



# Post-Industrial Challenges In Modern South Korea: Educational Pressures And Their Impact On Young People.

**Desafío post-industrial en Corea del Sur moderna: la presión educativa y su impacto en la juventud.**



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## Abstract

This paper examines the role of the educational system in modern South Korea and its effects on young students. It takes a threefold approach: Starting off with a historical background about education as the backbone for South Korea's rapid economic growth during the 70s and 80s, followed by an in-detail approach to the current educational system and its high-pressure context. Afterwards, the effects on youth deriving from this particular background are

explored from a social, cultural, and demographic standpoint, closing up with the actions taken by the government to tackle this national issue. Last, but not least, based on the quantitative and qualitative work of previous authors, this paper concludes with an insight of recommendations and the importance of addressing limitations and acknowledging gaps, as a step to effective measures that offer social welfare for future generations.

## Key Words

Industrialization; Educational system; South Korea; Social pressure; Suicide; Confucianism.

## Resumen

El presente escrito examina el papel del sistema educativo en la Corea del Sur moderna y sus efectos en los jóvenes estudiantes, adoptando tres enfoques principales: Iniciando con una revisión histórica sobre la educación como la columna vertebral del rápido crecimiento económico de Corea del Sur durante los años 70 y 80. Continúa con un acercamiento al sistema educativo actual y su contexto de alta presión. Posteriormente, se explora los efectos sobre la juventud derivados de este trasfondo particular desde un punto de vista social, cultural y demográfico, y cierra con las medidas adoptadas por el gobierno para abordar este asunto nacional. Por último, sobre la base de la labor fundamentado en datos cuantitativos y cualitativos aportados por diferentes autores, este documento concluye con un panorama de recomendaciones, así como destacando la importancia de abordar las limitaciones y vacíos existentes como un paso hacia medidas eficaces que ofrezcan bienestar social para las generaciones futuras.

## Palabras clave

Industrialización; Sistema educativo; Corea del Sur; Presión social; Suicidio; Confucianismo.

## Introduction

When countries undergo economic turmoil, high levels of poverty and illiteracy, scarcity, and social struggle in general, oftentimes the methods for fighting back against these issues are based on a key yet powerful word: Education. After the devastating Korean War between 1950 and 1953, South Korea experienced unimaginably quick rapid growth, driven by a strong commitment to increase literacy amongst its citizens<sup>1</sup>, strengthen domestic industries, and embark on a race for economic competitiveness using education as cornerstone. Freedom from Japanese rule in 1945, the arrival of Park Chung Hee in 1961 followed by Chun Doo-Hwan in 1981, the influence of Confucianism as a legacy of Japanese colonial rule, and strict policies that focused on education as a way to overcome the crisis, were all factors that contributed to raise the issue of social viability as a modern society.

The main objective of this paper is to address the context of high educational competitiveness and challenge the commonly accepted idea that the economic success derived therefrom leads to social quality,<sup>2</sup> using South Korea as a counterexample. Alongside this analysis, its specific objectives

<sup>1</sup> As Studwell mentions in "How Asia Works: Success and Failure in the World's most dynamic region", in 1950, literacy in South Korea was lower than in modern Ethiopia (Studwell, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Social quality is used to analyse the happiness of a society, combining an objective assessment of well-being – basic needs such as shelter, health and social security – and subjective measures as to what makes an individual happy (Wallace, 2014)

include:

1. Examine the Korean educational system as a tool for economic development in the 70s and 80s.
2. Provide an overview of its effects on young students, namely the alarmingly high rates of suicide amongst young school-age students in modern society.
3. Describe the surrounding context of social despair amongst the elderly population and youth employment stagnation.
4. Identify possible gaps and perspectives in and for this national situation within a framework of social and government action.

This project will help raise awareness among the general public through an understanding of the underlying variables that explain the phenomena. The author's intention with the threefold approach is that readers will acquire a general understanding of the educational pressure Korean students are under and cultivate a critical standpoint on this issue based on the elements provided. To analyze the proposed problem, the context that will guide this paper should be explored first, and will be addressed in the following section.



## 1. Section One: Towards Education for Economic Development.

### 1.1. Education in South Korea Before and After 1945

Before 1945, the earliest form of formal education in the Korean Peninsula was the *Taehak* in 372 A.C. This educational system was used by the upper class, known as the *Yangban*, and consisted of the teachings of Confucianism and Buddhism. Later, with the arrival of Christian missionaries and the establishment of private schools, national leaders that resisted the Japanese occupation<sup>3</sup> led the “movement to save the nation through education” focusing on educating future leaders that would pave a path for independence (Ministry of Education, n.d). During the years of Japanese occupation, the history and geography of Japan were introduced as mandatory subjects. Furthermore, education was not intended to prepare Koreans for administrative positions, but to provide for basic literacy and low-level technical tasks amongst men

<sup>3</sup> Japan first gained power over the Korean Peninsula after the first Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895), becoming a Japanese protectorate in 1905 and a colony from 1910 until 1945 (Seth, 2002, Ch. 1)

and, in the case of women, foster virtues such as constancy and domesticity (Seth, 2002, Ch. 2).

