Surviving the Sueneng:
How Korea Produces World Class Students and at What Cost

Erin Hassanzadeh
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“IT WAS GOOD ENOUGH TO GET INTO A RANK 5 SCHOOL IN KOREA BUT SHE WAS AIMING FOR NUMBER ONE.”

“It’s really stressful. Some people…many of the students suicide. Every year many of the students suicide because they didn’t get a good grade. There was one girl from the next school over and she was a really good student, she use to get all aces…all A’s. Then I guess she messed up on the Sueng, (national college placement exam). It wasn’t a bad grade either; it was just a bad grade for her. It was good enough to get into a rank 5 school, a number 5 school in Korea, but she was aiming for number one. She could’ve done another year but I guess her pride was too high. I don’t know.”

-Jae Jeon, Iowa College student from Busan, South Korean

INTRODUCTION

Korean high school students are excelling on international exams. In the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) international standardized exam (2009), Korea scored second in the world in reading, math and science. Second only to Shanghai-China, (PISA Exam Results, 2009). The 2012 PISA results released on December 6, 2013 show Korea remains dominant in international exams. They placed fifth in the world in reading, math and science. Above average in every category. But these outstanding scores do not appear out of thin air. Korean students work hard and put in intense hours of studying and work with private tutors for their entire lives, mainly in preparation for the Sueng.

The Sueng is a nation-wide exam that is taken by Korean students in their senior year of high school. The test is offered once a year and the results are the largest considered factor in the college application and acceptance process. The Sueng is a high stakes exam that can also determine what
profession a person will pursue and possibly even who they will marry. Analyzing the Sueneng is crucial to understanding the public education system in Korea today. Students work diligently for three years in high school to be prepared to take the exam and there can be severe repercussions for performing inadequately.

Korea is also a world leader in a much less desirable category. Korea has the second highest suicide rate in the world according to the World Health Organization, (2011). They are second only to Greenland. To give some perspective, the U.S. ranks 33rd in the world for suicides. Suicide is the leading cause of death for people under 40 in Korea. Rates have doubled in the last decade. While it’s difficult to directly link the high academic performance in Korea to the country’s suicide crisis, I will argue that a high youth suicide rate is one of several effects or “costs” of the intense Korean methods of schooling and testing.

When I began my research I set out with the questions: How does Korea produce world-class students? What methods did they use? What did the average day of school look like for a Korean high school student? Secondly, I wanted to research what the effects of that system were. What were some of the results of the Korean method of educating students? How did it Korean education system and ways of teaching affect the Korean students, family and society? I will look at the pressure the Sueneng exam puts on students and propose that there may be a link between the competition and pressure in the Korean education system to do well and the sky-high youth suicide rates in the country.
So while Korea is producing world-class test scores, what else is the system producing? I will explore the “costs” of this top performing education system. Are the Korean people happy with their current education system? I will aim to show that indeed there are costs that Korean students must pay for their world-class education. There is a social cost, a monetary cost, and the ultimate cost is that many students are sacrificing their lives in the name of academic success and committing suicide because of academic pressure.

**METHODS**

My original research aim was to do a comparative study on global education between the United States, Poland, Finland and South Korea. The inspiration for the research came from a journalistic piece written by American journalist Amanda Ripley titled, “The Smartest Kids in the World: and How they Got That Way”. The journalistic account focused on these top-performing countries and examined their education systems by analyzing data as well as using American foreign exchange high school students in Poland, Korea and Finland as case studies to learn about the methodology utilized by these top-performing countries. Yes, Poland had achieved recent success despite high levels of poverty and Finland had achieved a “utopic” model with high salaries for teachers. But there was something intriguing about the robotic, machine-like nature of the Korean education system that lured me in. It provides a great base for sociological research as we can look at the rigorous, competitive public education system and analyze what type of outcome the system produces. The
intensity of the system seemed like a harsh, strict, stress-enducing method to educate the children of Korea. I was curious if this took a toll on Korean students, as I imagined it would have taken a toll on me when I was a high school student. Korean test scores seem worthy of envy so the question remained, other than high test scores, what else was this public education system producing? How did it affect the students? Were those results worthy on envy like the test scores, or was there something else going on?

My research includes the gathering and examination of Korean test scores and performance as well as an analysis of the Korean education system and methodology. However, test scores can only reveal so much about an education system. They simply do not tell the entire story, as they don’t account for individual experience within the Korean education system. So I decided the best way to achieve the research results that I wanted was to use ethnographic methods to bring a personal perspective to the research. To interview students who had experienced the Korean education system first-hand.

