Education Fever and Its Impact on South Korea

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Abstract

South Korea’s education system dates back 2,000 years ago, when the ideas of Confucianism took hold throughout the country. Emphasizing hard work, the philosophy stated that educational advancement led to a sought after higher social ranking. What began as an educational fervor mutated into an education fever, or an intense desire for high school students to achieve academically and eventually settle into successful careers. Rather than being beneficial, education fever has been quite the opposite. The consequences range from too much stress on students to financial burdens on parents to, surprisingly, a rise in school bullying and Internet addiction.

The primary styles of research conducted for this project were analysis and synthesis. Published journal articles along with news articles, media reports, and blog excerpts were used as sources for facts as well as opinions on South Korean education. In addition, South Korean university students provided a firsthand account of the current education situation via a survey conducted by email.

The purpose of this research paper was to highlight a number of effects from education fever and to show how each of them are not only affecting South Korea today, but also adding to a much greater problem for the future.
Background

Perhaps one of the most fascinating aspects of South Korea is its view on education. Dating back about two millennia, South Korean education has its roots in Confucianism, the humanistic philosophical system that originated in China and spread to South Korea sometime between 100 BCE and 313 CE (J-K. Lee 5). Around a thousand years later, when the Chosun Dynasty came to rule in 1392, Confucianism was officially incorporated as the primary ideology, Korean society was divided into five distinct classes, and an examination system was established to select qualified individuals for important governmental positions (Paik 542). Passing the examinations required a great depth of knowledge and consequently reflected prestige and status upon a person. Thus, education was seen as the ladder that allowed one to move up in the public hierarchy. Such an integral system “has influenced modern day education and still continues to be a mark of social mobility and honor, not only for the individual, but for the family as well” (Paik 542). As a result, many South Koreans today correlate academic achievements with high societal standing and earned respect.

In a way, Confucianism itself was mainly responsible for embedding a foundation of values and beliefs, particularly emphasizing scholarship and education. It stressed that only hard work and persistence yield success in school and in life (Paik 543). Despite numerous hardships from the Japanese occupation (1910-1945) to the Korean War (1950-1953), this principle of educational zeal has not only endured, but has apparently intensified throughout recent years. In fact, this widespread lust for learning has taken the South Korean nation by storm and has even been given its own name: education fever.
Introduction to Education Fever

Strictly speaking, education fever in South Korea refers to this desire to focus intensively on academics and schoolwork so that mental learning can be maximized and knowledge can be broadened. The idea is that if a child can excel at studying in school, then he or she may be able to continue his or her education at a prestigious university where, after graduating, he or she can secure a well-paying job and hopefully live better than his or her parents. Even though education fever is commonly embraced with the best intentions to make the above scenario a reality, there is actually a hidden dark side to this academic frenzy.

Education fever is arguably hurting the wallets of parents, the minds of children, and the general health of South Koreans. It is slowly leading the country down a path of demise and destruction, increasingly disturbing the balance between work and rest. Although education fever is directly targeting schoolchildren and “threatening the well being of a whole generation of youth” (Beach), parents as well as the government are helplessly drawn into its trap. Personally, I think that education fever is a seriously misunderstood matter that must be addressed and combated now to steer South Korea in the direction of positivity and prosperity. I fully believe that South Korea’s seemingly inconceivable drive for education is slowly damaging the country, economically and socially.

Problems with Education Fever

Economic Strain

One of the first issues with education fever is the closely tied financial component. While most levels of education are never cheap and tend to pose a considerable load on parents, they are especially harsh on South Korean families. In order for a Korean child to make it through the education system with the best chance of gaining admission to a top-ranked university, parents
will have to put forth an outrageous amount of money. South Korean government data in 2010 report that “parents in the nation of almost 50 million poured 21.6 trillion won ($25.9 billion) into private education last year despite the economic downturn…” (“South Korea Seeks Remedy”). When those figures are broken down per capita, approximately $518 is spent per person per year toward education in South Korea ($25.9 billion/50 million). Compare this to the United States, which spends $153.1 billion on education (“US Education Budget”) and has a population of roughly 300 million. The per capita figure is strikingly similar: $510.33. What this means is that South Korea is spending about the same amount of money on education per person as the United States, even though South Korea has one-sixth of the population of the United States. This can mean that for the less privileged and poor households, debt is likely to be significant (“South Korea Seeks Remedy”), which is bad for the economy as a whole, especially during a recession. Therefore, it can be said that education fever is placing many Korean families in a tough financial situation.