After liberation from 35 years of Japanese rule in 1945, their departure left behind a huge vacuum in trained manpower, and illiteracy was widespread in Korea, estimated at 78% (Sorensen, 1994). The economy was dominated by agriculture and the system had no meaningful educational infrastructure (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2019). Education was thus made compulsory and became a fundamental tool for overcoming the national crisis. Furthermore, the Education Act in 1948, made the Korean system closely resemble the Chinese one. Since then, it has been based on the philosophy of *Hongik Ingan* or the universal welfare of mankind, with strong democratic principles (Nuffic, 2016). After the Korean war<sup>4</sup>, education was the tool that enabled the reconstruction. South Korea's (hereinafter Korea) successful economic development process is linked to the so-called "Developmental State"<sup>5</sup> at the heart of rapid industrialization during the 1970s and 1980s. In effect, the Korean "Economic Miracle" is closely related to an "Educational Miracle" (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2019).

Ever since the creation of the Basic Education Law in 1949, Korea has used a 6-3-3-4 educational system: grades one to six for elementary school (primary school), grades seven to nine for middle school, grades ten to twelve for high school and then four years in university<sup>6</sup> (Choi, 2013).

However, during the 1980s, after the assassination of president Park Chung Hee in 1979 and throughout democratization, private education expenditures increased considerably with parents aggressively pressing for the educational credentials of their children (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2019). In consequence, the government decreed that all colleges should admit 30% more students than their graduation quota (Jung, Pirog & Lee, 2016). The bill was issued through the July 30 Educational Reforms that abolished state-sponsored preliminary testing and replaced it with a new College Entrance Achievement Test. The measure indisputably increased the state's authority over education, assuming exclusive control over the college selection process (Seth, 2002, Ch. 5).

From 1981 to 1988, during General Chun Doo Hwan's presidency<sup>7</sup>, universities adjusted their scores to admit more students and tougher graduation guidelines were imposed to boost competition between college students, resulting in an exponential increase in student populations, education facilities and the number of teachers. The aftermath was overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of qualified professors and intense competition in the college entrance system. A strategy to balance out this surplus was the creation of a standardized college entrance examination in an effort to normalize high school education (Ministry of Education, n.d).

## 1.2. Economic Development and Education. Inextricably Intertwined?

Scientific research shows the strong connection that exists between high levels of education and economic development. In the case of South Korea,

<sup>4</sup> The Korean War, 1950-1953, was a conflict that took place between North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea), supported by the Soviet Union, and South Korea (the Republic of Korea), led by the United States. This mutual territorial dispute ended with a division between the Koreas along the 38th parallel.

<sup>5</sup> The Developmental State refers to a strong state intervention in the economy with the specific intention of working towards economic development and industrialization (Caldentey, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> High School is divided into academic high schools, where pupils are educated to advance to university, and vocational high schools, that specialize in a number of fields including trade, engineering or art (Choi, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Following the military *Coup d'état* in 1979, that resulted in the assassination of president Park Chung Hee by his security chief, Kim Chae-Kyu (Seth, 2002, Ch.7) Chun Doo Hwan took office from 1980 until 1988.

known as the “Miracle of the Han River”<sup>8</sup>, according to the International Monetary Fund, the country increased its domestic per capita income from \$88 to \$31,949 between 1965 and 2012 (Levent & Gokkaya, 2014). In just 47 years, per capita income increased by over 350%, a growth rate unthinkable for a country that, during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was among the poorest in the world. Additionally, when analyzing its economic success, it can be inferred that the country’s economic development has grown in parallel with the improvements made to its education. Predominantly, since Park Chung Hee<sup>9</sup> took power, education was reinforced in an attempt to offset the lack of natural resources in Korea with high-quality human capital. The importance attached to education, investment, and Research and Development activities had a positive effect on Korea’s rapid economic development, integrated with economic complexity and industrial production (Kurt, 2019).

### 1.3. The Education System in Modern Korea

Today, the educational system in the Republic of Korea (ROK) consists of six years of primary school<sup>10</sup>, three years of middle school, three years of high school, two years of junior college and four years of university, depending on the chosen career. According to UNESCO, “Korea’s education system can be explained with four words: Democratization, autonomy, localization and globalization”, characterized by rapid expansion and a high degree of competition (Levent & Gokkaya, 2014, p. 277). The government has also established five-year renovation plans that aim to update curricula and adapt to evolving needs and market requirements.

