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FEATURE

Suicide Mortality Among Students in South Korea: An Extended Discussion

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Abstract. South Korea, a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, has experienced unprecedented growth within the last 60 years. Commentators frequently attribute the nation's success to its system of education. Though education has indeed contributed much to the advancement of the nation, its hypercompetitive nature has led to an exponential increase in suicide among school age individuals, ages 9-24. This paper extends discussion from a previous work examining the rise in rate of suicide in South Korea from 1985 to the present time, factors that have contributed to this occurrence, and possible solutions to this societal problem.

Keywords: South Korea, education, students, suicide, CSAT, society, competition.

Introduction

South Korea, officially the Republic of Korea, is an East Asian member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that has experienced unprecedented economic and technological growth. Within the last half-century, the nation has transformed from being an agrarian society on the brink of collapse to an economic powerhouse that is a world leader in business, shipping, technology, healthcare, and manufacturing. Though ranking 109th in landmass among the world's 257 territories (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.), South Korea has the 13th largest economy in the world (World Bank, 2014). Such an achievement finds attribution in the South Korean government's putting into place a system of education geared towards targeting national needs in the wake of the South Korean War.

South Korea is often lauded as an educational miracle (Sistek, 2013). Within the span of a single lifetime, the nation progressed from one where less than 5% of its populace received a high school education to its current state of having 97% of all school-age individuals graduate from high school. Of these graduates, approximately 80% continue on to university, resulting in 64% of those ages 25-34 holding university degrees (ICEF Monitor, 2014). Such feats have not been without effect, as (a) the per capita gross national product soared more than 12-fold from $87 in 1962 to $16,413 in 2005 (Suh, 2007), and (b) nation's students top international charts in literacy, science, and math (Beyond Hallyu, 2013; Chung, 2009; Education, 2012; The Economist, 2014). On the surface, it would appear as if the nation is a model of the transformative nature of education; yet, such changes have come at a price.

The advances made through education have transformed South Korea into a hypercompetitive society. The drive to be the best, smartest, richest, prettiest, and most skilled has produced a situation that is akin to a socioeconomic pressure pot. As a result, the Land of Morning Calm has assumed the status of being one of the developed world's most violent (Myung et al., 2015); yet, what is paradoxical is the acts committed are not directed at others, but rather against one's self.

South Korea has one of the highest rates of suicide among the developed world (Kim & Park, 2014; Kwon, Chun, & Cho, 2009). A recent OECD (2014) health report provides comparative statistics across member nations, the findings of which reveal South Korea as having a suicide rate of 33.3 deaths per 100,000 people in the 2011 calendar year—more than double the 12.4 OECD member average (see Figure 1 for a graphic comparison). Kim (2014), author of *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself,* adds perspective to this statistic, stating that in 2012 alone, "14,160 people committed suicide . . . , an average of 39 people per day, [which is] a 219 percent increase from the 6,444 suicides in 2000" (para. 2). As shown in Table 1, viewing suicide rates over a period of time reveals a numerical trend that is rising exponentially among the people of South Korea. Lest we restrict the viewing of such information to mere statistics and quantitative data, it is essential we ever keep in mind that behind these numbers are the lives of real people.

Suicide Rates and Statistics

Suicide, the conscious and intentional taking of one's own life (Suicide, n.d.), is in itself nothing new; however, the rate at which it occurs among South Koreans is. The findings presented in the Ministry of Gender and Family Equality's (2015) "청소년 통계" (lit. Adolescent Statistics) report identifies suicide as the leading cause of death among individuals, ages 9-24 in the 2013 calendar year; whereas a decade before it was traffic related accidents. The findings from Lim, Ha, and Song's (2014) 30-year study also reveal that, while

the 10 leading causes of death have decreased by more than 50%, suicide mortality has increased among South Korean men and women by 122.0% and 217.4%, respectively. The findings also reveal the "suicide mortality now surpasses the death rates from diabetes, pneumonia, and liver disease" (Lim et al., 2014, para. 17). Hence, as seen in Table 2, suicide is not limited by age but has become an increasingly widespread trend within this society.