To bring this dimension to my research, I conducted ethnographic interviews to supplement the strong statistical data and the impressive test score results of South Korea. I felt the need to look further into how this powerhouse education system has affected its students.

“The Ethnographic Interview” by James Spradley explains the purpose of using ethnographic methods in research, “The essential core of this activity aims to understand another way of life from the native point of view,”(3).
This was exactly what I was looking to gain from my ethnographic interviews. I wanted to get the insider perspective on the Korean education system. Spradley makes the point that culture cannot be observed directly, “He saw them jumping from airplanes, but only by ‘getting inside their heads’ could he find out what people know, we must get inside their heads,”(8).

Ethnographic interviews allowed my research to get something John L. Caughey refers to as a “person-centered” perspective. If I were to only use scholarly articles, test scores and data for my research I would be limited in that I would only the see data driven perspective. I would have numbers and figures but I would not have any information beyond that data regarding the experience of students within the Korean education system. If I were to only use ethnographic interviews without any other research, again, my research would be limited as it would be hard to draw strong assumptions from two ethnographic interviews without any data or research to give evidence that their assumptions or comments from the interview were accurate or representative of the larger, Korean society. So both analyzing test scores and conducting ethnographic interviews have limitations as research methods when they stand on their own. When these two methods are combined together they become complimentary and work well with each other. Ethnographic interviews bring life and a relatable, personal perspective to the research data and findings. “Ethnography yields empirical data about the lives of people in specific situations,”(Spradley, 13). They can reveal cultural attitudes that they have learned over a lifetime of living
in Korea, something I could not learn from reading scholarly articles or researching test scores. So my ethnographic interviews revealed telling things about the daily routine in Korean high school and the attitudes many Koreans have about their education system and outcomes. “Both tacit and explicit culture are revealed through speech, both in casual comments and in lengthy interviews,” (Spradley, 9).

Analyzing test scores, and statistical data about Korea and the Korean education system allowed me to notice trends in performance and outcomes that are a result of the Korean education system. I was able to look at their trend of dominance on international exams as well as their alarmingly high suicide rates. So both my ethnographic interviews and data analysis brought a different, valuable angle to my research.

I first interviewed Dorothy, a 20-year-old Iowa college student who grew up in the capital city of Seoul, South Korea. Seoul is the largest city in Korea with a population of 10 million people in the city alone. The surrounding metropolis area has a population of over 25 million. Dorothy went to public school up until high school. She attended high school at Seoul American High School. The idea is that the school is a “normal high school” for families of department of defense employees. Dorothy’s father was a chief operations intelligence officer for United States Department of Defense. He is from the United States and her Mother is from Korea. She has one younger sister. She came to the United States to attend college. She is studying international relations and is a member of her
University’s Army ROTC program. While Dorothy attended an “American” high school in Korea, her aunt is a teacher in the public school system and her three cousins are currently going through the Korean education system. Most of her friends in Korea attended public school. So she was able to have the perspective of being a student in both Korea and the United States. She was also raised with two sets of values: her mother’s Korean values and her father’s American values.

I also interviewed Jae, another Iowa college student who also grew up in South Korea. Jae is 21 and is from Busan, South Korea, which has a population of 2 million. He attended public high school at ChoongRyul high school, which is an all boys school. He came to the United States for college and is studying health sciences. He is an only child and his family still lives in Korea. Most all of his friends attended public Korean high school and now attend Korean universities. Jae had a much more traditional Korean high school experience than Dorothy. Because of that background, he was extremely useful in understanding the intensity of the daily experience of Korean high school students.

Looking at the individual experiences of those who have participated in the Korean education system allows for an understanding of the Korean schooling experience of individual students rather than the country’s collective test score data. The commonalities from Krebill and Jeon’s experiences with Korean education are extremely telling and reveal trends and common outcomes in the Korean education system. The commonalities in their interviews lead the path
that I took in my research. Especially concerning Hagwon and the Sueneng. The most revealing information conjured from these interviews revolved around the youth suicide in South Korea.

**KOREAN EDUCATION PERFORMANCE: WORTHY OF GLOBAL ENvy**

As our world is experiencing globalization, we are experiencing an increased awareness of the performance of other countries worldwide. Education has become a global conversation of comparing and contrasting performance and methodology of systems around the world to figure out what works best.

There is a conversation happening in the United States about the status of our public education system. We hear and see the U.S. being compared to other nations and regions based on the performance of students in public schools and you will hear things like, “The U.S. is falling behind”, especially in math, science and technology. In the global conversation about public education, Korea seems to have figured out something the United States has not. Which is how to produce a high volume of students who are successful in reading, math and science. If we look at the Korean education system from a macro perspective, they certainly have a system worthy of global envy.

