

The profitable adventure of threatened middle-class families: an ethnographic study on homeschooling in South Korea

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Abstract South Korean society in the late 1990s was confronted with socio-economic setbacks and discursive turbulence concerning the quality of education being provided. It was at such a particular historical juncture of South Korean society that I conducted ethnographic research on homeschooling families. Based on field data collected from four homeschooling families, this article examines how lower middle-class families at first manifested their education fever in an unprecedented adoption of homeschooling, and then returned their children to school within the same socio-cultural context. Central to this article's analysis is what members of these middle-class families, especially children, experienced during the homeschooling period, and how parents negotiated their rationale for homeschooling and returning their children to school within contesting discourses (e.g., deschooling and neo-liberalism). As will be shown, despite experiencing difficulties in pursuing a self-fashioned education in a school-centered society, the families benefited from homeschooling in terms of acquiring "neo-liberal" mentalities for survival without risking their established socio-cultural status. As such, this article reconfirms the ambivalent characteristics of the alternative education movement in South Korea and its inevitable connection with the middle-class *habitus* embedded in the South Korean socio-cultural context.

Keywords Ethnography · Homeschooling · Education fever · Deschooling · Neoliberalism · Middle-class habitus

Introduction

Homeschooling is neither a new nor rare phenomenon worldwide (Lines 1991; Knowles 1988; Petrie 1995; Stevens 2001). Most western European countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Norway, Portugal, and Denmark have legally accommodated home educators (Petrie 1995). Recently, a surge in school-failure and school-violence discourse and an increase in private education in South Korea, Japan, and North America (Aurini and Davies 2005; Giesecke 2002; Lee 2001; Postman 1995) have drawn parents, policymakers, and researchers to homeschooling and other alternative forms of education. In the United States, 1.1 million students were reported to be homeschooled in spring, 2003 (NCES 2004). Over 5,000 families in Korea were estimated to have chosen homeschooling instead of formal schooling (Kang 2006). A recognition of the difference between compulsory education and compulsory schooling now seems to prevail all over the globe.

Features of homeschooling as an alternative to formal schooling have been discussed mainly from an input–output perspective. Homeschooling has been compared with formal schooling in terms of academic achievements and affective development (Ray 1988; Ray and HSLDA 1997). According to a comprehensive study on both agendas of education (Ray and Wartes 1991), homeschooled youth score equal to or better than their conventional school peers on measures of academic achievement. Also, the research

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suggests that homeschooled children's self-esteem is high, and they are socially and emotionally well-adjusted (Ray and Wartes 1991, p. 57).

As noted by Ray and Wartes (1991, p. 59), however, the detailed measurements of achievement and socialization do not indicate what parents' objectives are for their children and how effective homeschooling is in these terms. While the motivations of parents who have adopted homeschooling have been covered (Aurini and Davies 2005; Mayberry et al. 1992, 1995; Van Galen 1988, 1991), children's motivations and experiences have been neglected (Wright 1988, pp. 99–100). Indeed, the standard input–output perspective on homeschooling does not reveal what children experience in the course of homeschooling. Also, most research on homeschooling has devoted insufficient attention to how families cope with educational difficulties and why they encounter problems. Qualitative research has tended to portray only its positive aspects. In the case of South Korean society, no family adopts homeschooling with ease; indeed, some families encountering difficulties feel they have little choice but to return their children to school (as will be discussed in this article). Apart from being an “understudied” area of education (Welner 2002), homeschooling is depicted as an easily adopted educational method, thereby concealing its more complicated features as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

The present study was conducted with a view to overcoming such a de-subjectified and de-contextualized perspective on homeschooling. Homeschooling is a cultural phenomenon that should be understood from the perspective of homeschoolers within its actual socio-historical context. In particular, homeschooling needs to be understood as a middle-class phenomenon that demands parents' direct supervision over the education of their children. While some studies in the US presents a socio-historical explanation of the homeschooling phenomenon in terms of the shifting roles of families and the school as educator (Kirschner 1991), they do not reveal how complicated homeschooling is for middle-class families within their given contexts.

This study presents a socio-cultural perspective on the homeschooling phenomenon and the experiences of “pioneering” middle-class parents and children within the school-centered society of South Korea. In particular, this study focuses on some middle-class families who adopted homeschooling only to decide to return their children to school, revealing the ambivalent features of homeschooling in South Korean society. South Korea is known for its “education fever,” or Korean parents' yearning for their children's successful schooling (Lee 2005; Oh 2000; Seth 2002).¹ As formal schooling is broadly perceived in South Korea as a key to success and mobility, it is inconceivable to some that children would not attend school but instead

remain at home with their family and somehow learn there. What prompted some parents to adopt homeschooling in a school-centered society only to later send their children back to school? What did children experience during their homeschooling period? What significance have homeschooling experiences had for the middle-class families in South Korea?

This article aims to answer these questions, based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork, which was a part of seven years of fieldwork for my dissertation (Seo 2006). It represents my second trial for understanding homeschooling as an alternative to the modern schooling system. At this time, I focus on the cultural meanings of some middle-class families' adoption of homeschooling and subsequent return of their children to school. To me, the homeschooling phenomenon is akin to a “crystal” reflecting in different directions (Richardson 1994). Thus, this study begins with a discussion of how my first study evolved into the present study.

My first encounter with homeschoolers

In 2000, I first met homeschoolers while assisting with my colleague's research on “The Present and Future of the Homeschooling Movement in South Korea” (Lee 2000). At that time, I was preparing for an academic career and was a former public high school teacher who was not accustomed to the realities of South Korea's school system such as bureaucratic administration, emphasis on competitive college entrance examinations, and guidance only for controlling students' behavior and not for extending their autonomy.

From the late 1990s in South Korea, as if my leaving school had foreshadowed it, the crisis of public school system in South Korea was widely proclaimed and parental dissatisfaction with schools seemed nearly universal (Lee D. H. 2003; Lee H. G. 2003; Seo 2003). Hardly a day went by that the media did not disclose problems with schooling such as teachers' inability to control rebellious students, students' inattentiveness and truancy and parents' mistrust of the system's ability to enhance their children's academic development. In sum, these realities were dubbed *gyo-sil-bunggoe* (“classroom breakdown”), with the education system thought to be in crisis. Their objections aside, parents could not easily turn their backs on formal schooling given its centrality in guaranteeing their children's future success as well as in ensuring that their children would not be marginalized in South Korean

¹ In South Korea, the term “education fever” is used in everyday life as well as in academic one. Despite controversy in articulating its definition academically (J. G. Lee 2005), in everyday life, it refers to the phenomenon of national obsession with education and parents' aspiration and support for high educational attainment/achievement.

society. Most parents seemed to send their children to school not to be educated but to gain grades and diplomas. It was in this context that I was fascinated by the courage of homeschooling parents who were adopting an alternative course for their children.