The rapidity at which South Korea's suicide mortality rate has risen to 33.3 per 100,000 people (OECD, 2014) within the last 3 decades suggests the following: The intentional killing of oneself is not so much an individual problem as it is a societal issue that directly impacts individual lives. If this were localized to the individual, the linear trend seen in Figure 2 among South Koreans would be a horizontal line comparable to other OECD nations; yet, this is not the case. What Figure 2 reveals is a positive linear trend that has persistently increased after 1991.

Focus. The information that follows explores the complexity of suicide among students in South Korea. The thesis presented is this: Though advancing the nation's rapid development, the emphasis placed upon achievement has given rise to a hypercompetitive system of education that values entrance into one of three premier universities as the primary determinant of success. For students who fail to reach this ideal in South Korea's face-saving society, suicide often becomes a viable and alluring option.

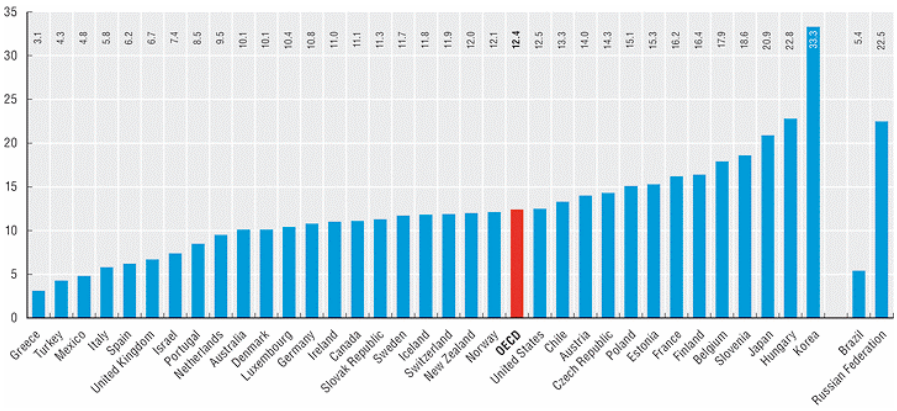

Figure 1. Suicide mortality rate by nation. Obtained from OECD (2014).

Table 1

1985-2009 South Korean Suicide Rates (per 100,000)

Year	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2009
Total	9.1	7.4	10.6	13.6	24.7	31.0
Male	13.3	13.3	14.5	18.8	33.0	39.9
Female	4.9	4.9	6.7	8.3	16.5	22.1

Note. Adapted from World Health Organization (n.d.)

Table 2

Number of Suicides in 2009 by Age and Gender

Age (years)	5-14	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	64-74	75+	Total
Male	39	549	1260	1778	2270	1527	1498	1006	9936
Female	42	460	1122	990	790	505	647	920	5477
Total	81	1009	2382	2768	3060	2032	2145	1926	15413

Note. Adapted from World Health Organization (n.d.)

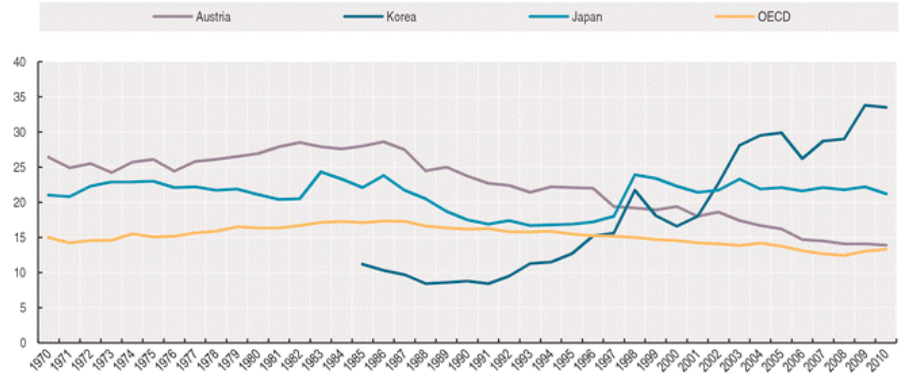

Figure 2. Adapted from OECD (2013).