The 2009 PISA test results showed Korea scored second overall in the world. For perspective, Shanghai-China scored first, Finland scored third, and the United States scored 17th overall. Korea scored “statistically significantly above the OECD average” in reading math and science, whereas the United States
scored “not statistically significantly different from the OECD average” in reading and science. However, the U.S. scored “statistically significantly below the OECD average” in math.

Test scores, like those produced from the PISA international exam results, are a primary mode of comparison that different governments use to evaluate their education system and compare it to others countries worldwide. Education systems are often thought to be an extension of the country’s government that is in place, so it makes sense why there is such a strong emphasis on analyzing education systems around the world and comparing them against one another. In the wake of Korea’s rise to the top of the world in education of their students, many countries are now scratching their heads asking, how did they do that? How can my country achieve those results? I will look at the perception of dominance that can be perceived by outsiders, foreign countries, and those competing to make their country’s kids the smartest in the world might view the Korean education system simply due to their scores on international exams.

There are some undeniably striking results produced by the Korean education system that are difficult to ignore. For instance, “93 percent of South Korean students graduate on time from high school, while the U.S. has an on-time graduation rate of 72 percent,” (Blazer, 1).

Korea has also received a lot of attention for being one of the world leaders in reading, math and science. A title derived largely from the country’s
performance on the Program for International Student Assessment, commonly referred to as the PISA exam.

The exam was developed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation, which is, “A kind of think tank for the developed world,”(Ripley, 15). Basically, it is an economic international organization of 34 countries with the mission, “To promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world,” (OECD.org). The organization consists of countries that believe in democracy and a market economy, and they work to find solutions to common problems such as education through idea sharing and data analysis. The exam is administered every three years to 15 year olds around the world in reading, math and science. The exam is designed to encourage critical thinking. It challenges students not simply to memorize information but it tests their ability to “do something” with that knowledge. Ripley explains the exam as, “An even smarter test, one that could measure the kind of advanced thinking and communication skills that people needed to thrive in the modern world,” (Ripley, 15).

Basically, the PISA test claims to be a more comprehensive standardized assessment that goes beyond simply quizzing students on a math problem. The PISA exam methodology, results, and the global discussion that was a result of this worldwide test being implemented will be used throughout this research to examine student performance. It is important to keep in mind that the focus of the PISA test is not necessarily to look at individual student achievement. Again, this
is why ethnographic interviews were utilized in this research. To supplement the nation wide, macro, impersonal test scores. The PISA is primarily viewed as an assessment to analyze the entire country’s performance. Because of this, these results of high achievement are not considering the individual performance and experience of millions of students. South Korea’s test scores speak about the ability of its students to do well on tests but it does not speak to the experience of individual students. What is being silenced when only test scores are being considered? There is no doubt that Korean students are performing well on the international stage but I aim to show that there is indeed a cost that these students are paying for their world-class education. The first step in understanding what these costs might be was to explore the daily experience of a Korean high school student. I wanted to know how Korea educates its students. What methods do they employ to achieve their stellar test results? To answer these questions I turned to my ethnographic interviews with former Korean high school students. These interviews confirmed the intense, competitive, unrelenting picture of Korean high school that was described by Ripley.

“IT FEELS WEIRD WHEN YOU ARE SITTING IN THE CLASSROOM AND YOU SEE THE SUN GO DOWN. IT WAS TERRIFYING THE FIRST WEEK OF HIGH SCHOOL.”

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THE KOREAN HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Jae Jeon grew up in Busan, South Korea. He attended ChoongRyul high school, an all boys school. Most schools in Korea are separated by gender to
increase concentration and test performance according to Jae. When asked if he enjoyed high school, Jae paused, took a long sigh and responded,

“Umm yes and no. Just because you spend 14 hours going to high school. You go to school around 7:00 or 8:00 in the morning and then you stay until 10:00 at the minimum. Usually students stay until midnight. They come back home, just wash, go to sleep and then do the same thing over again the next day.”