I believed that their choice to homeschool indicated that they were not narrowly focused on their children's entrance to elite universities and on their guaranteed high status in mainstream society, but that they were instead motivated by the intrinsic value of education. I saw them as *gae-cheog-ja* ("pioneers"), as one of them called herself, who were struggling to find their own way to a humane and creative education against the grain of collectivistic pressure from Korean society. Indeed, I was deeply enamored with homeschooling parents' visions of and activities for a more holistic education. Thus inspired, I began my own research on the homeschooling and deschooling movement.

Deschooling, and neo-liberalism: contesting discourses on homeschooling and alternative education

On my first encounter, I interpreted homeschooling as struggling to revive the intrinsic value and rationale of education, which had been "colonized" by the state. Such a feature of homeschooling was articulated in the concept of "deschooling", which was coined by Illich (1970) and has been used by his followers to criticize the "institutionalization of values" by modern institutions, of which the public school system is the most typical (Holt 1982). According to Illich and Reimer (Reimer 1971), the public school system does not guarantee the original value of education by which its existence can be legitimized. Rather, Illich contests that "the pupil is 'schooled' to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new" (Illich 1970, p. 1). Furthermore, Illich and Reimer maintain, like many other critical researchers on schooling (Bourdieu and Passerow 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976) that the established school system has exacerbated education inequality even though it is justified by the liberal belief that it can give equal opportunity to all children.² Deschooling advocates differ from others in that they do not have any hope of improving the public school system. Instead, as an alternative, Illich (1970) proposes a "learning web" as a "convivial institution" for education and Reimer (Reimer 1971) suggests a "learning network" distinct from the present public school system. As if responding to their proposal, the free school

and homeschooling movement boomed for the first time in the U.S. at about that time (the 1970s and the early 1980s). (Holt 1982; Lines 1991) Echoing these scholars, all the early literature on homeschooling in South Korea (Kim H. K. 2002; Kim J. W. 2000; Kwon 2002; Lee 2000; Seo 2002), also started by delineating the relationship between the homeschooling and deschooling movement. They considered homeschooling as an attempt to resist "schooled" society and initiated "deschooling" for the following reasons.

First, they paid heed to the homeschooling parents' autonomous activism to fashion their own holistic education instead of merely following the majority's instrumental "education" with the sole aim of helping their children enter prestigious colleges. I admired the homeschoolers for withstanding collective "schoolism," which can be specified in three themes: "schooling is the royal road to education," "obligations to the state (especially, mandatory education) should be observed," and "it is dangerous to be isolated from the majority" (Seo 2002, pp. 136–144). Second, they took note not only of autonomy and diversity but also of communitarian features that alternative education activists struggled to embrace (Lee 2001). In this vein, I perceived homeschoolers' "emergent" culture as searching not only for an identity and a new role for family in education, but also for "social relationships as a life force" and "education not as an obligation to the state but as a civil right" (Seo 2002, pp. 136–144).³

However, public education advocates were not persuaded by the possibilities inherent in homeschooling. They persistently criticized not only government reforms but also alternative education as "neo-liberal" (Kim, C. G. 2000; Park 1995). They argued that the first neoliberal education reforms had been enforced in 1995, with the catchphrase of *su-yo-ja jungsim gyo-yug* ("consumer-centered education"),⁴ the aim of which was to meet the needs of consumers (e.g., students and their parents) within the escalating "globalization" of the economy. Also, they criticized Kim Dae-Jung's regime's education reforms after the International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout (1997–

² In this sentence, the term "liberal" signifies an order in which the state exists to secure the freedom of individuals on a formally egalitarian basis. See Brown (2003), endnote 6.

³ The term "emergent" is borrowed from the work of Williams (1981). He distinguishes cultural forms into "dominant", "residual" and "emergent" ones (Williams 1981, pp. 203–205). While some innovations are movements and adjustments within the dominant culture which become its new forms, as Williams (1981, p. 205) points out, I thought that homeschooling as a cultural form is the "emergent" culture which struggles against the dominant one.

⁴ Interestingly, to the public *su-yo-ja jungsim gyo-yug* seemed to be a step toward the "democratization" of school administration in that it empowered parents and students who had been neglected to that point (Seo 2003). This ambivalent evaluation of the reform with an emphasis on autonomy and efficiency of education seems to correspond to that of alternative education.

1998) for privatizing and commodifying public education. In accordance with the requirements of the IMF, this reform aimed at enforcing the large-scale privatization of the public education system through such means as approving independent private and charter schools, and opening the market to foreign teachers and schools etc., (Kim C. G. 2000; Park 2005). They argued that homeschooling and other forms of alternative education legitimized the government's neoliberal policy and served only the middle-class. In his article directly dealing with homeschooling in the U.S., Apple (2000, pp. 75–76) pointed out that the “politics of recognition” claimed by homeschoolers could have a negative impact on the “politics of redistribution.”

Reflecting on this criticism led me to the questions of how middle-class homeschooling parents responded to difficulties imposed on their children as a minority and how far their homeschooling practice as part of the deschooling movement went beyond the class-based limitations of middle-class families. These questions target the limitations and possibilities of homeschooling among urban middle-class families participating in the deschooling movement in terms of homeschooling's ability to embody the autonomous rationale of education within the particular discursive and economic context of South Korean society.

Methodology

With such a transformed problematic in mind, I met the former participant families again and interviewed their children. Of the six former families, I interviewed three, which included six homeschooled children, observed their homeschooling situations and visited the places where the children spent most of their time. From April 2002 to October 2003, I interviewed Ms. Jang, a former participant, and her children, Jaemyong (15 years in 2002), and Sem-yong (12 years). Ms. Jang was a member of a local association of homeschoolers in the city of Incheon, where I met the other two former participant families, Ms. Nam and her two children Jieun and Jihee (both 15 years), and Ms. Um and her two children Hyejeong (15 years) and Hyejun (11 years). I hoped to meet adolescents, especially of high school ages, because I wondered how homeschooling had affected their thoughts about entering college and how they dealt with the dominant discourse on the subject, so searched for a new family and met the Kims and their two children, Gichol (18 years) and Gijun (15 years). All of the families started homeschooling in 1999.