With these staggering numbers, one may wonder where the money is going. For the vast majority of Korean students, money is used to pay for individual private tutoring outside of classroom lectures as well as for hagwons, or cram schools, which are academies where kids can receive additional instruction in preparation for their college admissions tests. Statistically speaking, Korean household expenditure on private tutoring hovers around 15 percent. Additionally, the total spending on all levels of education in 2007 made up 7.2 percent of the GDP with private spending accounting for approximately 40 percent of this portion (“Education in Korea”). While these values may not seem excessive, they are cause for alarm when seen within the context of the education system in South Korea.
In South Korea, college admissions are basically a make-it-or-break-it moment for high school students, since the university they attend will ultimately determine their later job and marriage prospects. Two of the most important criteria for selection are strong test scores and high academic grades. To ensure that students have the top marks, South Korean parents generally spare no expense to see that their children receive the best high school education, even if it is not realistically affordable. This is precisely where the problem occurs. Whereas kids from wealthy upbringings can take advantage of the best cram schools and tutoring, those from less fortunate backgrounds may have to settle for lesser schools while still risk endangering the financial stability of their families. Seen from an economic standpoint, education fever ultimately widens the gap between the rich and the poor through “consumption patterns, residential segregation, and access to quality education, especially quality higher education” (Beach). Furthermore, years down the road, a substantial disparity in the job market in South Korea is likely to occur. If every student aims to compete for a limited number of high-end professions with government agencies and top corporations (Beach), there will be less people left to fill the lower paying, but equally important occupations. This will mean that South Korea’s economy will suffer and growth will be impeded.

**Pressure on Students**

In addition to the monetary burden, education fever has a tremendous bearing on the mental and physical health of South Koreans, namely through the amount of stress placed upon students. Starting in late middle school and early high school, students start to plan for the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), an exceedingly difficult, eight-hour exam that covers over seven subjects, including mathematics, social studies, science, and foreign language. Only offered once a year, the CSAT essentially determines which college a student may get admitted
Everyone knows that a high score can virtually guarantee a place at a top university while a low score will almost certainly keep one out. So, in order to prepare for this test, high school students have to constantly sacrifice free time as well as sleep to revise and memorize a great deal of material. According to one current South Korean college student, a typical day for high school students is as follows:

Students usually go to school at 8, or more early to study before the first class. And their [sic] each class is about 50 minutes, and the time for rest is only 10 minutes. When 4th class is over, they eat lunch. After lunch time [sic], they keep studying until 6 or 7 class is over. Regular class is [sic] usually ends at 4:30. And then they do ‘Yaja’ (studying after school) until 10:00 or 11:00. (Park; see Appendix A)

Clearly, it seems that South Korean teenagers are studying nearly round-the-clock, and when they are not doing schoolwork, they are eating, sleeping, or doing other essential tasks. As for the amount of sleep, it also appears that they are not getting enough. From the time descriptions given by the above student, one can infer that the average student is receiving around six to six and a half hours of sleep per night. This amount, however, decreases during the so-called “year of hell,” or final year of high school, when students take the CSAT, as many simply give up sleep and try to live off five hours of rest each night (including weekends) for the entire year to fit in time for studying (J. Lee, “South Korean Students’ ‘Year of Hell’”). These long days and nights can be traced back to education fever, which is taking its toll on South Korean students’ lives. Physically, they have to endure endless sleep deprivation. Mentally, they have to cram an incredible amount of information into their minds. Unfortunately, it does not quite end there, as education fever continues to further push students to the brink.
Now, since the CSAT is obviously quite grueling, not everyone is able to pass it successfully, let alone score highly on it. If a student fails to garner an acceptance to a prestigious university, they may decide to become a *jaesoo sang* or a “study-again student” and retake the exam a year later. This entails a whole additional year of sleepless nights and uninterrupted studying. As stated by the previously quoted Korean student who was also a *jaesoo sang*, “Being like a ‘jaesoo sang’ is not good because friends and other people think that [the] jaesoo sang is poor…we always worry about the possibility of failure [for the] second entrance exam” (Park; see Appendix A). Evidently, the idea of being a *jaesoo sang* is not perceived well by others, and it seemingly puts students under even more pressure to try and succeed the second time around. Again, education fever is to blame for this suffering, as it has indirectly led to the creation of this “study-again student” concept.