The Hidden Price of Education

South Korea's education system has long been hailed for its integral role in furthering advancement and modernization. It has been said, "Without its education *obsession*, South Korea would not have transformed into the economic powerhouse it is today" (Ripley, 2011, para. 9, emphasis mine). Lest one perceive the aforementioned statement as being entirely complementary, considering the italicized term may refocus such thought.

By definition, an *obsession* refers to any preoccupation with an idea, image, or desire that dominates one's thoughts, feelings, or actions (Obsession, 2014). Reflecting on the phrase *education obsession* leads to the asking of the following: Could it be possible that the desire for education among South Koreans has reached the point of being an unhealthy obsession? Could *education* be the factor leading the nation's children to take their own lives?

Educational Investments

In many Western schools, a significant portion of the year is spent preparing students for the test; in South Korean schools, a significant portion of students' lives are spent preparing for one test: The national College Scholastic Aptitude Test (CSAT). Although it is said that decisions impacting the direction of students' lives and "educational opportunities should not be made on the basis of test scores" (Nelson, Palonsky, & McCarthy, 2012, p. 206), the CSAT continues to be the primary determinant of career options, the universities students gain access to, and by extension, what their future status and salary will likely be (Williamson, 2011). This test, lasting 8 hours, essentially makes or breaks futures by associating students with a score believed to be reflective of all their years of study in public schools, private learning institutes called *hagwons*, cram schools, and with online/at home tutors.

Preparation for the CSAT begins years before students' first day in primary school. As early as kindergarten, children ages 2-5 begin learning basic math, reading, writing, social studies, and English (see ECLC International Kindergarten, 2014; Seoul Foreign School, n.d.; Ministry of Education, 2007). The primary motivator is to gain the edge on the competition.

In South Korea's competitive knowledge economy, the qualifications possessed are critical in determining the opportunities one has for advancement. Among school-aged individuals, such *qualifications* find expression through grades and test scores. Thus, in addition to regular schooling, students often enroll in supplemental programs at private institutes in hopes of improving their educational credential (Yi, 2013). This has resulted in the nation having a student populace of which approximately 70% attend afterschool programs (Bray & Lykins, 2012; Chakrabarti, 2013; Levin, 2013; Ripley, 2011). While the time

spent at private institutes varies between individuals, it generally increases among students during the middle and high school years.

On any given day, middle and high school students spend a significant portion of their time in schools, private institutes, and learning-related facilities (e.g. libraries and study cubicles). The desire to excel above one's peers is so strong that it is not uncommon for high school students, in preparation for the CSAT, to study up to 14 hours a day (Beyond Hallyu, 2013; Janda, 2013; Williamson, 2011). Surprisingly, this practice is not discouraged but encouraged by parents and society in general. The expectations placed upon students are indeed hard to shoulder, as they entail not only living up to one's own aspirations, but to his or her parents' as well.

The reality South Korean students' face is one of intense pressure. Glimpses of this are seen in a common joke among high school students preparing for the CSAT: Sleep 3 hours a night and you may get into a top university; sleep 4 hours and you may have to settle for a public university; sleep 5 or more and you can forget about getting into any university. In a sense, every joke has a degree of truth which, when applied to the context of this report, then suggests the high school years are intended primarily for rigorous study in preparation for the test that ultimately influences the direction of every student's future. However, it is imperative that we not misconceive this society as being averse to activities such as socialization or children developing their talents; however, in line with Confucian thought, students' primary focus should center upon their studies.