### 1.4. Korean Education and International Standards

In this context, Korea’s successful educational system has positioned the country at the top of world standards. PISA (the Program for International Student Assessment) is one of the most efficient exams for evaluating student knowledge of today’s information society. Managed by the OECD and country ministries of education, students are selected randomly by software called Keyquest and selectively assessed in three main disciplines: Reading, mathematics, and science (Levent & Gokkaya, 2014). Unsurprisingly, PISA results for 2018 positioned Korea in 5<sup>th</sup> place, just behind China, Singapore, Estonia and Japan<sup>11</sup> (Armstrong, 2019). These positive results cannot be taken for granted as Korea has been at the top of the rankings in recent years and looks to continue to do so. Additionally, the percentage of Gross Domestic Product invested in educational institutions is among the highest in OECD countries. This is primarily due to household contributions and increased per student expenditures from 2008 to 2013 at all stages of education (OECD, 2016). At a government level, the total expenditure on primary to tertiary education in 2016 amounted to 5,4% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 0,4 percentage points above the OECD average (OECD, 2019).

Teachers also play a decisive role, and most of them are trained at eleven universities associated with the Korea National University, such as the Department of Primary Education at the Korea National University of Education and Ewha Womans University. High levels of professionalism amongst teachers

<sup>8</sup> “The Miracle of the Han River” refers to the rapid economic development that South Korea underwent after the Korean War (1950-1953) transforming the country into a manufacturing and exporting power.

<sup>9</sup> Park Chung Hee seized power in 1961 with a military *Coup d’état* and was the head of an authoritarian government until his assassination in 1979.

<sup>10</sup> All primary schools are free except for some private schools and the official starting age is seven years old.

<sup>11</sup> PISA 2018 results ranked countries as an aggregate of the total score of reading, science and mathematics.

is strongly related to their elevated salaries, which surpass the average of most countries. Together with the role played by its teachers, South Korea has been outstanding for efforts made in the field of gifted education<sup>12</sup> (Levent & Gokkaya, 2014).

Notwithstanding the above, this high level of competition and of honoring national results goes hand-in-hand with the extensive hours of study in which pupils are immersed, which are significantly higher than the global average.

### 1.5. Towards an Unbearable Private Tutoring System

Kim Hee-Young studies in a high school in Hongdae. She wakes up at six in the morning every weekday. After getting ready, packing some textbooks and the workshop she prepared the previous night, she has a quick breakfast while reviewing notes for class. Most probably, Hee-Young heads to the metro station by seven and starts classes at eight o'clock. After a long day full of new information and long hours spent between classes and the library, she finishes her official school schedule by five in the afternoon. Most students around the world would make their way back home. Not here. Right after five, Hee-Young and her friends rush into a private institution, also known as a *Hagwon*<sup>13</sup>, for another three or four hours of private tutoring. She heads back home around eight or nine in the evening. Upon arrival, she grabs some food, unpacks her notes and textbooks, studies a little longer, gets some work done for the following day and goes to bed at around ten. This is her routine five days a week.

Private tutoring is a fundamental part of the education of any Korean student. Due to high demand, this system has also become an alternative for people looking for an extra income. Such has been the impact that some teachers have made a fortune from private tutoring. Despite the fact that almost 2/3 of the market is covered by the *Hagwons* (Choi, 2013) - private for-profit learning institutions, where classes are taught in a classroom-like setting - there are two other options. First, individual or small-group tutoring, commonly provided in the students' home, where tutors can be either full time professional tutors or part-time university students. This is the most expensive form of private tutoring. The second consists of self-study sheets or paid internet and correspondence lectures, overseen by parents and is the cheapest and most popular method for younger students (Kim & Lee, 2010).

Private tutoring has been beneficial to the economy as a whole through the accumulation of human capital that translates into higher labor productivity. Still, two negative educational and economic impacts can be seen. First, long hours of exposure to tutoring can hamper a student's development of creative and problem-solving skills, as well as being directly harmful to the pupil's health. Second, from an economic standpoint, it can exacerbate social inequalities, since by its nature it imposes a heavy financial burden on Korean households. These inequalities can be explained through unbalanced access to private tutoring, providing a clear advantage for high-income families, and an ineffective use of financial resources that could be invested efficiently in other activities (Choi, 2013). Although measures have been taken, results are alarming and can even be related to low fertility rates.

The Korean government has been aware of the consequences of excessive private tutoring for high school students and social welfare. The toughest measures were implemented in 1980, when the government banned all types of private tutoring intending to implement equalization policies. This only resulted in an exacerbation of the black private tutoring market and, para-

<sup>12</sup> Gifted education refers to outstanding talented students that make up a subgroup fundamental for economic growth and the government offers special programs for them.

