southern Seoul. Wherever there are top students, of course, there are also those at the bottom. However, this problem is particularly exacerbated in Daechi-dong as there are thousands of students who try hard but simply cannot keep up with others in terms of their grades and, as a result, live a life of anxiety. It is as if they have become sinners. But it is not just academic pressure. Media reports have focused on a series of shocking incidents. There was a shocking revelation that people had given drugged drinks to students in order to blackmail their parents,¹ the tragedy of a female high school student who revealed her suicide plans and then livestreamed the entire process on social media,² and a teenage male student who took his own life after stabbing a female student.³ Can we say that all these things happened purely by chance or by accident? Many news outlets and reports suggest that the depression, helplessness, and anxiety experienced by the youth of Daechi-dong are behind these events.⁴

After hearing these stories, I gave serious consideration to my own life experiences in Daechi-dong. This is where I was born and where I still live today. Is this the future that awaits me? This paper explores the dark and negative aspects of Daechi-dong and a personal reflection of how they might be overcome by the individual.

¹ Min-jeong Kim, "Korean students drugged in cram-school blackmail scheme," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, April 5, 2023

² Min-jeong Kim and Seo-in Choi, "'Mojaikeu do eopseotda'... muchabyeol hwagsandoe neun 10dae yeoseong geukdan seontaek," *Jungang ilbo*, April 17, 2023

³ Ho-jeong Lee, "Teenage boy commits suicide after school attack," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, April 17, 2023

⁴ So-yeon Kim, "Daechi-dong goedam eul asinayo?," *Maeil gyeongje*, April 21, 2023

A Happy Mutant is Born

The title “Happy Mutant in Daechi-dong” refers to me. I’m a Daechi-dong kid, born in Daechi-dong, and now still living in Daechi-dong. It is my home. Yet when I introduce myself and say where I’m from, some people look at me with pity and feel slightly uncomfortable. It is because the preconceptions about Daechi-dong are widespread and well-known: Academicism, back-breaking study routines, high stress on students, and private academic institutes lining the streets. And, despite these being the common understanding of the area, the idea of Daechi-dong that most people possess is mostly correct. The questions that my friends from other parts of Seoul ask me the most about Daechi-dong are, “Is ‘Sky Castle’ real?” and “Does the drama ‘Crash Course in Romance’ look like Daechi-dong?” My answer to these questions is generally the same: “Well, even if some of it is an exaggeration, everything you think is basically right.”

People usually think of Daechi-dong children as students who have graduated from an English kindergarten, attended several academies since elementary school, and receive private tutoring. Moreover, students go to several academies — often going to multiple academies for a single subject. For example, they go to one math academy for review and school exam preparation and another math academy for preview and prior learning. I also took all of these courses as a Daechi-dong kid. However, when I was in my third year of high school, my friends at the academy said, “You were born and raised in Daechi-dong, right? But you don’t look like it.” At first, I thought, “Do they think I’m not good at studying? Do I look like I’m studying less?” But what my friends said afterward was a bit shocking. “You look too happy for a high school senior who grew up in Daechi-dong.” I was living the same life as all the other Daechi-dong kids, and so I wondered what made me look like someone who wasn’t depressed.

Daechi-dong

Daechi-dong is located in southern Seoul’s Gangnam-gu. It is a region of the city always associated with high educational enthusiasm and is home to countless academic institutes and academies. Students come from all over the country to Daechi-dong, making it the Mecca of Korean academies and the center of Korean private education.

Throughout Daechi-dong, there are numerous academies. You can find these located at Eunma Intersection and in the spooky alleys that litter the area. In fact, the region is comprised almost completely only of academies. The types of academies range from simple supplementary learning to

essay writing, arts and physical education, SAT, TOEFL, and AP. When most academies finish classes at 10 p.m., the streets, normally quiet even at 9 p.m., suddenly become crowded with students. In addition, there are many places in Daechi-dong where classes are held on public holidays such as Children's Day and Christmas. Breaks simply do not exist. Although national law requires academies to close at 10 p.m., many classes are nevertheless conducted in secret until long after 10 p.m.

Characteristics: Nunchi and Possessions

I'm a person who cares a lot about how other people perceive and view me. In Korean we would say that I'm a person who "reads nunchi" a lot. When I think about how I became like this, I think it could be because I grew up in Daechi-dong. In elementary school, my friends made comments comparing each other without hesitation.