The CSAT is essentially used to validate the degree to which learning has taken place throughout an individual's student career. This test is so important to students' lives that on the day it is offered, traffic is diverted away from exam centers, airline flights are delayed, employees receive the morning off, and police cars and ambulances are deployed to help students who are at risk of being late for the exam. Ultimately, this test serves as an appraiser that determines the price tag of each student's cognitive worth to prospective academic and occupational circles.

The Dream

The amalgamation of the years of study, hard work, and sacrifice stems from the dream of being accepted into one of the nation's three prestigious schools: Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University (aptly termed SKY). Day after day, month after month, and year after year, students spend countless hours at learning institutes not because their schooling is insufficient, but as a response to the intense pressure to be the best. Each year, over 700,000 students compete for spots at one of the three elite universities (Lee, 2013), which in total accepts less than 20,000 incoming freshman. For the select few, admission into any of the SKY universities almost guarantees a secure future. Sadly, for the

remaining 680,000 test takers, the dream cherished from youth must come to an abrupt end.

The Sad Truth

Recently, the National Youth Policy Institute in South Korea found that 1 in 4 students considered committing suicide in 2012 (Sistek, 2013). The following year, the Korea Health Promotion Foundation (2014) published findings from a study of 1,000 respondents, ages 14-19, that revealed 51.6% have had suicidal thoughts—note: the study also found 29.1% of the respondents have experienced severe depression at some time. More recently, in a nationwide survey of South Koreans ages 13-24, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (2015) discovered that (a) 61.4% are generally stressed and (b) 54.4% are specifically stressed with their academic life. Considering that students' stress level is key, founder of a non-profit suicide prevention agency Kevin Caruso (n.d.) affirms, "too much stress can cause or exacerbate suicidal feelings[,]" eventually leading to positive ideation (para. 2).

The beliefs and attitudes a person holds influence decision, and decision ultimately dictates subsequent action (see Figure 3). In a sense, what is perceptible in each student suicide bears likeness to an iceberg—in that the deeper dangers leading to the act often remain hidden beneath the surface. In recent years, numerous studies have been conducted to better understand factors contributing to suicide occurrence in South Korea (see Fu & Chan, 2013; Jung & Olson, 2014; Park, Ahn, Lee, & Hong, 2014). In one such report discussing the attitudes college students hold towards suicide, Kim and Park (2014) write, "[S]tudents in Korea hold distinct attitudes that may relate to the startlingly high suicide rate . . . [; being] more permissive of suicide and less likely to believe that people have the right to prevent a suicide" (p. 7). Essentially, the degree to which suicide is seen as being permissible—whether as an escape or to save face—directly influences the extent of occurrence; for societies which "approve suicide are more likely to commit suicide because 'norms define what behavior is required, acceptable, or prohibited in particular circumstances'" (Stark as cited in Jung & Olson, 2014, p. 1039). This approval all too often evinces itself in the wake of celebrity suicides, as the frequency at which it occurs in this nation spikes in the weeks thereafter (e.g., the suicides of Lee Eun-Ju in 2005, Jeong Da-bin in 2007, and Choi Jin-Sil in 2008), (Fu & Chan, 2013).

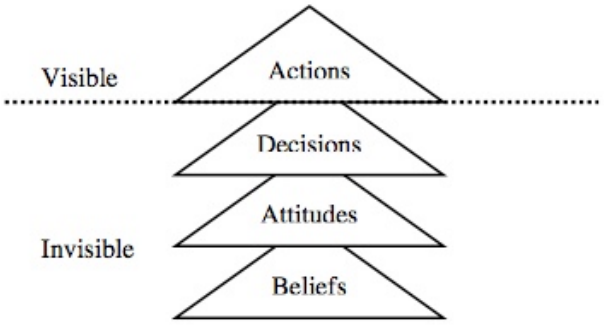

Figure 3. Adapted from Gaikwad (2004).

