I was a transfer student.

During the summer of 1977, my parents decided to move in with my grandfather, who had expressed a strong desire to spend the last several years of his life under the same roof with his eldest son and grandchildren. He had even built a new house for this purpose in one of the booming towns near the outskirts of Seoul. I was a fifth grader with a year and a half left till graduation from an elementary school.

I clearly remember the first day that I met my teacher, Miss Kim Myung-Sun. My mom and I were in the backseat of a car that was taking us to my new school. Even before I started attending this new school, my mom had managed to intimidate me with all these horror stories about what would soon become my new school.

“Mimi,” she was starting it again in the car. “You should remember that kids in this school are really, really smart, much smarter than the kids you used to hang around with in your old school.” She kept on going, closely studying the apprehensions on my face that were only getting deeper every minute of the way. “I heard most of them get average scores above 90 points on most of the exams. I know you’ve been a very good student in your old
school... quite honestly though, things might become somewhat different in this new school... I mean, there could be so many kids who are at least as strong as you are academically in this new school.”

To this date, I honestly do not know who or what her sources were for these exorbitant anecdotes. My best guess is that she largely made up the stories on the basis of what little she knew about the school in this new town we were moving to. As any mom, or should I say any “Korean” mom, I bet her motive was pure and simple—to prevent her daughter from letting the guard down and her achievement scores slide. She was successfully turning one transfer student into a scary little rat.

What I also did not know at the time was that this new town was quickly earning a reputation for establishing schools that produced students with excellent academic performance, which was far superior to the average performance of students in other districts in Seoul. The whole town was being developed as part of a strategic expansion plan by the government in response to the saturation problem in downtown Seoul. Families were encouraged to move to this new area and schools with superb academic records worked as powerful baits for Korean parents to consider moving for the sake of their children’s education. I am not sure whether the government provided any reward for so doing but principals of these new schools were working very hard to make sure that their schools made part of this honorable reputation. In fact, the superior achievement level of schools is the primary cause of ever-increasing housing prices in this and neighboring areas even today.

My new teacher had freckles on her face. She looked very young. I do not remember what she said to me or my mom when we first met her. All I remember was that I thought she was really pretty with this long black hair and a shy, yet beautiful, smile. The classmates in my new school did not seem much different from the classmates in my old school, either. A couple of days had passed and I was cruising, despite my mom’s continued warning. “Just wait until you get your first test scores back.”

In the morning of my fourth or fifth day in this new school, the teacher made what to me was a surprising announcement. “We’ll have a math quiz today as I announced to you last week. Please clear up your desks.” No one told me about this math quiz, so I got caught completely off guard. I was relieved when all five problems she put up on the board were what I already learned well in my old school. After we turned in our answer sheets, she made another dreadful announcement. “As I also warned you last week, you’ll be slapped on the palm by the number of problems you missed on this quiz.” What? Oh, my God. I was almost losing my mind.

Surely she won’t slap a transfer student... I’m sure I’ll be spared... I mean, I didn’t even know we were going to have this quiz... I wasn’t here
when they made this stupid agreement. . . . What if I missed any of the problems? What if I missed two?

There were two students who got all five problems right and I was one of them. The teacher, without even a slightest trace of smile remaining on her face, began slapping students on their palms with a plastic ruler, starting from the very first row on the left corner of the classroom. “Kyung-Mi, you missed two problems, so two slaps.” “Hyun-Jung, one problem missed, one slap.” There were more than fifty of us in the classroom and the slapping seemed to last eternity. I remember seeing a vice principal’s face outside the classroom window. I did not know how long he had been standing there. He was looking into our classroom from the hall. I don’t recall if he had entered our classroom or said anything to us.

When our teacher was finished slapping the last student, she collapsed on her chair. Then she began talking to us, “Class, you know we are falling so much behind on our math achievement compared to other classes…” She didn’t finish. She was just sitting there, covering her face with her both hands. There was dead silence in the classroom. Several minutes had passed and we realized our teacher was crying. Some girls started sobbing after her. We were only fifth graders but we understood why she cried. Well, sort of.

That was the first and the last time that I saw my teacher slapping anyone for whatever reason. In fact, she seemed to have fully recovered from the frustration and vulnerability she revealed to us by the very next day. She was back to the gentle, cheerful, and diligent teacher that we knew and stayed that way for the remainder of the school year.