<sup>13</sup> *Hagwons* or private tutoring consists of complementary activities outside the regular schedule. Also known as "Shadow" educational activities (Poh Lin Tan, Morgan & Zagheni, 2016) or *Jukus* in Japan.

doxically, increased inequality. It is estimated that, between 1980 and 2000, the number of *hagwons* increased from 381 to 14,043 and the number of students enrolled in them grew from 118,000 to 1,388,000 (Choi, 2013). Many critics point out that no matter how many anti-tutoring policies the government issues, so long as incentives for higher educational competition remain, all efforts are worthless. According to a study based on econometric assessment methods, it was concluded that restrictions placed by the government in 2006 under which *Hagwons* could only operate until ten in the evening, were a partial success. However, this policy did not lead to a significant reduction in the hours spent on private tutoring. It is also suggested that it increased private tutoring costs for high school students due to an inelastic demand for this service (Choi, 2013).

## 1.6. A Student's Hard-Fought Journey to University: the SAT Exam

A student's journey from school to university – and not any kind of university – continues with the College Scholastic Aptitude Tests (CSAT), known as the *Suneung* or *Ipsijjok*<sup>14</sup> in Korean, and administered by the Korea Institute of Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE) (Kim & Dembo, 2000). Introduced in 2004, it takes place every November and covers five major subjects: Korean language, mathematics, foreign language (English), and social studies, where students can choose between social studies, science or vocational training, a second foreign language and classics. The total number of possible credits is 400 and, for university admittance, the minimum required is 250 (Nuffic, 2016).

A key guide to understanding the higher education system, provided mainly by universities and colleges, are the differences that stand out between national institutions, funded and managed by the Ministry of Education (MOE), public institutions, managed by local management boards, and private institutions, funded by individuals or organizations. The top three most prestigious universities are collectively known as the SKY, which stands for Seoul National University, Korean University and Yonsei University (Nuffic, 2016). Admittance to one of these top universities practically guarantees employment with the government or in one of the 63 *Chaebols*<sup>15</sup> as well as invaluable lifelong networks and possibilities for social mobility (Hultberg, Calonge & Kim, 2017).

This is a very special day. Students to take the ultimate exam for which they have been preparing their entire lives. The sun rises on a new day full of anxiety, nervousness and hope for the best. The whole country moves in slow-motion. Families and students line up at the schools to cheer on their children and friends that will fully pour out their minds and bodies during nine whole hours. Police officers make sure everyone makes it in time, which is why latecomers are scolded at school. Air traffic in Korea ceases during the listening section. Moms gather to pray for their kids. This is the moment that can make or break their future.

Students taking the CSAT can apply to three universities simultaneously. Their score is the main criteria at many universities and near-perfect CSAT scores are a baseline for admission to top institutions like the above-mentioned SKY Universities<sup>16</sup> (Mani & Trines, 2018). The pressure students are under cannot be sufficiently put into words.

<sup>14</sup> *Ipsijjok* refers to "examination hell", expressing the excessive competition for college entrance (Kim & Dembo, 2000)

<sup>15</sup> *Chaebols* are family-owned conglomerates such as Samsung, Hyundai, Lotte or LG.

<sup>16</sup> The SKY Universities are the top three universities in South Korea: Seoul National University, Korea University and Yonsei University.



## 2. Section Two: Cultural Context, Social Pressure and its Effect on Young People

### 2.1. The Role of Religion and Life Philosophy

#### Christianity

Both, Catholicism and Protestantism provided the impetus for modernization in Korea. When Christian missionaries arrived, they established a complete system of education, including modern science and medical science. The values of “freedom, human rights, democracy and equality became acquainted largely through Christianity” (Kim, 2000, p. 113). Today in Korea, 19.73% of the population identifies as Protestant and 7.93% as Catholic (Statista, 2015). The arrival of Christian missionaries and the instauration of the fundamentals of education, further strengthened an urgency for education (not only at an academic level) that had been installed centuries before on the Korean peninsula. Today, these values continue, and education is the tool used to display them.

#### Buddhism

Buddhism was introduced to Korea from the Chinese mainland during the three-kingdoms period<sup>17</sup> (Kitagawa, 1989). Inspired by the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, Buddhism focuses on the goal of spiritual enlightenment to break the cycle of suffering mankind is part of (IndexMundi, 2019). Buddhism,

<sup>17</sup> The Three Kingdoms Period: Silla, Goguryeo and Baekje was a period in Korea extending from 18 B.C to 935 A.D, influenced by the civilization of ancient China (Lee, 2008).



as well as Confucianism, greatly emphasizes the importance of family honor. According to Donald Baker, a Professor in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia, Buddhism in Korea has not changed its core teachings, but has rather operated differently within Korea's pluralistic religious environment, precisely because that environment has changed (Harvard, 2016). Today 15.53% of Korea's population identifies as Buddhist (Statista, 2015). As a result of this pluralistic environment, Buddhism permeates education in certain characteristics including education as a life-long process, education as a gradual unfolding and true education as individual, physical, mental, spiritual, and social. Within this context, this total development is a means to self-realization (Inflibnet, n.d). This is reflected by the South Korean educational culture in its emphasis on the individual's "future" and "prospects", as education itself will determine their lives, in most cases.