As for those who are unable to gain admission to a high-end college or who cannot deal with the rigors of schoolwork, life can become unbearably harsh. Many South Korean parents do not offer much emotional support and instead demand better results one way or another. From one recent divorce case, a South Korean “mother verbally abused and beat the son when dissatisfied with his marks…[which] led to irreconcilable differences between the husband and wife…” (“Education Fever Sparks Divorce”). In many other situations, students end up developing mental problems like depression, high anxiety, or low self-esteem (“Education in Korea”). The worst instances, though, involve students choosing to commit suicide rather than face shame from their peers and family. In fact, “in 2005, suicide was the second leading cause of death for those in the 15-19 age group, with 6.5 per 100,000” (“Education in Korea”). These incidences alone paint an alarming picture of the extent to which education fever has driven South Korean students and families.
School Bullying

Another upsetting occurrence that is on the rise in schools across the globe is peer bullying. In the most common circumstances, school bullying can comprise physical confrontations such as pushing, shoving, and hitting, or it can include verbal harassment like teasing or name-calling. South Korea, however, seems to have stepped over the limits in what bullying can incorporate. For example, one typical form of bullying involves labeling a particular student with the title of wang-dda, which roughly translates as “social outcast” or “loner” in English. This means that the student will be completely ignored by everyone in the classroom, and those students who try to interact with the outcast will also become marked as a wang-dda. Since students in South Korea remain in one classroom at school while the teachers move around, wang-dda teenagers have to face humiliation from the same classmates all day long. In addition, such a degrading label can last for all four years of high school and even later on in college (“Bullying in South Korea”). To make matters worse, students who are shunned have nowhere to locate help because schools in South Korea have poor counseling systems (Y. Lee; see Appendix B). As a result, bullied students are practically forced to internalize their pain and find some way to manage. Those who are unable tend to commit suicide to end their misery.

While bullying has all sorts of causes, some experts in South Korea feel it comes about from the unforgiving education system. In other words, education fever is promoting school bullying. Dr. Bae Joo-mi, a counseling specialist, believes that the hypercompetitive nature of South Korean society leads students who fall behind in grades to prove themselves in other ways through aggression and dominance (J. Lee, “South Korea’s School Bullying”). Such a theory is quite plausible when viewed from the perspective of the teenager. As Korean students are surrounded by an environment dictating that only academic achievement results in success,
competition naturally exists. With high stakes involved in getting into a top university, many seek to gain an edge over their peers whom they see as competitors rather than friends. While most students attempt to distinguish themselves through excellent grades and test scores, others try to bring their classmates down and, consequently, attack them emotionally. So, it can be said that South Korea’s education fever has made education, traditionally synonymous with learning, the equivalent of a merciless contest, which is fundamentally both wrong and disastrous.

**Internet Addiction**

With the advancement of technology in today’s world, newer means of communication, entertainment, and conducting business are constantly being established and expanded. Not surprisingly, the most developed nations are the ones that tend to embrace the high-tech wave of change and become more immersed in its offerings. South Korea, interestingly, is considered the most technologically wired country in the world with more than 90 percent of all households having broadband Internet access (J-M. Lee). Although this high degree of digital connection is generally a good thing that supports numerous industries, it can lead to a serious problem, specifically for two million South Koreans today (J-M. Lee): online addiction.

South Korea’s obsession with the Internet is currently a growing concern. According to the latest numbers, 30 percent of adults and 26 percent of teenagers are hooked to Internet games (J-M. Lee). Even though the Internet and online games are not inherently bad, it is what results from being constantly glued to a computer screen that produces harm. Firstly, Internet addiction can lead to bad habits or behaviors, generate severe health problems, and even cause death. In one recently published article, researchers evaluated Korean adolescents using a 20-item Internet addiction test. Each response was reported from one to four, where a one meant “not at all” and a four meant “always.” Those with a score of 52 or higher out of a possible 80 were classified as
“high-risk Internet users.” The investigators found that high-risk Internet users consumed fatty and sugary foods, smoked, drank, and skipped main meals all to a much higher degree than no risk Internet users or those who had a score below 48 (Kim et al. 55). Such observations indicate that Internet addiction can drastically alter lifestyle. As for the extreme Internet addicts who tend to completely disregard food, water, and other sources of nourishment, they may enter a critical state where their bodies become dangerously weakened. If this is prolonged over a certain period of time, the body may eventually give in, as it did in 2005 for 10 people in South Korea who died from online gaming addiction (Cain).

In addition to the physical aspects, Internet addiction impairs proper social functioning. By only interacting online through chat rooms or fantasy realms, addicts are in effect detached from society. As a result, many begin to develop signs of antisocial, aggressive, and highly irritable behaviors. In one actual case, a South Korean child would scream and lash out at his mother when she tried to make him stop playing on the Internet (J-M. Lee).