Suicide among South Korean students. Among primary and secondary students, academic stress may be a factor leading to suicidal actions. The Korean Ministry of Education is reported as stating that in 2010 a total of 90 high school, 53 middle school, and 3 elementary school students committed suicide (Kim, 2011; McDonald, 2011); two years later, the number—though decreasing—bore similar resemblance: 88 high school, 48 middle school, and 3 elementary school students (Presse, 2013). Despite its recent declining trend, as seen in Table 3, the loss of 965 student lives is never acceptable.

The fact that high school students comprise the majority of student suicides may be attributed to the intense pressure they face. Though it is widely known that South Korea has the highest rate of suicide among OECD nations, what is less known is that this rate surges among students when the CSAT results are released (Janda, 2013). In many respects, the system of education in place is primarily geared towards preparing students for the CSAT. As this is the only life many students ever know, failing the test by receiving a less than satisfactory score may be synonymous with failing life. The World Health Organization (2008) soberly notes that for some students, resorting to suicide is the only means by which they can take control of their lives. Yet the sad truth is this: For every student who, out of despair, takes control by committing suicide, thousands more go on living in misery.

In a competitive society that values education as the means of attaining "the best wages, benefits, and opportunities for advancement" (Yi, 2013, p. 191), few people pause to consider achievement's hidden cost. While suicide rates have steadily declined in OECD nations after 1988, South Korea continues to rise. As seen in Table 4, the primary cause of suicide for South Korean's ages 13-19 is "school performance and concerns about higher education" (39.3%); for those 20-29 years in age, "economic hardship" (22.3%) and "job issues" (19.8%). Though

three, the contributing impulses are essentially one—for the degree to which student are educated has a direct bearing on their future careers and financial status.

Table 3.
Number of Student Suicides by Year

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014 (until July)	Total
137	202	146	150	139	123	68	965

Note: Adapted from Anh Min-Suk (2014)

Table 4

Impulse to Commit Suicide and Reason by Percentage

	Age: 13-19	Age: 20-29
Economic hardship	19.5	22.3
Problems with spouse or loved one	5.1	8.6
Physical or mental sickness or disability	2.1	7.0
Job issues	.8	19.8
Loneliness or solitude	9.8	17.6
Family issues	10.5	10.9
School performance and conernces about higher education	39.3	5.2
Problems with friends	7.8	1.7
Other	5.2	6.7

Note: Adapted from Statistics Korea (2014*)*

The Future of South Korea

Unless the South Korean government radically reforms their society, of which the education system is a part, it is highly probable the rate at which suicide occurs will continue to rise. South Korea is a face-valuing society that places considerable emphasis on status, title, hierarchal relationships, appearance, achievements, and family advancement—most of which are competitively attained. For those who fail to save face by having the right education, job, or levels of success, suicide may continue to be perceived as a viable option. Change then ultimately calls for a reversal of the very thing that led to the nation's advancement (i.e., the desire to be the best).

To prevent students from overtaxing themselves with their studies, the government has come up with three solutions. The first, which took the form of

legislation in the ‘80s and ‘90s, aimed at closing all private afterschool institutes; however, the bill met bitter opposition from parents who desired additional schooling to prevent their children from falling behind. The second approach was to declare a nation-wide 10 p.m. curfew as being the required time all learning institutes close (Kang, 2010; Ripley, 2011). A number of private institutes, however, intentionally violated the curfew by moving students to windowless classrooms so as not to be suspected by patrolling officers. A more recent approach has been to deemphasize the yearly CSAT in favor of *Sooshimojib.* Whereas CSAT scores once restricted students’ career options and the universities granted access to, the practice of *Sooshimojib* is more liberal in that it permits students to apply directly to university degree programs throughout the year based on merit, talent, and achievement instead of test scores.

Discussion

In order for change to occur in the future, the government, media, parents, and researchers must in the present stop focusing on symptoms and address the problem. As one (a) who has worked as a teacher in South Korea for 6 years, (b) who is married to a South Korean national, and (c) whose interests have led to extensive inquiry into South Korean culture and society, I am wholly convinced that the nation’s student suicide problem does not stem from private academies closing after midnight, the admission policies of three premier universities among South Korea’s 300+ tertiary institutions, nor the CSAT. Rather, the most profound problem that needs to be addressed is probably one of perception.