### Confucianism

The country initially closed its borders under the influence of the "Defend Orthodoxy (Confucianism) Reject Heterodoxy (Western Thought)" movement in the court of *Choson* (1392 A.D – 1910 A.D). After opening its borders, it maintained a policy of "The Eastern Way, Western Technology (*Dongdo Seong*)" (Duncan, 2015, p. 105). During this time, education was limited to the hereditary ruling class, known as the *Yangban*<sup>18</sup>, that represented 15% of the population. Education did not extend to the masses and practical education – medicine, astronomy and foreign languages - was aimed at a small group of lower-status people, collectively known as the *Chungin* (Sorensen, 1994).

When Korea became a Japanese protectorate in 1905, an anti-Confucian sentiment began spreading amongst Korean intellectuals, who even called it a "hierarchy of tyranny" (Duncan, 2015, p. 106). According to Max Webber, Confucianism was seen as detrimental to the development of capitalism.

### Confucianism as the Hero and the Villain

Korea's educational success has been a complex interplay of values, institutions, economic resources, and knowledge accumulated from diverse sources (Sorensen, 1994). The influence of Confucianism in Korea has been significant in that it idealized a hierarchical society where only people with a high social status could enjoy education. This is reflected by Koreans' strong belief in education as a highly transformative indicator of social status (Kim, 2002).

Experts highlight that educational success in East Asian countries is not so much due to their institutions and resources as to the efficacy of East Asian Confucian Culture, because it provides high levels of social capital in the form of strong family structure and norms of hard work and high value in education (Sorensen, 1994). However, even though Confucianism has been present in China, Japan, and Korea in different forms, these countries have not always been particularly economically successful. Changes can mostly be seen since the 1970s. Furthermore, Confucianism was considered the reason behind the lack of success of East Asian countries and China's failure to modernize (Sorensen, 1994).

Although Confucian values are still pronounced, many state that it inhibits economic development, as Park Chung Hee did in his time.

As described briefly and powerfully by Kim Hwa-young in a short text, "The Daechi-Dong neighborhood in Gangnam in the southern part of Seoul is the *Hagwon* mecca. At 10p.m., when all the Hagwons end their classes, the roads are jammed with parents arriving to pick up their children. Students pour out

<sup>18</sup> The *Yangban* represented the Korean elite and their education was based on history, philosophy and poetry written in Chinese.

of the private cram schools and a 10-minute traffic war ensues. Then all is quiet again. Confucius said, 'They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who delight in it.' Has his wisdom become an empty phrase now?' (Kim, 2018, p. 2). Even though a definitive answer to this question is not likely, it is indeed possible to analyze the forces driving Korean students' educational process.

South Korean Confucianism has academic competition at its core, somehow contributing to the actual system. Some authors point that an emphasis on academic education was a dominant influence upon the patterns of modern blue- and white-collar<sup>19</sup> workforce. Even though Confucian principles for education refer to the need for the self-fulfilling pleasure of acquiring knowledge, in modern Korea this has become more of a material goal.

One of the explanations for the fact that Korean society has been deviating from Confucian principles lies in the dramatic economic and social transformation undergone by Korea over the past 50 years. Young people are now leaving their parents in the villages, and strong family ties are beginning to weaken. For example, to find a better match for their older children, parents have abandoned the privilege of living with their child after marriage, marking a major change in traditional Confucian practices of marriage and family life (Duncan, 2015).



## 2.2. Youth Fatigue and Suicide

The transformation of the educational system during the 1960s has been pillar of South Korea's rapid economic growth, industrialization, increased exporting power, technification, international competition, cultural influence, heavy and chemical industry massification, and migration.

But there is a challenge therein for post-industrial societies that have achieved economic development and now face demographic and social issues. And Korea is no exception. In 2015, the Ministry of Education (MOE) recognized that the educational pressure faced by young students has resulted in a serious social problem (Nuffic, 2016).

Education is South Korea's backbone. It is such that high levels of responsibility and stress drive parents not only to invest large amounts of financial resources in their child's education but also to remind their kids that how they do in school affects the whole family.

<sup>19</sup> White collar jobs are office jobs that do not require physical or manual labor, such as professional and technical workers, managers, administrators, sales workers among others, while blue-collar jobs include manual work, such as craftsmen and kindred workers, operatives and service workers (Weaver, 1975).

Research has shown that excessive private education from childhood negatively influences a child's psychological, emotional, and behavioral development and worsens the parent – child relationship through the use of coercion. There is also the issue of transferring a parent's dream to the child as a result of the parent's unresolved issues and a frustrated desire for achievement that has become generational (Kowen, Jang & Lee, 2019).

Korean parents consider their children an extension of themselves, making the child's academic success not only an individual achievement but, more importantly, a family honor (Kim & Dembo, 2000). This is mostly expressed as anxiety due to the extreme pressure to perform well and an awareness on how time spent studying will affect their future.