While Internet addiction clearly afflicts working adults, it also impacts many teenagers and children. It is estimated that “10% of South Korean schoolchildren have shown signs of online addiction, thought by some psychiatrists to be one of the highest rates in the world…” (Cain). Much like the school bullying phenomenon, a few think that education fever is leading teenagers to become addicted to the Internet. One South Korean neurologist hypothesizes that the sheer amount of pressure from the ruthless education system causes students to essentially give up and seek a source of enjoyment such as the Internet (Williamson). This makes sense because if kids are working for so many hours at a time, there comes a breaking point at which they cannot study any longer. So, they have to find a place of relaxation completely away from the schoolwork. Since the Internet is so readily available in South Korean households, students turn
to it as an outlet for their stress. The bottom line here is that education fever is fostering an atmosphere filled with too much competition and tension, inadvertently causing students to break away and pursue contentment elsewhere, which ends up being addictive. Sadly, both the schooling and the Internet environments can yield heavy consequences, basically resulting in a lose-lose situation.

Conclusions

South Korea has definitely come a long way through its history. Resilient through wars, takeovers, and numerous governmental reforms, the nation has admirably launched itself from being among the poorest countries in the world to now being recognized as an emerging superpower. Undoubtedly, South Korea’s transformation can be attributed to both its integration of Confucian ideals and its citizens’ determination to achieve and thrive. In other words, education fever has helped to propel the nation into the global spotlight.

Alas, it is the fever itself that is now threatening to dismantle the country altogether. Although education fever has instilled a drive to learn to ensure one’s future prospects, it has regrettably brought about utter chaos. Simply put, “‘education fever’ is not about education at all. Schooling is but the means for the relentless pursuit of social status and prestige” (Beach). Thus, families are practically forced into devoting a large part of their incomes to finance their children’s education, thereby creating unnecessary debt and further perpetuating the gap between the rich and the poor. Teenagers are subjected to long work hours with minimized sleep, jeopardizing their mental health and putting them at risk for committing suicide. Schoolchildren perceive their classmates as enemies and accordingly try to bring them down through bullying. Finally, from the hypercompetitive surroundings, students progressively reach a point where they virtually collapse from the pressure and seek out gratification via the Internet as a means to calm
down.

Despite all the negative features of education fever, South Korea has hope for its future. Education fever still exists today because of preconceived notions of what success is. While laws and public policies cannot always alter mindsets, South Koreans themselves need to come to an understanding and shift their attitudes away from prestige and towards a more reasonable outlook for achievement. By taking a step back to try and find the best “prescription” to treat education fever, South Korea can optimistically move forward without undoing what tremendous progress the country has made.
Appendix A

Excerpt of a survey conducted by the author via e-mail. Responses are from J. Park, a freshman student at a Korean university:

3. What was a typical day in high school like?
- Students usually go to school at 8, or more early to study before the first class. And their each class is about 50 minutes, and the time for rest is only 10 minutes. When 4th class is over, they eat lunch. After lunch time, they keep studying until 6 or 7 class is over. Regular class is usually ends at 4:30. And then they do ‘Yaja’ (studying after school) until 10:00 or 11:00. Originally yaja is optional, but teachers force students to do it.

…

15. Were you a “jaesoo sang”? If so, what is it like being a “jaesoo sang”? Do you think it is unfair that you have to prepare for the entrance examination all over again?
- Yes, I was a “jaesoo sang”. Being like a “jaesoo sang” is not good because friends and other people think that jaesoo sang is poor. Also we should have to study more time and study harder than year ago. And we always worry about the possibility of failure at second entrance exam. But, if they have dream really want to achieve, it can be another chance to achieve it.
- I think it’s unfair to study all over for entrance examination all over again. And I think exam should hold at least twice a year. If the student is ill that day or make a mistake, they have to study all over again for a year. That’s too horrible for students who study hard to prepare for entrance exam.
Appendix B

Excerpt of the same survey conducted by the author via e-mail. Response is from Y. Lee, another Korean college student who also happened to be a *jaesoo sang*:

12. *Do you think the rate of suicide is simply too high? Why do students decide to end their lives instead of trying to find an alternative way? Are there any counseling resources to emotionally assist a student?*

  - I insists that the reason why students decide to kill themselves because they don’t have anywhere to let out their stress. Schools in Korea have poor counseling system. So students don’t have anyone to talk about their hmmm agony. This makes them depressed and students end up killing themselves.
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