And I continued enjoying my new school. Neither my new teacher nor my new classmates treated me like an outsider. They were all very warm and instantly accepting of the transfer student. I did not clearly realize it then but it had a lot to do with how the teacher treated and positioned the new student in her classroom. My new teacher called upon two girls, whose homes were close to mine and whose names and faces I still remember, to help me adjust to the new surroundings as quickly as possible. I started coming back home with them after school, chatting with them and asking questions about the new school, teachers, and friends. They showed me around the neighborhood as we walked along together.

My teacher regularly checked how I was doing and always tried to find ways to make my transition to the new environment easier and less anxious. I remember seeing her talking to another female teacher in the hallway one day. When I made a bow to her (as any Korean student is expected to do when they see a teacher), she stopped talking to her friend teacher and turned to me again with this big smile that became her trademark in my mind. “Good morning, Mimi. Oh, Ms. so and so, this is Bong Mimi. She is a new student in my class. Mimi is such a terrific writer.” She started telling her friend teacher about the poem and the paper flower that I gave her on
her birthday. She told her friend teacher that the poem was so good and touching that she could not believe it was written by only a fifth grader. I was totally embarrassed because I did not expect that the teacher would introduce me to her friend, who was an adult and, on top of it, another “teacher.” It must have been very pleasant embarrassment, nonetheless, because this “terrific” poem writer was standing there feeling proud.

I soon felt as if I had been attending that school for a long time. I did not miss my old school or my old friends any more. I liked my new teacher a lot and she liked me back. I did not think she liked me any more than she did my friends but I knew she liked me a lot and that was all that mattered. All the kids in my class liked her and she liked every kid in her class. She had a way of making us feel that we were very special. She did not try to bombard us with absent-minded compliments. Rather, she showed us deep and sincere appreciation for the small things we did.

I became liking her so much as did my mom, who even tried to arrange a blind date for her, which was more like a marriage meeting, with my uncle. She gracefully declined, citing she was waiting for her fiancé to finish the three-year military service mandatory for all Korean men. She got married to him the next year and all my friends, my mom, and I attended her wedding. None of the weddings that I have attended in my life so far had so many children guests.

**EPISODE 2**

I was a transfer student again.

It was the summer of 1981. That spring, my dad ran for a seat in the National Assembly and won it. My brothers and I had to transfer to schools that were located in one of his electoral constituencies. We moved to an apartment that was only two minutes away from the school that I was going to attend, the *Yongsan Girls’ Middle School*. Our house was on the seventh floor and I could see the school yard from the window of my room.

I clearly remember the first day that I met my teacher, Mrs.….? Funny, I vividly remember her face but can’t remember her name. It wasn’t one of those common last names like *Kim, Lee, Choi, or Park…* or was it? Anyhow, it was a couple of days before the school resumed from its summer break and my mom told me we needed to go see my new teacher. Because it was hot and the school was so close from where we lived, my mom and I didn’t feel like we needed to dress up. We took a short stroll down the street to my new school in one summer afternoon.

It was around 4 o’clock in the afternoon and the main administrative office was busy with teachers getting ready to leave after the day’s work. No one really paid any attention to us, so my mom told one female teacher that
I was a transfer student to the 3rd Year (equivalent to U.S. 9th grade). She said, “3rd Year? Oh, then you belong to Homeroom Class 4. The teacher is in the classroom now for an end-of-day assembly but will be here shortly.” My new teacher did come down to the office shortly and was told that we had been waiting for her. She approached us with what I thought was a very tiring and annoyed look on her face.

“So you are the transfer student?” She turned her head away from me and began talking to my mom. “Well, you know, the class is already full with (how many) students. I really can’t accommodate any more students but one of the students in my class recently transferred to another school, so they assigned the new student to my class . . .” She paused and glanced at us up and down for several seconds. She continued, “I hope she won’t be causing any trouble . . . How is she in terms of school achievement? The student who transferred out of my class had good grades . . . Oh well, that’s alright as long as she doesn’t cause any trouble.” Trouble? I was sure that she had not even looked at my school records. She showed us where the classroom was and that was it. We didn’t get to say much. The teacher didn’t ask us whether we had any question before she said good-bye.