Their socio-economic status was lower middle to middle-class in terms of their academic careers, jobs, and housing situations. The participants, especially the mothers were all in their early to mid forties in 2002. They all graduated from college, three of them from a college of

education. The mothers, who were the main homeschooling partners for their children, had teaching experience as individual tutors or lecturers in private for-profit academic institutes. Most of the fathers were engaged in independent business except one who was a medical doctor. They lived in the metropolitan area of Incheon (2), Ansan (1), and Ilsan (1) near Seoul. All the families lived in quite spacious apartments over 30 p'yŏng (about 120 square yards), which symbolizes being the middle-class in South Korea (Moon et al. 1992, 2000).

In order to understand and describe common homeschooling experiences and the shared value systems of these families, this study was conducted and written as an ethnographic study. Ethnography, in general, refers to “the task of describing a particular culture” (Spradley and McCurdy 1972, p. 3). In spite of controversy in articulating its definition (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994, p. 248), no ethnographer denies that it involves a prolonged fieldwork to gather “unstructured data” in a natural setting for describing and interpreting “cultural behavior.” As personal experiences inevitably accompany fieldwork, ethnography is “located between the interiority of autobiography and the exteriority of cultural analysis” (Tedlock 2000, p. 455). This duality of ethnography encouraged me to write this article from the first person perspective and to describe a spiraling research process of questioning, participating, answering, re-questioning, and answering again.

Given that it was conducted three years after my previous research (Seo 2002), this study assumed a form of “ethnographic longitudinality” (Weis 2004). “Ethnographic longitudinality” enables researchers to understand economic and discursive formation over time and to see relational interactions between such formations and the particular phenomenon being researched within a broader context by “shifting our eyes from pieces drawn at one point in time to those drawn at another” (Weis 2004, p. 14). Comparing the more recent data from the data from my previous research enabled me to consider the ongoing transformation of homeschooling within the broader context of South Korean society. This form of “ethnographic longitudinality” was manifested in writing the main part of this article.

In conducting the research for this study I first focused on analyzing the commonality of homeschooling children's experience through their narratives with the aim of revealing how far the middle-class homeschooling parents' beliefs and thoughts about educational practices had been embodied in their children's lives and how the children, as a minority, had interacted with the dominant discourse about schooling. In a word, I intended to explore how the homeschooling parents, along with their children, navigated through contesting discourses on education (for

example, deschooling, neo-liberal reform, public education reinforcement, etc.,) at a particular historical moment of South Korean society (i.e., the IMF crisis and “classroom collapse” discourses).

Homeschooling and returning to school

In April, 2002, it was Jaemyong who welcomed me when I revisited Ms. Jang’s family about two years after I first met them. He seemed to enjoy his homeschooling life very much. He studied mathematics with an “uncle-like” tutor, played basketball in an apartment playground, and chatted or played computer games with his friends on the Internet. Sometimes he helped his busy parents with house chores such as washing dishes, doing laundry, and cleaning the house. However, of all his hobbies he liked reading history books the most. But Semyong, his sister, was not to be seen. He advised me not to meet Semyong that day because she was very busy preparing to return to school. She was going back to school?

Ms. Jang explained to me that Semyong was eager to go back to school. Much astonished at first, I found that returning to school after receiving homeschooling was not so unique to Semyong. During an interview with her, Ms. Jang revealed that some homeschoolers including my previous participants returned their children to school or planned to do so. Ms. Nam sent her twin daughters back to school, one in Korea and the other in New Zealand. Ms. Kim, a new key participant for this research, was planning to send a younger son back to high school that year. Besides, I learned that even Jaemyong went to a private institute almost every day in preparation for a “special purpose” high school for foreign languages.⁵

This does not mean that every homeschooling parent let their children go back to school and every homeschooling child returned to school. However, it is true that quite a few urban homeschoolers returned their children to school. I still remembered that all the parents had harshly criticized the public school system. What had made the parents change their minds? Why did their children want to go back to the very school system that they had condemned? Had the homeschooling experience changed them and their children into different people? I had to read the old data

again to understand what made them change their minds over time.

Flashback

I first met Ms. Jang, Ms. Nam, and Ms. Um one day in January, 2000 in the city of Incheon. At that time, their three families had been meeting regularly to share their homeschooling experiences. They discussed their common problems. They taught their children the subjects in which they had expertise. Importantly, they gave their children chances to make friends with other homeschooling children.

During the first interview, Ms. Nam had criticized teachers’ improper behaviors such as slapping her daughter’s cheek and forcing her to give a bribe. Ms. Um had complained of the inflexible curriculum and hectic life cycle of schooling. She said, “I was not hesitant at all to let my children leave school. If they went to school, they would have had no time to learn what they wanted to learn.” Likewise, Ms. Jang complained of an ever-changing curriculum and a class atmosphere that aimed not at “taking care of the children,” but at “keeping pace with the times.”

Schooling created endless conflicts for me. Nevertheless, my children had been good at school. As for me, I didn’t like the annual change of class. I didn’t like being concerned about the fact that my children changed their dispositions whenever their homeroom teachers changed. Also, I think it was a big waste for teachers not to take care of children but to try to keep pace with the times. Teachers, educational organizations, and we parents were all busy doing *yeol-lin-gyo-yug*.⁶ My children seemed to change their dispositions continuously. You know what? They changed their behaviors without proper thinking. They just followed the changing atmosphere. Anyone who let her children go to school would think so. Meanwhile I was informed of this meeting (about homeschooling) and I was empowered. (Quoted from Ms. Jang’s interview data in January, 2000)

At the time of the first interview, Ms. Jang’s children, Jaemyong and his younger sister Semyong had practiced homeschooling for six months. Before homeschooling they had been good students in an elementary school. Jaemyong had been the vice president of the student council and

⁵ Special purpose high schools, which originally started in the late 1970 s and focused only on art and athletics in an effort to complement the high school equalization policy, have expanded during the mid-1990 s in accordance with educational reforms, which emphasized “diversification, specialization, and autonomy” of schools. These schools had the special purpose of nurturing talents for the new economy, including technical, science, and foreign language skills. (Kim, Y. C. 2003).