Consider the following: As a parent, what does it mean for a child to be academically successful? As a student, should I focus on being the best or doing my best? By promoting entrance into SKY schools as the ideal, am I as a parent or teacher perpetuating a hierarchal system designed to benefit the few? As an administrator, should our school’s curriculum prepare students to secure jobs in the workforce or to create employment opportunities not yet thought of? As an exam proctor, is the CSAT a valid assessment of students’ intelligence? As government officials, whose interests are we serving by ranking and publishing students’ CSAT scores nationwide from top to bottom? As a society, is education determining our lives or are we determining what education should be? And lastly, regardless of the scores students earn, have we as administrators, educators, parents, and society members impressed upon our children’s minds that their lives have of immeasurable worth? Ultimately, these questions need to be answered from within South Korean society as opposed to from without.

Perceptions

Essentially, suicide stems from a loss of hope in response to perceived failure. Interestingly, one study among South Korean nationals found that of all the things

a person can be discouraged about, the respondents considered academic failure to be the most bitter—with approximately 67% of the participants blaming themselves as the source of their failure (Kim & Park, 2006). Failure with South Korean society, however, does not necessarily equate to an F, rather failure occurs when individuals (a) perform at a level lower than expected or (b) are not able to reach a predetermined goal. In Yang and Rettig's (2005) study, the goals for students were twofold: (a) Admission to an Ivy League university and (b) getting straight A's in school. Though admirable, such lofty goals often set children up for failure, which, when taken to an extreme, can lead to suicide. In speaking about such hopes, Sleziak (2013) maintains that the desire for straight A's has little to do with learning passion; rather, it is idealized as a means of securing "social recognition" and future "economic advantages" (p. 32).

Within the nation's knowledge economy, education is passively portrayed (through media and society) and actively perceived (by parents and students) as one of life's most important goals (Kim & Park, 2006). Understanding how South Koreans perceive success necessitates taking into account the nation's cultural, economic, historical, and social milieu. Few things have left as enduring a legacy upon culture, thought, and action as Confucianism (Park & Cho, 1995; Shin, 2012). Central to this philosophy is creating social orders founded upon harmony, humanness, virtue, and education (Kim & Park, 2003; Levi, 2013). Though based on Confucius' ideals some 2 millennia ago, Hahm (2003) remarks that philosophy retains "an invisible grip on" South Koreans in the present age, "and how they make sense of the world" (p. 270). This is most readily seen in the nation's present day education system, as at its heart lies an exam culture founded upon a philosophical tradition thousands of years in the making. The CSAT exam, as did the civil service examination in Confucius' time (Kim & Park, 2006), advances or restricts a person's life by determining which educational opportunities, career options, and social status of which the individual is worthy. As much hinges upon this one exam, receiving less than satisfactory remarks than equates to a less than satisfactory existence—a factor, which has not only heightened competition, but has also contributed to the nation's rising suicide rate.

Conclusion

The financial, technological, and social advances wrought in South Korea during the process of modernization have not alleviated competitiveness, but strengthened the intensity at which it is experienced. For young South Koreans, failure to develop the ability to cope with the stresses of life often proves to be fatal. Among individuals, ages 9-24, suicide has risen to become the leading cause of death. In analyzing the factors contributing to its occurrence, this paper identifies a system of education that has over-emphasized the CSAT exam. In a competitive system that ranks its nation's students in hierarchal order based on

CSAT scores, it is unlikely that the vigor with which students study will decrease. The practice of ranking students leads to commodification, and once a commodity loses its usefulness by appearing at the lower rungs of the educational ladder, it (i.e., the student) often has little value to businesses and society in general. Within the context of South Korean society, the result of such a rank equates to a menial life. Education then becomes a decided tool—for good or evil—in determining what one's life will be.

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Notes

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