I remember feeling humiliated and insulted at the same time. I checked on my mom. She did not say a word but I bet she felt the same way. We didn’t talk about my new school or my new teacher on our way back home. Actually, I don’t think we talked at all. After all, it was only a two-minute walk.

Weirdest things began to happen one after another, starting the very next day. My new teacher called me to the teachers’ lounge first thing in the morning. She had an awkward smile on her face. “Mimi,” she called my name. “I am afraid I was not courteous enough to your mom yesterday . . . I mean, how humble your mom was!” She laughed a little from time to time as she spoke. “I must say that I truly respect her modesty . . . I bet you must be very proud to have such unassuming parents!” I was confused by the sudden change in the tone of her voice because nothing really changed since we met yesterday, approximately eighteen hours ago.

Several days had passed, and I became friends with three girls who were sitting in front and back of me. One day, one of the girls suddenly asked me a strangest question none of my friends had ever asked me before. “Mimi, so tell me. Where do you live, Dongbu Echon-dong or Seobu Echon-dong?” What? What was Dongbu Echon-dong and what was Seobu Echon-dong? I was clueless. My address said I lived in Echon 1-dong. It didn’t say anything about Dongbu (Eastern) or Seobu (Western). “OK, then just tell us where you live exactly.” “Me? I live right there—that apartment you see right there.” A sneer flitted across her face. “So you are a rich kid. Why have you played with us? Were you trying to pull our legs?” They stopped playing with me that instant and never played with me again. In fact, they stopped talking to me altogether.
One girl wanted to remain friends with me but the other girls wouldn’t let her. It was an extremely difficult situation for me because I had not made other friends yet and we were still sitting in front and back of each other.

It was weird. Several more days had passed and students from other homeroom classes started visiting ours during the break. They pointed a finger at me from the door. “That is the girl. That is the daughter of Bong Du-Wan.” Bong Du-Wan was the name of my father. During each break, a different bunch would come swarming about at our classroom door. I felt like a monkey in a zoo. Then a group of students approached me. “Mimi, we would like to have you in our group. Will you join us?” There were about six of them in that group. One of them lived in the same apartment as I did. I was glad to have friends again.

My new homeroom teacher taught music classes. Music was one my strong subjects, along with English. In one of the first music classes since I transferred, the teacher posed several questions about scales and notes. I raised my hand to answer them and got them right, not knowing that would mark the very beginning of a completely new schooling experience for me.

Suddenly rumors started to spread. The stories were about how my homeroom teacher showed favoritism toward me and how I chose who to make friends with on the basis of family wealth and school grades. “Did you know the first thing she said after she came to our school was, ‘Who is the top performer in this class? I only make friends with best students.’ How obnoxious!” “She boasted she always gets perfect scores on English exams.” Those were just two rumors that a girl in my class told me she had heard. I was speechless. I even heard some of the students in my class confronted the teacher, accusing her of preferential treatment. Through these rumors and gossips, I learned that the six students in the group, with who I had newly made friends, were those who other students believed the teacher strongly favored. Apparently, my name was now on top of that list. Other students resented that all the girls in this cliquish group, including this transfer student who happened to be the daughter of an influential figure, were from well-to-do families, achieving well academically, and favored by most teachers in their school.

My homeroom teacher called me again to the teacher’s lounge. I was so glad and relieved. She must have heard what was going on. I wanted to tell her how difficult it had been for me for the past couple of days and how pent-up I was feeling with all these baseless accusations. My teacher asked me. “Do you know there is this rumor among the students that I favor you, giving you all the special treatments?” She didn’t call me by my name. She continued. “You know, I didn’t have this problem before you came to my class. Unless you are spreading these rumors yourself, I cannot understand why all these rumors are suddenly rampant. The whole thing really puts me...
in an awkward position. Why did you want to create an impression that I favored you? Give me one good reason why I should favor you."

I didn’t want to go to school. The school started at 8:30 am and I wouldn’t start heading for school before 8:20 am. I cried every morning. In Korean middle and high schools, it is the teachers who go to different classrooms in each class period, while the students stay in the same classroom. Tears started to pour right after I sat in my classroom and would not stop until the second or third class period. I sobbed helplessly in my seat. All the subject matter teachers who taught our class in the morning saw this transfer student sobbing helplessly in her seat. None of them said anything to me. They all pretended that they didn’t see me. I guess they felt there was nothing much they could to. Besides, I wasn’t one of their homeroom students. The crying lasted a little over a month. Meanwhile, my school performance hit rock bottom. My homeroom teacher didn’t try to help me. I think if anything, she tried to distance herself from me.