Ever since they are little, students are taught the importance of honoring their parents and contributing to society through a strong, comprehensive education. Once students get into college, the demands from their surroundings are non-stop and they are expected to get into the best colleges, become leaders at important firms, and be the best in their fields of study. Unfortunately, this high pressure can shift sharply into unhappiness, depression, and untold suicide rates amongst young people.

Reports have pointed to the fact that depression is associated with suicide. It is believed that 50% of all suicides are related to depression, and two to nine, or 15% of people diagnosed with or treated for depression will die from suicide (Soo, 2018).

Unlike the decreasing trend in suicide rates amongst OECD countries, Korea has experienced a steady increase over the past two decades, recognized as both a social issue and public health problem (Park, Lee & Kim, 2018). Although suicide rates have decreased from an all-time high of 31.7 deaths per 100,000 people in 2011, this figure is still substantially higher than the global average (Kwak & Ickovics, 2019). For instance, in 2017, the suicide rate was 24.6 per 100,000 inhabitants, the highest among OECD members as it has been since 2003 (OECD, 2017). Suicide is the fourth most common cause of death in Korea. On average, 40 people commit suicide every day (Singh, 2017).

For years, social scientists have wondered why this economically successful state has such startlingly high suicide rates (Singh, 2017).

The particularity of suicide as a cause of death is that it is exacerbated by social force, which induces intentional self-harm. While the previously explained attributes of Confucianism and Buddhism may be part of the reason why Koreans do not seek treatment, most East Asian societies are similarly focused on family and influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism, meaning that culture alone is not responsible for high suicide rates (Singh, 2017). However, culture is more related to the stigma around mental illness and unfortunately, this social stigma restrains people from seeking help. According to the Health and Welfare Ministry, of the 90% of those that commit suicide due to mental illness, only 15% received any form of treatment (Singh, 2017).

This context places adolescents at a higher risk of delayed mental health care and makes them more vulnerable to suicidal ideation and attempt. These cases are mainly driven by depression, 46% of which is caused by academic stress amongst high school students and generated by social expectations related to academic excellence and success (Kwak & Ickovics, 2019).

According to traditional achievement motivation theory, students can, first of all, have a fear of failure which negatively affects achievement. Simultaneously, it is influenced by two factors: "a self-concept of low ability" and "fear of failure and its consequences" (Kim & Dembo, 2000, p. 97).

Suicide has been the leading cause of death among Korean adolescents since 2007 and the data indicates that, although females attempt suicide to a higher degree than males, the latter complete suicide more often than women.

This is known as the “Gender Paradox” in suicide (Park & Sang, 2018, p. 1).

Other risk factors include divorced parents, closed family communications, financial struggles, and bullying. Furthermore, the feeling of having control over one’s own life, including job security, which reduces exposure to financial strain and job autonomy, leads to better mental health. This directly affects the relationship between social position and depression, as previously explained, in a context of compliance with socially competitive demands (Nishimura, 2011). The extent to which people have control over their lives and feel enabled to live as they would like to is known as Social Empowerment (Wallace 2014).

According to the World Health Organization, “No single factor is sufficient to explain why a person dies by suicide: suicidal behavior is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by several interacting factors – personal, social, psychological, cultural, biological and environmental” (WHO, 2014, p. 11).

### **3. Section Three: Collateral Context**

#### **3.1. Suicide Amongst the Elderly**

Suicide is democratic and not restricted to a single group of people. The results also show that Korean suicide rates increase with age, with the elderly population taking up the highest share. This can be explained, albeit insufficiently, by the “loss theory” that views the process of aging as a process of ongoing loss – loss of health, spouses, jobs, social connections with relatives and friends, reduced social roles, financial independence, and meaning of life (Park et al., 2018, p. 92). This explanation somehow does not fully portray the responsibility of the socioeconomic context wherein a lack of government support, higher levels of poverty, isolation, insufficient social welfare services, and poor financial independence has led to a suicide rate of 85.7 among Korean adults (89/100,000 for men, twice the rate of China, and 30.8/100,000 for women), and poverty among Korean elders reach 49.6% (roughly half) the highest in the OECD and four times higher than the average (12,4%) (Park et al., 2018). Many retired Koreans have no source of income, as the country’s pension system was created in 1988. As Korea becomes even more economically advanced, a larger number of Koreans abandon their elderly parents in the countryside and send them money less frequently (Singh, 2017). The sad reality is that elders are perceived as burdensome for families and/or society and a feeling of not belonging to valued groups or relationships triggers suicide attempts so as to not become a financial liability (Park et al., 2018).

#### **3.2. Low Fertility Rates and Declining Population**

This context of high educational costs has also driven parents to choose smaller family sizes, which may be a reason why the desired number of children is considerably lower in South Korea, as a determinant of fertility rates. This continues as a cycle of action and reaction, and high education costs may also promote delayed marriage by encouraging individuals to wait until they can afford the expenses required by a child, resulting in a self-perpetuating cycle that rewards those at the top of the educational hierarchy (Poh Lin Tan et al., 2016).