⁶ *Yeol-lin-gyo-yuk* is a kind of progressive education for the purpose of promoting teachers’ and students’ autonomy and flexibility in contrast with the uniformity and rigidity of the curriculum and teaching methods of conventional education. However, some argue that *yeol-lin-gyo-yuk* confused teachers because it was enforced in a top-down way by the government.

Semyong had also been a leader in her class. But Ms. Jang, their mother, had been discontented with their behavior and ways of thinking because of the above reasons. She said, "My children are this way because schooling deprived them of most of the energy and time that they could have spent thinking." Even if Jaemyong hesitated to leave school at first, he ended up leaving school in the fifth grade of elementary school. Unlike her brother, Semyong heartily welcomed her mother's suggestion about homeschooling when she was in the third grade because she was scared of some teachers' punishments. Eventually, both of them left school in the fall semester in 1999.

Few children in these homeschooling families had trouble with teachers and complained of the school system in South Korea. Only Gichol had minor problems with his teacher's prejudiced assessment. Most of the children were well-adjusted to schooling, which can be seen from Ms. Jang's case. Jihyun and Jihee, Ms. Nam's twin daughters, were well-behaved students, though they were not as popular as Jemyong and Semyong. Also, Hyejung herself did not have any negative feelings about schooling when she finally quit school in the fifth grade. It was her father who thought that she gradually disliked writing and drawing because of how her teacher assessed what she did at school. The parents' initiative and supervision did launch their adventure in homeschooling.

Homeschooling: self-directed learning, independence and leisure

All of my participants had been practicing homeschooling since 1999 and each family had its own way of homeschooling. At first, Ms. Jang laid out a more demanding and laborious curriculum than the school had. After about six months of homeschooling, she sent Jaemyong and Semyong to an elementary school in New Zealand for a year and then to another homeschooling family's house in Daejun for six months. After that, she let the children choose whatever topic they wanted to study. Ms. Nam emphasized teaching Jihee and Jihyun how to read books and discuss them, and letting the girls see the natural beauty in suburban areas by traveling. Ms. Um did almost the same as Ms. Jung, but Hyejung and Hyejun spent a great deal of time learning English and sometimes teaching English in their parents' language institute. Ms. Kim, after traveling to many different places for several months, helped Gichol and Gijun establish ways of studying on their own without letting them go to private academic institutes. Despite the variety of homeschooling methods, these homeschooling children's experiences had many different characteristics than their experiences in public schools, involving diverse thinking, self-directed learning, self-reliance, and active social relationships.

First, they realized that what was taught in school to prepare students for examinations was not necessarily true and important. Jaemyong, Hyejung, and Hyejun went to Dog-seo-dang (a private academic institute for reading and discussing). The advisor in charge told me about the drastic difference between them and ordinary students. "With time and leisure, they understand the content of books more in-depth and think about the material even in a philosophical way, whereas ordinary students and their parents are impatient to ask me to teach them writing skills to be used when taking tests for entering universities." With all the homeschooling parents emphasizing reading, the children read more books than ordinary students and some of them even knew that the "truth" given in textbooks at school is biased as with other books.

This way of thinking leads to self-directed learning. Most of them said that they tried to find their own learning style and some were accustomed to searching for books to read on their own. Jaemyong, who was once severely scolded by a teacher for reading books in class, enjoyed reading history books. He often read book reviews in newspapers and then asked his mother to buy the book being reviewed. Gichol, after a long struggle with his mother, was able to study whatever and whenever he wanted. He said "It is faster to study alone than to be taught by a teacher with forty or more classmates in school. Also, when studying alone, I am able to learn more accurately by searching for this or that book."

Also, the children came to appreciate the importance of standing on their own. Most of them helped their parents with various kinds of house chores as in Jaemyong's case mentioned above. At home, they learned how difficult it is for their parents to earn a living. Some of them were working part-time at a restaurant, an internet café, or an academic institute. Hyejung, Ms. Um's sixteen year old girl, said, "These days parents don't seem to let their children live their own lives, but instead they themselves want to live their children's lives." Sometimes she taught her peers and younger students English conversation at her parents' language institute. Furthermore, some of the homeschooling children, like Hyejung, wanted to be financially independent. About this situation, Hyejung's mother commented, "She probably won't suffer from ordinary adolescents' distress and conflict." She seemed to indicate that most of adolescent's distress and conflict in modern times originates from overcoming the drastic gap between childhood and adulthood. Hyejung, however, gradually stepped from childhood to adulthood.

Finally, they learned to cherish their friends, because they had fewer chances to make friends than they had in school. Most homeschooling children had difficulties in overcoming feelings of isolation and marginalization especially in the early period of homeschooling. Gichol,

Ms. Kim's nineteen year old boy, said to me, "After quitting school, I realized how selfish I had been. I hated others' comments about me and wanted others to understand me and do everything for me. Now, I came to know how to understand and be receptive to others." Because he worked part-time as a waiter or in a small factory for a while, he learned how to be on good terms with people of various ages, occupations, personalities, and social statuses.

These narratives represent their changed perspectives, which were, indeed, what most homeschoolers wanted to achieve from the beginning: diverse thinking, self-directed learning, self-reliance, and active social relationships. They thought that it was in "leisure" or free time that these goals were achieved. Ms. Um said, "Once they don't have to fulfill endless demands from school, and have a lot of time, they can see all things from a distance." Also, Gijun said, "When I was in school, I was so busy that I did not have time to think about anything but preparing for tests." Leaving school seemed to have given some physical and mental space for homeschoolers to reflect on themselves and their lives.

Formal schooling: friends, competition, and credential

Despite these positive experiences of homeschooling, why did the urban homeschooling children want to go back to the public school system? In response to my question, Semyong gave the following answer:

I have wanted to get back to school since returning from New Zealand. Unexpectedly, I came to think that there are many things I can get only at school. I can play with friends.... I'd like to make friends, play with friends, and go on a graduation trip with them. Of course, after I finish the sixth grade and get a diploma, I'd like to go to New Zealand. Though they said I don't need a diploma, I think having a diploma is better than not. Of course, I think having been in New Zealand is good for me, but now I may lack knowledge in specialized subjects like social studies and natural sciences. I'd like to compete with peers.... At school, there is competition. It is natural that people want to be superior to others. So going back to school would be better (Quoted from Semyong's interview data in April, 2002).