I graduated from that middle school after one semester and went on to high school. It was the only graduation ceremony in my family history that none of us, including the graduating student, attended.

**CARING, COMMITMENT, AND COLLECTIVE EFFICACY**

If someone asks me to name just one thing that most clearly distinguishes the two teachers in my mind, I can say without hesitation it is “caring.” Caring for students was what Miss Kim Myung-Sun had and showed to her students. She might not have been the best teacher in terms of teaching skills or classroom management but she cared for students. It was not merely one or two special events that made me feel that she cared. Rather, it was how instantly I felt safe after the transfer, how quickly I developed a sense of belonging to my new school, and how happy I continued to be in this new learning environment. Miss Kim Myung-Sun took me in under her wings as she did all the children in her class and this made other children to be more accepting of me.

The two major transitions I experienced during my school days, one in elementary school and the other in middle school, initially put me in a similar psychological state. I was feeling nervous, anxious, and somewhat excited at the same time. However, I was a completely different student several weeks after the transition, a happy and confident child in one setting and a miserable and helpless one in the other. Here are a few quotes Bandura (1997) offers:

Socioeducational transitions involving new teachers, regrouping of classmates, and different school structures confront students with adaptational pressures
that inevitably shake their sense of efficacy. These adaptational problems are likely exacerbated if the teachers to whom the students are entrusted doubt they can achieve much success with them. (p. 242)

It is funny how I should recollect the slapping incident, which happened only once, over all the pleasant memories I had when I was asked to share a story about my most memorable teacher, Miss Kim Myung-Sun. It is even funnier how that incident is ingrained in my memory as undeniable evidence of her caring and compassion and not her neglect or abusiveness. I am not saying that I believe Miss Kim Myung-Sun resorted to slapping purely out of love. It was more likely out of frustration that her class was lagging behind in math achievement and she did not know what to do to make her students study harder for it. Perhaps she took a wrong advice from more experienced colleagues around her or simply emulated what was then part of common practice in Korean classrooms. Although it is my personal belief that no circumstance could justify teachers for exercising corporal punishment to children, my friends and I were able to feel our otherwise caring teacher’s agony in her tears.

Teachers who genuinely care about their students do not show favoritism. Every student is as dear to them as every other student in her or his own special way. Students in the classrooms of caring teachers are protected from the harms of an outside world by forming a caring community of their own. I find it intriguing that it is not the corporal punishment per se that leaves a scar in children’s minds. It is the simplest utterance without heart, fleeting sneer, or cold facial expression of a teacher that could leave everlasting scars in students’ minds.

I had often wondered why the teachers in the Yongsan Girls’ Middle School did not try to help me. I could not comprehend that teachers would do nothing to help a transfer student who was sobbing for hours every morning in class. Wouldn’t they have wanted at least to find out what was going on? After having moved back from South Carolina to Seoul in 2003, I called one of my high school teachers to say hello and let her know that I was back in Seoul. She happened to tell me that she was now teaching at this relatively new coed middle school, whose predecessor was none but the Yongsan Girls’ Middle School. So I had to tell her, “Did you know that I’m a graduate of the old Yongsan Girls’ Middle School? Boy, I had such a difficult time while attending that school…. The school had a terrible culture with students forming factions on the basis of achievement scores or family backgrounds and teachers doing absolutely nothing about the situation… but that was twenty-some years ago. It must be different now, being a new school, coed and all.”
Her answer really surprised me. “So it was already like that then, when you were attending this school? How amazing. What you just described is exactly the way it is now in this school. I guess nothing changed.”

Like most K–12 schools in Korea, the Yongsan Girls’ Middle School was then and still is a public school, which means students are designated to the school from nearby areas. The problem is, a majority of the feeder areas for this particular school are relatively underprivileged, whereas few of them are known to be highly affluent. Two of the neighborhoods with the same block name, Echon-dong, are divided by a main road with its well-to-do East and its far less prosperous West. The economic difference has narrowed significantly in recent years due to major development efforts but it has been creating tension among the residents and a source of friction even among the students in this school. What is worse, public school teachers rotate schools within their provincial system every five years and many teachers simply opt to wait out the five-year term, turning a blind eye to problems they see in their “temporary” workplace.