The situation is disturbing. In Korea, during the first months of 2020, the fertility rate was 1.09 births per woman, a 0.63% decline from 2019 (Macrotrends, 2020). Many arguments point to this decreasing trend. Fierce competition in the labor market is decisive. This has resulted in delayed marriages and lower fertility rates, as people focus on achieving professional success while struggling to find high-paying jobs in their fields. There is also a growing number of women on a career track and the possibility of having to shift from

a full-time to a part-time job to take care of children is not attractive. Together with this, the significant financial investment in one's child's education which includes private tutoring and other expenses, has prompted a move from quantity to quality (Choe & Retherford, 2009). On top of all this, highly skilled graduates are failing to find highly paid jobs with far-reaching consequences including depressed wages and lower household consumption, which affects the country's economic growth (Hultberg et al., 2017).



### 3.3. Repercussions of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis.

Korea was one of the countries most affected during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and, as ultimately life-saving assistance, the International Monetary Fund provided an emergency rescue loan in December 1997. Korea suffered a steep rise in unemployment, declining household income and rising financial inequality (Chang, Gunnell, Sterne, Lu & Cheng, 2009). During that decade, a sharp increase in suicide rates overwhelmed a number of East/Southeast Asian countries and coincided with the Asian Economic crisis in 1997-1998<sup>20</sup>.

Research has proved the correlation between unemployment and financial problems as triggers for depression, and depression as a pattern for suicidal thoughts. The Asian Crisis was associated with in excess of 10,000 suicides in Japan, Hong Kong and Korea, painting a picture of the strong affinity between socio-economic variables during this event (Chang et al., 2009).

Despite its major economic success, Korea's system is showing some cracks. The economy is no longer growing at high rates as it did during the 1980s, as is normal for any economy that has achieved economic development. However, there has been an rise in social inequality and youth unemployment<sup>21</sup>, leading to an unemployment rate of 10.4% in 2019 (OECD, 2019) along with a massive increase in irregular employment. Despite a well-edu-

<sup>20</sup> The Asian Economic Crisis of 1997-1998 began with a stressed depreciation in the Thai currency that quickly spread to neighbouring countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, Korea among others. This crisis was followed by a massive capital outflows, bankruptcies and rising unemployment (Chang et al., 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Youth unemployment is understood as the number of unemployed between 15 and 24 years of age expressed as a percentage of the youth labour force (OECD, 2019).

cated workforce, Korea has very poor labor productivity by international standards, which has resulted in “education inflation”, skills mismatch and social polarisation (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2019).

After 1997, there is evidence that indicates that labor markets have become increasingly more volatile (Nishimura, 2011), presenting a challenge for this generation. Since then, fear of another economic crash and the need for economic security has also intensified workplace stress (Singh, 2017).

### **3.4. A Culture of Hard Work**

Suicide as a phenomenon extends to all stages in life. When depression occurs because of the risk factors already explained plus the social stigma, people tend to self-medicate. This can take the form of exercising, social media, attendance at religious gatherings and, the most common and deadliest, alcohol abuse. Korea is the world’s largest consumer of hard liquor, with the average Korean adult consuming 14 shots a week. This is directly tied to a culture of hard work and stress. Roughly 40% of those that attempt suicide do so while drunk (Singh, 2017). The way the combination of work and education stress works in Korea is lethally toxic.

According to a study conducted on the economic burden of depression in South Korea, “The cost of depression in Korean represents a substantial burden on both society and the individual. The findings suggest that our society needs to increase the public health effort to prevent depression and to detect it early in order to ensure appropriate and timely treatment” (Chang, Hong & Cho, 2012, p. 688).

## **4. Section Four: The Challenge for the Government**

### **4.1. World Health Organization Framework**

According to the World Health Organization, suicide prevention must be an imperative for country policy makers, “key elements in developing a national suicide prevention strategy are to make prevention a multisectoral priority that involves not only health sector but also education, employment, social welfare, the judiciary and others” (WHO, 2014, p. 08).

The theory establishes three types of intervention for suicide prevention: (1) Universal prevention strategies, designed to reach the entire population by increasing access to help, strengthening protective processes such as social support, and changing the physical environment. (2) Selective prevention strategies, that target vulnerable groups by age, sex, occupational status, or family history. (3) Indicated prevention strategies, aimed at specific vulnerable individuals, for instance, those displaying potential early suicide signs or who have already attempted suicide (WHO, 2014).