Most homeschooling children who were eager to go back to school gave a response similar to the one above. The themes of their narratives could be summarized in three words: friends, competition for excellence, and credentials. In spite of their general contentment with homeschooling, the children realized after a few years of homeschooling that they had difficulties overcoming these problems.

More than anything else, for homeschooling children school was a valuable place for peer group formation. For many homeschooling children, "Not going to school means not having friends," as Semyong put it. They said that many people were prejudiced against adolescents who do not go to school, whether they left voluntarily or not. "My close friend who had been friends in school has been reluctant to meet me since I left school. I have wondered why. One day on the phone I, by chance, overheard his parents telling him not to meet with me," said Gijun. Also, the homeschooling children often encountered problems with other friends as they tried to make friends. "I do want to make close relationships with peers. But while homeschooling I had difficulty making one with a friend because I lacked chances to know her inner personality," said Gijun. Though older children like Gichol and Hyejung did not have many problems making friends, most of younger children did not make long-lasting friendships.

Most, if not all, urban homeschooling children I interviewed had a desire to be superior to others. As their desires were difficult to realize outside of school, they wanted to get back to the assured course to success that they found in school. Semyong came to yearn to attend a prestigious university in the U.S. such as Harvard after returning from New Zealand. She thought that competing with other classmates would be a more efficient means for her to excel in subject matters that the school's curriculum provided. They wanted to know where they ranked academically. Also Gijun, who was not as good at studying as Semyong, said, "Why not me? Success can come not only by studying, but by doing something like being a chef or a computer programmer if only one has graduated from a college or university. Anyway, what matters is that one has to be the best or the first class in one's field." However, his elder brother Gichol had been learning electric guitar since 1999 but did not improve as rapidly as he had expected. He came to feel nervous about the situation, saying "I have done nothing while others have been preparing for the entrance exam." At last he decided to give up the guitar and prepare for the entrance examination like his friends.

Finally, most of the urban homeschooling children came to think that it was easier to get credentials by going to school rather than by taking *Geomjeonggo-si* (a qualification examination similar to the American GED equivalent). They needed credentials so that they might enter a college or university and not be discriminated against. In order to get a part-time job, Gichol once told a lie to a manager. He said, "I told a lie that I had the equivalent of a high school diploma, because many people think that the boys without it cannot behave themselves and act like gangsters." Besides, due to a long examination-free period, most urban homeschooling children were afraid of being tested and assessed in situations to which there were not

accustomed. For *Geomjeonggo-si*, they had to study the textbooks and reference books relevant to the standardized curriculum by themselves regardless of their interests. In this situation, Gijun said, “I think it is easier to go to school. At school, I would only have to listen to the teacher everyday to get a diploma.”

Friends, competition for excellence, and credentials seemed to be what schooling meant to the urban homeschooling children and what they expected of the school system. Indeed, they grasped the social meaning of schooling even at their young age from the prejudice and discrimination that they suffered from mainstream society as “pioneers.” More succinctly put, “Outside school, it is difficult for children to make close friends,” “if you are not a genius, it is harder to succeed out of school than in school,” and “it is easier to get important credentials in school than to take *Geomjeonggo-si*” are their interpretations of negative experiences that they had during homeschooling. These statements could be called “schoolism” though a different version from the one mentioned in my earlier research above (Seo 2002, pp. 144–148). Ironically, after several years of their adventure, they ended up surrendering to as well as penetrating into the dominant discourse about schooling, “schoolism.”⁷

A profitable adventure for middle-class families

How difficult was it for the children to withstand such a collective “schoolism”? Of course, “schoolism” might be more specific and harsh to the urban homeschooling children than to their parents. What matters, however, is that “schoolism” was already recognized by the homeschooling parents as the dominant discourse to deter homeschooling as mentioned in my earlier research. Despite their recognizing and withstanding “schoolism” in the beginning stages, why did the homeschooling parents respond to their children’s requests by sending or planning to send them back to school? Unlike their earlier determined resolutions to practice homeschooling against “schoolism,” they seemed to let their children surrender to the pressure of “schoolism” without much hesitation. Despite the fact that their children had a hard time resisting a school-centered society, “As my children eagerly want to do so, I can’t help it” is too simple an answer to the question. First, the urban homeschooling children’s changed ways of thinking and studying could have enabled them to withstand “schoolism.” As Semyong says, “Since there is always prejudice in society, I don’t mind.” Additionally, their negative

experiences could have been mediated with a more critical discourse about schooling, such as “deschooling” discourse, as it was four years ago. What is more, their parents could have tried every means possible to find solutions to their children’s problems. Indeed, their homeschooling was launched on their parents’ initiative and their homeschooling practices had always been directed by their parents’ continuous supervision and evaluation.

As, in school, teachers provide a specific institutional and normative discourse that students appropriate to interpret their experience, homeschooling parents are the major agents of particular normative discourses that their children appropriate to understand their experience. Besides, in homeschooling situations, the parents have more authority over their children than teachers do at school. To understand what underlies these middle-class families’ adventures, I needed to understand how and why urban homeschooling parents had appropriated a neo-liberal discourse as well as a deschooling one.

Deschooling without its core

The urban homeschooling parents had a normative discourse concerning education by which they practiced, evaluated, and reflected on their educational activities and those of others. Their discourse must have originated from their lived experience in schooling, tutoring, and parenting. However, the explicit and integrated discourse they appropriated seems to have been found in deschooling discourse recently propagated by magazines and newspapers along with “classroom collapse” discourse. They might not have decided to practice homeschooling without appropriating a deschooling discourse.

In January, 1999, Mindle (“Dandelion”), a publishing company for alternative education, issued its first bimonthly journal. It is a major producer and distributor of deschooling discourse in South Korea. Their main motto is “Education as Standing on One’s Own and Nurturing Each Other” and their specific motto against “schoolism” is “There is a Way of Education Outside of Schooling” or “Education is Different from Schooling” (Hyun 1999, p. 3). Their criticism of the public school system focuses on the deep-seated authoritarianism and relentless competitive atmosphere at schools.