“The teachers here have absolutely no commitment. They don’t care about the students or the school. They don’t try to fix anything. Most of them just wait until their “five-years” is over. Mimi, this school has the worst culture that I have seen so far.”

Teachers in this school tend to see clear differences in students’ achievement scores by the districts the students live in. Because only a small fraction of the students come from affluent neighborhoods, the superior achievement levels of some of these students are more easily discernible. Probably for this reason, some teachers show unmistakable favoritism for so-called “rich” kids. When students perform poorly, the same teachers are too quick to blame the students’ unsupportive family background. Not only these teachers lack caring for students and commitment to teaching, they also appear to suffer from lack of collective efficacy. Below are some more quotes from Bandura (1997):

Teachers who view intelligence as an acquirable attribute and believe they can attain academic successes despite students’ disadvantaged backgrounds promote a collective sense of efficacy, whereas teachers who believe that intelligence is an inherent aptitude and there is little they can do to overcome the negative influence of adverse social conditions are likely to undermine one another’s sense of efficacy. (p. 248)

Clearly, what the teachers at the Yongsan Girls’ Middle School exhibited was, and according to my former high school teacher still is, a defeatist attitude. The way they showed favoritism toward certain groups of students resulted from their belief that students’ family background and other innate factors that often come with it largely determine how and how well students would perform in school, academically or otherwise. It partly explains the cold
and indifferent initial reactions of my new teacher toward me and my mom when we first met her. She must have performed an instant assessment of my background, solely on the basis of how my mom and I were dressed that hot and humid summer afternoon, and decided that I could not possibly belong to the category of the select few who she favored. Here is Bandura (1997) again:

Staff’s collective sense of efficacy that they can promote high levels of academic progress contributes significantly to their schools’ level of academic achievement. Indeed, perceived collective efficacy contributes independently to differences in school achievement levels after controlling for the effects of the characteristics of student bodies, teachers’ characteristics, and prior school level achievement. With staff who firmly believe that, by their determined efforts, students are motivatable and teachable whatever their background, schools heavily populated with poor and minority students achieve at the highest percentile ranks based on national norms of language and mathematical competencies. (pp. 250–251)

Students can successfully overcome any adaptational or achievement pressure and perform well when their teachers let them know that they care about them, trust that they can achieve success, and will help them achieve and adapt well in the new learning environment. I sometimes hear from Korean teachers that no matter how hard they try, it is the family background that ultimately makes the needed difference in the end. Teachers often underestimate the power they can exert on their students and nowhere else is this more evident than this type of comments.

It is an interesting coincidence that both of my transfers occurred near my graduation from the particular school level. Korea maintains a 6–3–3 school system with six years in elementary and three years each in middle and high school levels, respectively. I spent the last one and a half years of my elementary school years and the very last semester of my middle school years in a new learning environment. Teachers and parents alike tend to believe that students’ achievement levels fluctuate less as they move to higher grades within the given school level. Whereas this is true in many cases, it is also true that a single, dedicated teacher still brings about remarkable changes in schools, classes, and individual students with achievement records and cultures that seemed to have become bolted. Just like how my school performance soared right after I transferred to Miss Kim Myung-Sun’s class and how it plummeted so dramatically within such a short period of time after I joined the Yongsan Girls’ Middle School.

Teachers who act as agents of positive changes share several notable characteristics. They genuinely care about their students’ overall wellbeing. They are committed not only to help their students achieve better but also to make them feel safe and happy when they are in and outside school.
They are firm believers in their capabilities as an individual teacher and as a member of their team to bring about desired changes in their students. These caring and committed teachers with strong personal and collective convictions do make undeniable and constructive marks in their students’ lives that often last a lifetime.

Several weeks after Miss Kim Myung-Sun slapped us on the palm by the number of problems we missed on the math quiz, the school administered its regular end-of-month examinations. I do not recall exactly how well our class performed on this school-wide exam. I do remember, however, that our teacher was quite pleased with our overall achievement and we, as a class, felt very proud of ourselves. We were proud that we performed well academically but we were more proud that we made our teacher happy. Because, you know, the last thing we wanted to do was to make our teacher cry again.

REFERENCE