### **4.2. State Response – How Has this Issue been Tackled?**

School-based Suicide Prevention and Intervention (SPI) provides a safe school environment for young students, reducing suicide-related risk and inspiring prosocial behaviors (Kong & Kim, 2016). Regardless of the stress put on the need to intervene all stages, response has been rather passive. This resulted in the creation of the second national five-year plan that included the revised School Health Act (SHA) in 2006 (Kong & Kim, 2016), and the proclamation of the “Act for the Prevention of Suicide and the Creation of a Culture of Respect for Life” in 2011. After this, Korea saw a drop in suicide rates from 31.7 to 27.3 deaths per 100,000 habitants (Kwak & Ickovics, 2019, p. 151-152). However, the vast majority of the national budget for adolescent suicide prevention has been invested in hotline services and internet-based SPI coun-

selling programs, rather than on school-based SPI (Kong & Kim, 2016). The problem is, a sizeable number of students did not participate in SPI because of parental consent restrictions, creating a major barrier to effective suicide treatment in Korea (Kong & Kim, 2016).

The Korean government's mental health budget accounted for only 2,6%<sup>22</sup> of total health care expenditures in 2014 and research on mental health is limited (Kwak & Ickovics, 2019).

In 2016, "Life Love Plan" was rolled out with the aim of creating a culture of respect for life. The Korean Association for Suicide Prevention (KASP), an NGO supported by the Ministry of Health that runs the LivingWorks Programme, also seeks to provide suicide intervention training and given the urgent need to dig deeper into this problem, interventions with more immediate impacts become more important (Kwak & Ickovics, 2019).

Even though the South Korean government has implemented certain measures to combat high suicide rates, most have not been effective. The Ministry of Gender and Family recently created the National Youth Healing Center, a program that has little to offer other than counseling programs for students (Singh, 2017). Even the *Chae Myeon*, or the concern of losing face, related to Neo-Confucianism, discourages disclosing suicide-related problems (Kong & Kim, 2016), exacerbating this national challenge.

Part of the problem is that Korea spends a minimal amount of money on improving its citizen's mental health. In 2016, only \$7 million was spent on mental health, and 64% of that money went to hospitals and other mental institutions (Singh, 2017). Economic investment is required even if the solution will not be found solely through financial investment.

### 4.3. The Case of Japan

In Japan, suicide was considered taboo and not discussed publicly. After suicides rose sharply in 1998, children who lost their parents to suicide began breaking this taboo and speaking out. In 2006, suicide began to be seen as a "social problem", triggering concrete actions. In 2007, the "General principles of suicide prevention" policy was enacted, aimed at preventing suicide and providing support to survivors, and stressing prevention, intervention and postvention. The result was a decrease in middle-aged and older persons committing suicide (even though it increased among young people) (WHO, 2014). Japan's example shows the importance of government policies to break the cycle of inaction and somehow decrease troubling suicide numbers.

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<sup>22</sup> The World Health Organizations recommends that countries should destine between 15 and 50% of their health care budgets to mental health treatment (Kwak & Ickovics, 2019)



## Conclusions

This paper has focused on establishing a connection between economic development, educational pressure, and suicide amongst young students, and included parallel concerns such as suicide in elderly population and the culture of hard work, all related to Korean society. This analysis has allowed concluding the strength with which these factors are entwined. While the creation of programs to raise awareness and breaking the suicide taboo are part of a possible solution, one thing remains true: part of the issue is attached to the way the Korean educational system is structured.

Along with a rapid industrialization and modernization process came obstacles for social welfare. The challenge is extremely demanding, as in order to ease the educational burden on students, the whole structural framework of education, including high school and the college entrance exam, must be tempered. As mentioned previously, the principles of Confucianism, while changed to adapt to modernity, are still extremely entrenched in Koreans. Principles such as hierarchy and status remain present. Are Koreans willing to temper the system? Could these cultural principles change? Would such a change lead to fewer suicide rates? Based on the elements presented and understanding the answer to these questions as a limitation of this paper, the author invites interested parties to research this topic further so the discussion can continue. However, according to this paper's educational and social focus, some measures can be proposed.

First, some of the criticism resides in a lack of quality within the schooling system, making private tutoring a must and resulting in the long study hours of students (besides the pressure to prepare for the college entrance exam). By assuming a "quantity-overran by quality" approach to education, policies such



as a balance between official schooling hours and private tutoring should be guaranteed and complied with. The latter intending to allow students to fulfill educational objectives while spending more time within their social surroundings. Furthermore, to stop the rise in suicide rates among young students, selective preventions strategies are required, as recommended by the WHO. A number of shock therapies exist in Korea, but their effectiveness is hard to measure. Another issue is that there are no media guidelines on how to report on the situation. As Christina Xiao points out, there must be a synergy between media, political, legislative and government stakeholders to create legal boundaries and public awareness on how to report suicide in a way that can potentially save lives (Xiao, 2017). This paper provided an overlooked yet important connection between these important topics, providing valuable context for readers to acknowledge and be aware of the connection between education, economic development, and youth fatigue, represented by suicide rates in the case of Korea.

Addressing these limitations alongside potential actions to rigorously distribute the national budget for this problem, are important steps toward the development and implementation of effective, transformative, and sustainable Suicide Prevention and Intervention strategies in South Korea to ensure social welfare for present and future generations.

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