Catalyst
ISSN: 2408-137X, Volume 11, No. 1, 2015
Institute Press

Rising Rates of Suicide Among School Age Children in South Korea: Trends

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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 nations success to its system of education. Though education has indeed contributed much to the advancement of the nation, it has been identified that the hypercompetitive nature of education has led to an exponential increase in suicide among school age individuals ages 15-24. In this paper, I examine the rise in rate of suicide from 1985 to the present time, factors that have contributed to this occurrence, and possible solutions to this societal problem.

Keywords: *South Korea, students, suicide, competition, exams, hagwons, trend, society, pressure.*

Background

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, Korea has transformed from being an agrarian nation on the brink of collapse to an economic powerhouse that is a world-leader in business, shipping, technology, healthcare, and manufacturing. Though ranking 102nd among the world's 189 nations in terms of landmass, Korea—a country smaller than Cuba—has the 14th largest economy in the world, as well as the highest individual income in all of Asia (World Bank, 2014). Such achievements find attribution in the Korean government's putting into place a system of education geared towards targeting national needs in the wake of the Korean War.

Korea, for the past two decades, has been lauded as an "educational miracle" (Sistek, 2013). Within a single lifetime, the nation has progressed from one where less than five percent of its population received a high school education to its current state of where ninety-seven percent of all school age children graduate from high school. Of these graduates, approximately eighty percent continue on to university, resulting in a populace in which sixty-four percent of those ages 25-34 hold university degrees (ICEF Monitor, 2014). Korea consistently produces students who top international charts in literacy, science, and math (Economist, 2014; Kristine, 2011; Beyond Hallyu, 2013). As a result, income has soared (Per capita GDP, which in 1962 averaged under $90, is currently well over $20,000). On the surface it would appear as if Korea is a model of the transformative nature of education; yet, such achievements have not been without cost.

The advances as a result of education have transformed Korea into a hypercompetitive society. The drive to be the best, smartest, richest, prettiest, and most skilled has produced a situation that—for lack of better words—is akin to a socioeconomic pressure pot. As a result, Korea (a once *peaceful* nation) has assumed the status of being one of the world's most *violent*; yet, what is paradoxical is the acts committed are not directed at others, but rather against one's self.

Among the 70 developed OECD nations, Korea has the highest rate of suicide. This is quite contrary to reason, for contemporary Koreans, though highly educated and prosperous, are five times as likely to take their own lives than their forefathers who weathered war and extreme poverty. The nation's current rate of death from suicide is 31 people per 100,000—in the early 1980s it was 6 (Cho, 2010; Victoria, 2013). To put this into perspective, 14,160 people committed suicide in 2012—more than double the 6,444 suicides in 2000 (Kim, 2014; Williamson, 2011). As shown in Table 1, viewing suicide rates over a period of time reveals that it is a trend that is rising exponentially among the people of Korea.

Year	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2009
Rate	6.6	7.4	10.6	13.6	24.7	31.0

Table 1. *Korean Suicide Rates, 1985-2009* (Korean Statistical Information Service, 2011)

Suicide and the Lives it Claims

Suicide, the intentional killing of oneself, is nothing new; however, the rate at which it is being committed among young people is. Though once 8th in rank in terms of causes of death, suicide has advanced to become the leading cause of death of individuals ages 15 to 24 (Statistics Korea and the Ministry of Gender Equality as cited in ICEF Monitor, 2014; Kristine, 2011; Economist, 2014). In 2009 alone, 446 people (ages 10-19) and 1,807 people (ages 20-29) committed suicide. These ever-increasing *figures* suggest the intentional killing of oneself is not only an individual problem, but also evidence of a societal problem that directly impacts the lives of young people.

The Price of Education

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 added). Lest one perceive the aforementioned statement as being entirely complementary, consideration of the italicized word may lead one to think otherwise.

By definition, an *obsession* refers to any preoccupation with an idea, image, or desire that dominates one's thoughts, feelings, or actions (Dictionary.com, 2014). Reflecting on the words "education obsession" led to the following questions: Could it be possible that the desire for education among Koreans has reached the point of being a morbid obsession? Could *education* be the thing leading Korea'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 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 (Nelson, Palonsky, & McCarthy, 2012) that decisions impacting the direction of students' lives and "educational opportunities should not be made on the basis of test scores" (p. 206), CSAT continues to be the primary determinant of the universities students gain access to and, by extension, what their future status and salary will likely be (Williamson, 2011). This test, lasting eight hours, can make or break futures by associating students with a score that is supposed to be symbolic of all their years of hard work, erudition, and cramming at afterschool *hagwons* (private learning institutes).

Preparation for the CSAT begins years before students first day in primary school. As early as kindergarten, children ages 3-4 begin learning math, reading, writing, and English to gain an edge on the competition—i.e. other 3 year olds. Though 75 percent of school age children attend hagwons for a variety of subjects, the duration of time spent in such institutions increases dramatically during the middle and high school years.

On a given day, middle and high schoolers spend as many as 14 hours in schools, hagwons, and learning related facilities—e.g. libraries, private 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 16 hours a day (Beyond Hallyu, 2013; Janda, 2013; Williamson, 2011). Surprisingly, this practice is not discouraged, but *encouraged* by parents, teachers, and Korean society in general.

