

Education fever and Academic Stress in South Korea

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Introduction

While South Korea is well-known for its education system and academic achievement, there are a lot of reports of student suicide and depression. Koreans' zeal for education, which is often dubbed "Education Fever", has been reinforced by a widely-held belief that education is a ticket to socio-economic success, and education fever is a significant factor leading to academic stress of Korean students. Intensive private education and credentialism sustain education fever. Korean government implemented different policies that aim to reduce Korean adolescents' academic stress.

Key Findings

- Korea had a deep-rooted tradition in which education and academic achievement are seen as the best ways for gaining social and economic privileges.
- Koreans' education fever has its origin in Confucianism, which was transmitted from China more than fifteen centuries ago.
- Since 2007, the leading cause of death among Korean youth is suicide, with academic stress described as the most common explanation for suicidal attempts.
- Korean parents are deeply involved in children's education, and the majority of Korean students participate in private education.
- Korean value educational credentials and thus students study hard to pursue better academic qualifications.
- Education Fever trigger academic stress, governmental policies have been implemented to alleviate students' stress.

Causes of Education Fever

Korean parents are highly engaged in the academic pursuits of their children
E.g. choose hagwons, collect education-related information, move to communities with easy access to quality education

Korean parents believe hagwons can improve academic outcomes for children
→ invest heavily in the academic achievement of their children
E.g. they spend between 15% -30% of their family budget on private education

The majority of secondary students participate in private education and Korea's total expenditure for private tutoring is extremely high.

Credentialism generates never-ending competition among Koreans. Koreans stress elitism in the basis of academic fractionalism, many believed that the level of a university affect the chances of having better labour outcomes. Korean teens either compete for prestigious universities or pursue higher education to occupy advantageous positions in growing fierce competition.

Results

Adolescence = a period of intense emotional upheaval
→ teenagers are particularly at risk of psychological disorders

Heavy academic workload + competitive learning environment + education-oriented society + parents' aspiration =

Physical, mental, and psychological exhaustion
E.g. anxiety, bipolar disorder, depression

→ feeling incompetent
→ low sense of achievement
→ less enthusiastic about their studies
→ helplessness or cynical attitude toward schoolwork
→ lose self-confidence
→ low self-esteem
→ Suicide ideation, suicidal attempts, commit suicides

For the sake of alleviating youngsters' academic stress and breaking education fever, the Korean government launched various policies.

In 2013, the government introduced a test-free semesters programme. During the free semester, students participate in various non-academic activities.

In 2008, Admissions Officer System was initiated. The weight of CSAT score as a screening criteria in the admission process has been cut down, and greater weight is given to other criteria, such as recommendations, essays and extra-curricular activities, as well as school grades.

Conclusions

Koreans believe that education allows one to live a better life without losing in the hypercompetitive society. Quality education provides youngsters with more opportunities to obtain high-pay jobs and improve social status, it also enables them to take priority over others in the marriage markets in the meantime.

Education fever is a deep-seated problem in the Korean society. The "educational arms race" is out of control. Korean parents make substantial investments in private education to enhance their children's academic achievement. For the sake of increasing the chance of achieving socio-economic success in the competitive society, students also pursue higher education attainment like bachelor, doctoral and master degrees. Koreans' overemphasis on academic achievement undoubtedly lead to heavy academic burden among students.

A large number of Korean adolescents are suffering from academic burnout symptoms and some of them even have suicidal ideation and suicide attempts.

Korean government carried out many programmes that aim at relieving students' academic stress, for example, the Free-semester Program and Admissions Officer System, but their effectiveness are doubted because both of them have certain limitations and drawbacks.

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