One example of this is accommodation. There are two big apartment complexes near the elementary school in Daechi-dong I attended: Mido Apartment and Eunma Apartment. Both are nice, but Mido is more modern. My elementary school friends looked at each other and said, "You look like you live in Mido Apartment. And you look like you live in Eunma Apartment." They also discussed each other's possessions: "What's your parents' car? What's the size of your home? How much pocket money do you get? What are your parents' jobs?" These questions were incredibly common among my friends. In fact, I heard them so many times that I didn't even know they were rude until I became an adult. A lot of people pay great attention to their friends' financial ability. For example, when they celebrate their friends' birthdays, they often say they will only attend if it is in a fancy location, such as a party room. This behavior would have been influenced by their parents. Essentially, students are always comparing and asking questions about each other so as to distinguish themselves and create hierarchies amongst each other even though it's not money they earned. As a result, students ask their parents to buy popular and expensive clothes, hats, backpacks, and cell phones so that they don't get left out. With these possessions, they can become so-called high-quality students. This situation also continues into middle school and high school.

In middle school, there was a widespread perception that students should have luxury cosmetics and bags. Some students who were driven by status even worked part-time and spent all their money buying luxury goods. I am not criticizing the fact that students want to wear or possess luxury goods, however. I am highlighting the situation in which students

who are used to showing off by wearing expensive clothes ignore their friends and others who don't have luxury goods. These students' problems and thoughts led them to be naturally overly conscious of others' eyes.

Academic elitism started from being too concerned about nunchi. In Daechi-dong, more than 60% of students retake the college entrance exam (CSAT). Some students may want to study in a better school, but often the biggest reason for retaking the exam is that students think the people around them will ignore them if they don't study at a prestigious university based in Seoul. Many students also retake the exam because their parents are unsatisfied with their children's exam scores.

Deteriorating parent-child relationships

One of the unique aspects of Daechi-dong is that it was often taken for granted that mothers would quit their jobs and care for their children full-time. This was seen as desirable. As a middle and high school class president, I didn't understand why class presidents' and vice presidents' mothers had to meet each other regularly. Moreover, classmates' mothers had constant meetings to share their children's academy information or college entrance exam strategies. Mothers would line up to register for popular academy classes and even for their children to sit in the front row of large classes. In this way, mothers are devoted to their children's entrance exams and studies. But at the same time, they also want compensation from their children. Many of my friends said to me, "You must be burdened if you are an only child. Your parents must have high expectations. It must be hard." However, thankfully I've never felt like my parents pressured me just because I'm an only child.

The most common thing students hear in quarrels with their parents is, "I've invested so much in you. What's wrong with your grades?" Parents want their children to pay for their dedication, but they get angry if their child's grades do not meet their expectations. From the students' point of view, they did their best, but when they take their report cards home, they only hear bad things from their parents. So, they don't want to show the report cards to their parents, and they even manipulate them in a PC room so as not to get scolded by their parents. Parents think they are making great sacrifices for their children and invest a lot of money to care for them. In fact, however, students only think of the situation of fighting with their parents and their sharp words rather than being grateful for their parents' sacrifices. It is because parents, who are supposed to be on their side, have actually increased their academic stress rather than alleviated or decreased it. One of the things I heard from a friend in Daechi-dong was, "Since my

parents gave birth to me, I don't know why I should thank them for paying my academy fees, textbooks, or buying me things necessary for life. Isn't it obvious? Isn't it the parents' duty?" I was upset that quite a large number of students considered their parents as little more than ATMs. It was also heartbreaking to hear of parents making their children study excessively according to their plans rather than their children's own dreams or desires.

I saw a promotional poster for an academy that read, "The beginning of the college entrance exam is elementary school 4th grade." I understand parents want their children to do well and achieve their dreams later, but I feel sorry for young elementary school students who study high school subjects and attend various academies daily.

Self-Awareness

I once told my parents in tears that I was a useless daughter because I didn't seem as good at studying as other Daechi-dong students. So even though I lived a similar life to others in Daechi-dong, how did I eventually overcome this stress and live a happy student life to the point where I thought of myself as a happy mutant?