This type of practice suggests that one's youth is not a time for sports, socialization, talent development, or enjoyment, but rigorous study in preparation for *the* test that ultimately determines one's destiny. 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 day off, and police cars and ambulances are deployed to help students who are at risk of being late for the exam. In many respects, 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 prestigious universities (Lee, 2011), which in total accepts less than 20,000 incoming freshman. For the select few, entrance into any of the SKY universities almost guarantees a secure future at high-paying conglomerates—e.g. Samsung, Hyundai, or LG. Sadly, for the remaining 680,000 test takers, the dream held since kindergarten must come to an abrupt end.

The Sad Truth

In 2012, the National Youth Policy Institute in Korea conducted a study that found *one* in *four* students consider committing suicide (Sistek, 2013). In 2014, the number of teenage students having suicidal thoughts rose to one in two (Kang, 2014). Though suicide rates in OECD nations are generally declining, it seems as if there is a definite force advancing the frequency at which suicide occurs among school-aged individuals in Korea. That force, according to the data listed in Table 2, is identified as school/grades among individuals ages 15-19, and economic difficulties among individuals ages 20-29. In the Korean context the two motivators are closely related—for the degree of schooling acquired and *where* one is educated has a direct bearing on status and financial security.

Ages	Economic difficulties	Relationships/ Dating	Disease/ Disability	Job	Loneliness	Family Issues	School/ Grades	Dispute	Other
15-19	10.5	1.9	2.2	1.6	11.2	12.6	53.4	3.8	2.8
20-29	30.0	7.0	5.9	15.0	16.5	12.9	5.3	1.0	6.4

Table 2. Causes of Suicide (Korean Statistical Information Service, 2011)

In 2010, 3 elementary, 53 junior high, and 90 high school students committed suicide. It is likely that high schoolers comprise the largest number of deaths for they face the most intense pressure. Though it is widely known that 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, Korea has created a system of education geared towards preparing students for the exam. This is the only life many students ever know—hence, failing the test by receiving a less that satisfactory grade may in some senses 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.

The Future of Korea

Unless the Korean government radically reforms their society (of which the education system is only one part), it is highly probable the rate at which suicides occur will continue to rise. 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 is often perceived to be a viable option. Change would ultimately call 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 overexerting themselves in study, the government has come up with three solutions. The first took the form of legislation in the 1980s and '90s mandating that all hagwons be shut down; however, parents' desire for additional schooling geared towards the children's advancement prevented this law from ever taking root. Presently, the government has declared a nation-wide curfew for students at "10:00 p.m." as being the time when students in hagwons must go home. However, a number of

these schools have intentionally violated the curfew by moving students to windowless classrooms so as not to be suspected by patrolling officers. As a result, task force teams have been put into place that carry out daily raids on offending hagwons. The final approach the government has suggested is deemphasizing the CSAT exam, while also seeking to promote egalitarian admission policies.

The Author's Position

Realistically, in order for change to occur in the *future*, the government must in the *present* stop focusing on symptoms and address the problem. The problem is not hagwons closing at 2:00 a.m., nor is it the admission policies of 3 universities among South Korea's more than 300 colleges and universities. Rather the problem that needs to be addressed among the Korean people is that of perception. As an American whose cultural worldview differs substantially from Koreans, I am not in a position to say their country should change *this* or *that.* Nonetheless, the rising rate of suicide among their young people, which is a direct result of schooling, suggests that Korea's educational views are out of balance and are in need of adjustment. Though society is slow to change, young minds are easily molded. The refocusing of the youth's understanding of education and its purpose in life can have positive long-term effects on Korean society when students reach adulthood. One way this can be done is by posting banners in schools saying:

- "You only fail when you give up. Suicide should never be an option."
- "You are not a commodity that loses its worth once life doesn't go as you plan. You have immeasurable worth."
- "Your worth is not measured by your grades, your wealth, your possession, or even your looks. Your worth is measured by what Jesus gave for you: Everything."
- "The CSAT is a one-time thing. It is not the determiner of your worth. Rather how you choose to live your life each day, in spite of difficulties and challenges, is the real measure of your worth."

Although it is highly probable that students' parents may continue to push their children to study excessively, children raised in less competitive environments where words of encouragement are continually said may not only experience a decrease in the rate at which suicide occurs, but may also actively strive to raise the next generation differently.

Conclusion

The financial, technological, and social advances wrought in Korea during the process of modernization have not alleviated competitiveness, but strengthened the intensity at which it is experienced. For young Koreans, failure to develop the ability to cope with the stresses of life often proves to be fatal. Among individuals ages 15-24, suicide is a trend that has grown to become the most common cause of death. In analyzing the factors contributing to its occurrence, this report identified the Korean education system's emphasis on excessive studying for the CSAT exam. In a competitive society where the education system ranks its students from top to bottom, it is unlikely that parents will stop sending their children to hagwons and cram schools out of fear of their child falling out of the race. The placement of ranking numbers on students in a sense commodifies them; and once and a commodity loses its usefulness by appearing at the lower rungs of the educational rankings, the commodity often is seen as having no value to business and society in general. When applied to people, the result of such a rank often equates to a menial life. In this respect, Education is a decided tool—both for good and evil—in determining what one's life will be.

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