In the beginning, my participants articulated their own experiences and their children’s negative experiences at school from a critical but positive perspective of education similar to deschooling as a concept. Deschooling discourse became the explicit conceptual tool with which they could describe and support their educational activities as well as criticize the public school system. Ms. Um said, “I saw a cartoon in Mindle. In the cartoon, a child threatens a flower in a pot, saying, “You shall die if I don’t water you.” Then,

⁷ “Schoolism” is the term for denoting dominant discourse concerning the meaning and value of schooling in South Korea (Kim, H. D. 2000; Seo 2002, pp. 146–147).

all of a sudden, it begins to rain! After reading it, I realize that it means that the child is a school and the flowers are children. Even without schooling, children can grow!" Also, deschooling discourse gave them a subject position as "pioneers" opposed to the cowards adhering to the old "collapsing" system of "schoolism." In fact, in the beginning no one's family among those urban homeschoolers could avoid the suspicions and criticisms of relatives and neighbors like, "You do want to spoil your children, don't you?" (Seo 2002, pp. 145–146). Many people in South Korea think that the high school or college they graduate from is a key factor in determining whether or not they will develop a social network to help them succeed in mainstream society. In such a situation, Ms. Jang welcomed the subject position of "have-nots." In the first interview, she said, "For the sake of educating our children and of developing our country, it'd be better for 'haves' to be frank with us homeschoolers, rather than to be worried about losing what they have and to dissuade or hush homeschoolers." The parents must have felt like they were not only educational but also social activists. They were "pioneers" of deschooling.

Though Ms. Jang and Ms. Nam decided to begin homeschooling after reading Ms. Um's homeschooling story in a major daily newspaper, at first they depended much upon Mindle as a center of networking for homeschoolers. From 1999 to 2000, all the participants of this study often participated in the Ga-jeonghag-gyo-mo-im (Homeschoolers' Association) supported by Mindle to get information and communicate with other homeschoolers. Ms. Um, Ms. Jang, and Ms. Nam met at the office of Mindle for the first time and agreed to establish a local Ga-jeonghag-gyo-mo-im association in Incheon.

In fact, they formed the association to try to address their children's problems. Without continuous and practical cooperation with other homeschooling families, urban homeschooling children could not make friends with, learn from, and compete with other homeschooling children in a reciprocal and communitarian way. Also, without reflection upon their experience from others' viewpoints, urban homeschooling parents had difficulty making their own way and breaking through the firm wall of "schoolism" in legal and other situations. These were the lessons that they learned during the adventure. As Ms. Nam said, "It was quite hard to outline all things alone, really hard to do it all by myself. However important my awakening is, it means nothing without being shared with others" (Quoted from Ms. Nam's interview data in December, 2002).

In spite of this crucial awareness, they quit meeting together after not more than three months. They have confined their practices to finding individual solutions instead of extending them to the creation of productive social relationships among themselves. Consequently, their

practice failed to solve their children's problems in a way outside of going to public school, and to carry out the paramount objective of deschooling discourse, that is, to create an "autonomous teaching and learning network" (Reimer 1971) and to share invariable awakenings with one another. Their rationale for homeschooling practice might have been "deschooling" in the beginning, but its core aims disappeared from their vision.

Egoistic familism, conservatism, and meritocracy

Why did they quit cooperating with each other? What caused them to fail? Judging from Ms. Nam's above remark, it seems that they knew exactly the reason why they could not realize the core goal of deschooling. Most homeschoolers acknowledged the necessity of constructing a productive social network to an extent that they considered the "social relationship" as "a life force" (Seo 2002, pp. 140–142). Nonetheless, what prevented these homeschoolers from striving to build such communitarian "social relationships"? In the course of searching for an answer to this question, I eventually came upon the so-called middle-class *habitus* of the homeschooling families: egoistic familism, conservatism, and meritocracy.

According to Ms. Nam, each family stuck to its own interests so firmly that they had difficulty finding common ground on which they could stand together. She said, "One of us seems to think that the other members took advantage of her family for their own benefit alone, not for all." They did not trust each other enough to endure the seemingly useless activities for their own children for the sake of communitarian values. After a couple of months of meeting, they came to think that homeschooling alone could be more efficient and comfortable than homeschooling together. Likewise, instead of encouraging her younger son to go to Mindle's office to participate in diverse activities with other homeschoolers, Ms. Kim emphasized his memorizing some English vocabulary everyday and checked it herself.

Besides, they were afraid of their children being marginalized or going astray from the moral, academic, and practical standards of mainstream society. Some of them were more stubborn and conservative than others in holding to the conventional standard. Jaemyong himself censored his behavior related to playing computer games. He often said to me, "If my mom sees me doing this, she doesn't leave me alone." Gichol, the 19 year old boy, sometimes had trouble with his mother because she often prohibited him from doing things that deviated from conservative norms, such as smoking, drinking, or going out with a girlfriend who attended a technical arts high school at which many low-achieving students were enrolled. Also, Ms. Kim demanded that her children score higher than the average score of 90 points in *geomjeonggo-si*, saying

“These points are equal to the grade level in school. We cannot ignore this society entirely. We have to conform ourselves to some norms of this society.”

Most importantly, urban homeschooling parents did not protest against the unlimited competition in society. Rather, most of them wanted to fit in this meritocratic society. In spite of criticizing the useless competition for grades in the school system, they thought more highly of succeeding in the world or being an elite member of society than they did of “nurturing each other.” Saying “the harder our children devote themselves to their favorite things, the better they will be able to succeed over others,” Ms. Jang would have her children watch or listen to television programs about Harvard students or young CEOs. Ms. Kim collected and read her children newspaper reports about successful leaders who managed to make their own way in spite of unfavorable conditions. Also, one of the reasons why Ms. Um let her children quit school was “the school system is an inefficient one and just pulls excellent students downward.”

As a result, despite criticizing the prevalent prejudice against drop-outs, the urban homeschooling children saw themselves as separate from so-called problem youths. Gichol related, “It looks awfully ridiculous to spell ‘hospital’ as ‘hosfital’. So, I don’t say that I have no credentials. I don’t want to be treated like drop-outs.” Also, some of them considered studying the standardized curriculum used in the school systems, as important to their success in life. Semyong says, “I think we have to study. If one doesn’t study, one cannot speak in a proper way in front of others.” They were nervous about taking a test just like ordinary students. As Gijun put it, “These days, about eight months before *geomjeonggo-si*, I feel so nervous that I’m not interested in playing with friends. When talking with them, we always talk about which college we can enter.”