Looking at my report cards in middle school, my GPA was low in the first year. But my parents believed it was the result of my best efforts and didn't rush me or say anything about my grades. Instead, I felt the need for supplementary learning, so I told my parents the subjects I felt I needed to improve in and then went to the relevant academies through my own choice. I had no complaints about attending the academy because I found it myself. Although my grades were not good from the beginning because I had not done any prior learning, I could see them rising slowly and steadily during the first, second, and third grades. I was shocked and worried because I could see students around me had already completed their high school courses while they were in elementary school, but I was less stressed because I studied according to my own study plan which no one had forced on me.

Parents and Influence

The most stressful factor for students in Daechi-dong is academic stress. I also felt significant anxiety if I didn't get good grades. I cried a lot if a test didn't work out as I wanted or didn't go as well as expected. However, it was mainly due to my parents that I was able to get over that stress quickly and come back to being a positive mutant. Of course, I can manage stress by hanging out and talking with my friends, but my parents' reactions

significantly impact my emotions. They are the people who support me most. The moments that my parents trusted and supported me were the driving force behind me successfully overcoming stress and study.

Meanwhile, many of my friends were under constant stress due to conflicts with their parents after mock tests or school exams. My friends told me their parents usually said some very harsh things like, "It's not worth the money I put into you," or "Why are you so bad at this when your friend is so good?" Students have even received psychological treatment due to academic stress and conflicts with their parents.

Sharp words can't be justified even if parents are trying to motivate their children. Parents can be the biggest strength in the life of a young test-taker, so I hope parents will know that their words greatly influence their children's emotions and, rather than rush to criticism, say a lot of warm and loving words instead.

Beauty Standards and Elitism

The reason I started an extreme diet when I was in middle school was just a passing comment from someone. Students in my class said to my friends, "You're pretty." However, to me, they only ever said, "You're cute." Of course the word cute does not contain a bad meaning. But to me it meant I wasn't as pretty as my friends. It was then that I started a diet. I didn't eat more than 500 calories a day. I kept at this for a while but when I felt my body hurt and I was regularly dizzy, I eventually stopped. My friends also told me to stop. There was no reason to diet anymore. When I stopped and looked back on the reasons why I was doing it, I realized that I was constantly comparing myself to others. My extreme diet was not just because of the word "cute": "cute" was just the starting point.

Many of my friends who were skinny, the people I wanted to resemble, complained about their appearance and wanted to fix some particular part of their face. There were even some friends who received psychological treatment for the stress they regularly received related to their appearance. This may be because they thought they lacked something in comparison and were unsatisfied with themselves. That's when I realized there is no end to comparison. Everyone was overlooking their strengths and beauty. If it's hard to stop comparing ourselves to others, we should stop looking just at our shortcomings and think about our strengths, and if we find our strengths, we'll gradually stop comparing ourselves excessively with others. It is more common than you think that students in Daechi-dong don't know their strengths and only see the good in others. The ability to

raise students' self-esteem will start with small compliments to themselves or those around them.

It's a shame, but I was also gripped by the idea of academicism until last year. I am a student at "Seoul" Women's University, but I didn't make it to the In-Seoul ranking, a list of prestigious universities in Seoul. My high school friends even said they thought I would retake the college entrance exam. They told me, "Why don't you try again? Are you satisfied now? You're good at studying! Isn't it a waste not to retake the exam?" Of course, my friends didn't mean any harm or offense, but I was intimidated and wondered if I should retake the exam after listening to them. However, when I came to college, students who worked hard motivated me. I tried to focus on my school life without caring about what other people thought of me. Thankfully, I found myself very happy and satisfied with my school life.

A Happy Mutant

The secrets of my shared happiness may appear rather little obvious. However, many students and parents of families in Daechi-dong often forget these ideas. Academic stress, compulsion, depression and more. I think the source of all these is low self-esteem. In fact, I do not believe that it is only Daechi-dong students who experience such psychological anxiety. Many other Korean children who are thrown into the Korean academic system experience it. The environment can sometimes cause such constant stress and pressure that we feel we cannot escape. However, it would be good for students to find their own survival secrets to make them happy. This starts by raising their self-esteem. I hope many Korean students will pass through difficult times like me and live as happy individuals, as mutants, in such an environment.

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