These homeschooling parents and children did not seem to have reflected critically on the dominant middle-class values embedded in their lives, and never broke through their adversity. The parents could not invest enough time, effort, or opportunity cost to help their children overcome their difficulties. Unlike other homeschooling families, these financially pressed middle-class families could not abandon their double sources of income. After a period of six months or so, all the mothers of the four families, the main homeschooling partners of their children, returned to their jobs instead of helping their children learn. They could not leave their economic status as members of the middle-class. Rather, they seemed to have been more thoroughly absorbed in middle-class culture in South Korea. To put it more directly, they might have actually embodied its values in the homeschooling adventure. According to a recent paper (Moon et al. 2000), the middle-class in South Korea has been forming their identity and culture during the last 20–30 years of drastic economic

development. It argues that the Korean middle-class is afraid of falling down from their present standard of living due to the lack of a social security policy which leads to egoistic familism and over-heated credential fervor. Also it reports that due to mass higher education middle-class families put a high value on conservative value in education and westernized ways of thinking, such as individualism and meritocracy. They consider themselves smart and are eager to learn and adopt new and unique ideas. What is more important, it contends that they are courteous to neighbors and complain of social inequality and authoritarianism but pay little attention to productive social activities for their communities. To my surprise, all these middle-class features in South Korea were recognizable in the urban homeschooling parents.

Ironically, by understanding the reason why they failed in homeschooling in terms of the concept of middle-class culture in Korea, I could understand more clearly why they began homeschooling when they did in the year 1999. Although the “classroom collapse” discourse could be seen as a decisive trigger which encouraged these families to embark on their homeschooling adventures, most urban homeschooling parents, from the beginning, emphasized a fluctuating and unstable economic environment which included mass layoffs during the IMF period (1997–2001), unlimited competition in the global economy, and a post-Fordistic change toward knowledge-based industry as important factors in their decisions to begin homeschooling with their children. Indeed, three of the families, which belonged to the lower middle-class, were afflicted by hardships during the IMF period and both the parents worked part-time or full-time, even during the homeschooling period. They often talked about the futility of efforts to gain a competitive advantage in the public school system and the uselessness of the knowledge gained at school in terms of their career experiences. Moreover, although they did not publicly express their intention to teach their children English during the interviews, all of them focused on their children improving their knowledge of and skills in English. From an economic viewpoint, as is seen in the following comments, it is probable that urban homeschoolers were searching for a more efficient way than was available to enhance their children’s future economic prospects.

Ms. Jang: Especially in the 21st century, we can’t survive without changing our thinking style. It’s very dangerous to kill children’s thought. If they can’t think freely, they can’t survive anywhere.... When I sent Sebin to Daejun three years ago, even though she was only 10 years old, I was not worried about her, because she self-managed better than her brother (Quoted from Ms. Jang’s interview data in January, 2000).

Ms. Um: For example, she will have to invest for what she wants to do. When she is older, she will have to get a driver's license and buy her own car. She thinks she has to do something practical. She often thinks of standing on her own (Quoted from Ms. Um's interview data in December, 2002).

Ms. Nam: Jihyun once said to me, 'It depends on me, whether homeschooling, or going to school, or studying abroad.' The moment I heard that, I came to be fairly comfortable. Now I think it makes little difference whether children will go to school or not (Quoted from Ms. Nam's interview data in December, 2002).

As can be inferred from Ms. Nam's remark, they did not let their children go back to school because the school system changed into a desirable one. They let them go back because they thought their children had sufficiently transformed themselves into "self-managed" people to survive in a rapidly changing global economy. Of course, the urban homeschooling children's changed ways of life, such as their diverse thinking, self-directed learning, and self-reliance, could be virtues of deschooling if embodied in communitarian ways. However, they also could be considered as neo-liberal values or mentalities attuned to a post-industrial and globalizing competitive economy if materialized in egoistic, conservative, and meritocratic ways.⁸ Given that *habitus* is a system of dispositions or preferences that generates a system of distinctive features or practices called a lifestyle (Bourdieu 1984, p. 170), there seemed to be little that was unique in the mindsets of these families regardless of their experiences adopting a new life-style such as homeschooling and then abandoning it. In terms of *habitus*, the process of engaging in homeschooling and then returning to school could be considered an embodiment of their middle-class *habitus* at a particular juncture in South Korean history.

Conclusion: return of the prodigal son

In the beginning the urban homeschooling families were "pioneers" judging from their resistance to the predominating "schoolism" based educational model and their search for an unprecedented approach to education. The "schoolism" that they struggled with was the authoritative discourse on "education," based on the deep-seated

authoritarian collectivism in South Korean culture. Also, the "deschooling" discourse with which they criticized "schoolism" was revolutionary in that it focused the public on the fact that the public school system might colonize an otherwise autonomous realm of education, and that parents and their children could fashion their own methods of education. Indeed, what they lost as "pioneers" during the homeschooling period was a blind adhesion to "schoolism." What they won as "pioneers," on the other hand, was not only diversity, self-directed learning, self-reliance, and active relationships, but also "penetration" into another schoolism, or what school means for children, not for parents in this society: friends, competition, and credentials.⁹ Although the parents ended up sending their children back to school, the homeschooling adventure paid off for them.

Their experiences during the launching period of homeschooling should be evaluated in terms of education, which has its own value. In cooperation with other homeschooling parents, the parents relished the joy generated from nurturing one another by sharing awakenings. In their leisure time, their children reflected on what they had done at school and what they should do for true learning and relationships. Both of the parents and the children realized that educational value cannot be given by someone else, but can be relished by participating in educational activities for their own sake. With such awareness, as can be seen in Semyong's and Gichol's case, they could distinguish what they wanted to do for enjoyment in their mind and what they needed to do for success in their socio-economic life. By adopting a "deschooling" discourse, they revived the intrinsic value of education which had been concealed by "schoolism."¹⁰

Seen from the end point of their adventure, however, their earlier resistance to "schoolism" and appropriation of "deschooling" discourse seems to have been encompassed within a neo-liberal discourse, which appealed to many parents with slogans such as diversity, choice, competition, excellence, and efficiency since the education reforms of the government in 1995. In the course of the homeschooling adventure, the "diversity" of the curriculum for relishing intrinsic educational values and the "autonomy" of the realm of education have been displaced with "diversity" of methods from which to choose for achieving excellence and

⁸ To my surprise, Brown (2003), drawing upon Lemke's interpretation of Foucault's neo-liberal rationality, articulates my discussion more elaborately like this, "neo-liberalism normatively constructs and interpolates individuals as entrepreneurs in every sphere of life. It figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for "self-care"—the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions."

⁹ "Penetration," which was coined by Willis (1977, p. 119) is meant to designate "impulses within a cultural form toward the penetration of the conditions of existence of its members and their position within the social whole." Homeschooled children as participants of this study penetrate the cultural conditions and meaning of schooling in South Korea through homeschooling adventures.

¹⁰ As noted by Habermas (1981), education is one of the "autonomous realms of the life world," that needs to be prevented from being colonized by the system or the market and the state.

“autonomy” of individuals to choose among given commodities. As liberal democracy is used as rhetoric for extending and disseminating neo-liberal rationality (Brown 2003), the original meanings of such concepts of a “de-schooling” discourse have been dislodged from the autonomous meaning system of education and replaced by *si-jangnon-li* (market rationale). In a word, “becoming together” as a core attribute of education (Aoki 1990; Jo 2001) was missing from their adventure.¹¹

These findings of my second encounter with urban homeschooling families do not imply that these profitable adventures reflect the experiences of all homeschooling families in South Korea. Most of these families are lower middle-class families that felt threatened during the IMF crisis. Quite a few families continued homeschooling as a way to provide their children with a holistic education despite all the difficulties and costs, and regardless of endangering their social positions as members of the middle-class. Also, I do not argue that the middle-class families that I met were so prescient as to estimate the loss and gain of their homeschooling adventures in advance. They at first consciously and eagerly tried to make a collaborative association with highly uncertain outcomes as most homeschoolers in North America have done. This path may be termed “choice without market” for “intensive parenting” (Aurini and Davies 2005).

However, the middle-class families that felt anxious within their socio-cultural situation failed to “become together” because it was too hard for them to free themselves from the fetters of their middle-class *habitus* and to face challenges that would endanger their established socio-economic status. Nonetheless, for them the children’s changed ways of life which included diverse thinking and “self-management” (self-directed learning, self-reliance, and active social relationships) were attuned to the so-called neo-liberal turn in the economy against the backdrop of the IMF bailout. The adversity that their children encountered might have legitimized their returning to their accustomed and familiar positions and to their becoming more self-disciplined and self-managed members of middle-class society. In this vein, they turned out prodigal sons who have returned to mainstream society with greater competitiveness without succumbing to the pitfall of becoming a minority in a school-centered society. Much like Weis (2004, p. 169) observed elsewhere, class inevitably reemerges, although in a reconfigured and reconstructed form. The families’ *habitus* and appropriation of neoliberal discourse became “limitations” or “blocks and ideological effects that impeded the full development and expression of the impulses toward the

penetration” (Willis 1977, p. 119) into the educational pitfall of appropriating neo-liberalism.

The educational pitfall they might succumb to is that even the realm of education in the family, which is the most influential agent of formative experiences of “being in the world,” may have been colonized by the market rationale. Without state sponsored endeavors to govern the families with market rationale or a neo-liberal mentality, these middle-class homeschoolers embraced neo-liberalism “autonomously” in the course of embodying the middle-class *habitus* through their homeschooling adventures, as if proving that “neo-liberal subjects are controlled through their freedom” (Brown 2003). What is more, some homeschooling families described their choice to homeschool as a short-cut for entering colleges.¹² Whether they return their children to school or not, they might drive their children not to full-blown educational growth in leisure but toward another impoverished routine of calculating costs and effects in the name of parenting.

The difficulties these lower middle-class families were faced with, however, shed some light on the social and cultural structure of South Korean society. In terms of social development, the difficulty in making friends that the children could not overcome originated not solely from their egoistic mindsets but also from a strong collectivistic and exclusive ethos in South Korean society. Also, in terms of economic fluctuation, the anxiety the parents felt so strongly was derived from the lack of a social security system coupled with their desire for economic security. With socio-cultural conditions in favor of their educational adventure, their resolution in the initial stage of homeschooling might not have been so vulnerable. Their adventure of homeschooling and returning to school reveals some of the features of middle-class families *embedded* in the socio-cultural context of South Korean society.¹³

¹² In line with this trend, major newspapers in South Korea, unlike in the initial stages of homeschooling, began to represent homeschooling as an effective and short-cut method to become one of the “elite” (Seo 2006).

¹³ In the wake of the first public hearing on legalizing homeschooling in the National Assembly in August, 2003, in March 2005, an amendment of elementary and secondary education law was passed with new articles stating that *dae-anhag-gyo* (alternative school) is legalized as *gag-jonghag-gyo* (“other schools”) without any guarantee to support the schools financially and to approve the academic careers of graduates from schools in South Korea. Also, a second hearing on the legalization of homeschooling was held in January, 2007, with the enforcement ordinance for establishment and administration of alternative schools announced officially in June, 2007, and the guides for self-regulation of schools passed through in April, 2008. Despite the prevalence of the ostensible autonomy of education and the attenuation of collectivistic “schoolism,” all these steps of the government might not guarantee the right to defend the autonomous realm of education from the system (the market and the state) but “the right only to signify, to consume, and to choose” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, p. 330).

¹¹ In this sentence, “becoming together” means nurturing each other and sharing awakenings with one another.

These findings reveal the ambivalent characteristics of the alternative education movement in South Korea. As some previous research (Boldt 2006; Kim J. S. 2002; Lee 2004) points out, the alternative education movement of middle-class families lingers at the intersection of bifurcated ways of educating competitive elites and communitarian laymen. It is not certain that there is a way to merge these two approaches to educating “communitarian elites” without sacrificing one or the other. Considering the results of this research, it seems certain that any approach at reconciliation must include freeing oneself from the persistent fetters of middle-class *habitus* and taking the risk of becoming a minority in this society. Also, it is certain that the reconciling approach inevitably needs the socio-cultural structure of Korean society to change from its current collectivistic ethos without any collective solution for social security and adopt more diversity with public support for achieving the educational goal of “becoming together.”

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