The best word to describe the Korean high school experience is, “intense”. The high school experience is characterized by long hours in the classroom with intense studying, competition and pressure. Jae described the education philosophy in Korea to be, “Get the best grade, no matter what.” Korea has a national curriculum. So every student in the country who attends public high school will learn the same thing. Jae started class Monday through Friday at 7:30 in the morning, and he told me that it was very important for students to be on time. Jae described what happens if you’re late,

“If you are late you have teachers in front of the gates (laughs). One of the teachers checks to see if anyone has long hair and if they do they call them out and we have a field and (laughs) they make you crouch and then walk the whole field like two laps or something. They check your uniforms too…if they’re too tight they call out for that. This all causes you to be even more late to class and if your homeroom teacher is there you get another penalty there. Like squats. So that’s how the morning begins (laughs).”

After 30 minutes of English listening, Jae’s day of class officially began. Each class was 50 minutes long with a 10-minute break in between. This continued through all 12 subjects that were taught in Jae’s high school. Those subjects include English writing and speaking, math 1, math 2, history, biology,
chemistry, physics, earth science, physical education and one free period of your choice. At noon, they had a lunch break. Jae recalls,

“It depends on which school you are in but in my school we didn’t have a cafeteria so we would have trays of food come into every classroom in a cart. Then we would take turns, like four students in each class would take turns and then serve to other students. After you eat, it depends on which group of friends you have, if you’re top 5 ranks of studying you will study. If you’re from the low ranks, you will go out and play soccer, basketball or badminton. So those students just play. For everyone else, you will just chit-chat.”

When their lunch period was over, students at Jeon’s high school resumed class from 1:00 to 6:00. “Then at 6:00 we have a dinner time. Same thing as lunch; the cafeteria tray comes in. We are still at school…still in the classroom,” said Jeon. At 7:00, after dinner is over, students have free study time until 10:00 where students study the material they learned from the entire day. But students do not go home at 10:00, “At ten you get to leave and then you go to Hagwon until 2:00 a.m., and then you go home to make it back by 7:30 the next morning,” said Jeon. Hagwon is best described as an after-school tutoring program. We will later explore the Hagwon phenomenon that has gained popularity and almost become a necessity in Korean education. This privatized education method has become an extension of the public school systems in Korea.

Both Dorothy and Jae agree that Korean high school is exponentially more difficult than Korean middle school. “Korean college is definitely easier than Korean high school. Korean high school is the most challenging education years of your life,” said Jeon, “When you get to high school it is a shock.” Korean middle school is far less vigorous than Korean high school. Students only go to
school from 8:00 until 4:00 and rarely study much outside of school. Jae recalls the initial adjustment period from middle school to high school, “It feels weird when you sit down in the classroom and you see the sun go down. It was terrifying at the first week of high school.”

In looking at Jeon’s schedule minute by minute, it reveals the vigor and intensity that most Korean high school students experience according to my research as well as Dorothy’s interview answers. It is difficult to imagine eating lunch and dinner at school, in your classroom. Students rarely see their families during the week. Dorothy recalls barely seeing her cousins who attended public school at family functions because they were too busy studying, “Their education system was a lot more intense than mine. I know they used to miss out on a lot of family events because they had supplemental schooling.”

We can see from Jae’s schedule that the Korean education system employs extreme study methods and requires students to put in long, hard committed hours for their three years of high school.

Another interesting reality of the Korean education system is the simultaneous competition and comradery that is established between students in this system. Due to the sheer amount of time the students spend together, there is a strong bond between some groups of students. I also observed that because school peers in Korea are roughly the same age, mostly the same gender, and often times the same race as Korea is a homogeneous society except for about 20,000 ethnically Chinese people according to the CIA World Factbook. So not
only do these students have a shared experience of intense studying and high expectations that are required but also they are of similar age, gender and race. It would be difficult to assume that they form stronger relationships as students because of these demographics; however, it is interesting to keep in mind as a possible factor in creating a certain “closeness”. Jeon explains, “It’s a really good bonding experience between your friends. Usually you meet your best friends in high school if you’re Korean. It was good bonding experience but for life in general it wasn’t very pleasant.” On the flip side of this bond is the rivalry that is produced by the intense competition between peers. Jae recalls,

“The competition is not obvious but it’s very stressful. Like lets say even if I want to borrow a note from you, I wouldn’t be able to ask you because I know the answer would be no. They wouldn’t want to share. Even if I would have more information than my peer he still wouldn’t want to share because he’s kind of afraid, ‘what if there’s something in here that HE doesn’t have and he gets a better grade because of it?’ Because it’s all comparative grades.”

There is an emphasis on performing well in all subjects in Korea. Grades are extremely important and students are aware of the scores of their peers. They are ranked in order of performance and test scores are regularly posted in the class with the students name and score. So everyone knows where they stand amongst their peers academically. Jae talked about the focus on grades,

“The whole education system stresses so much the grade you feel like if you fail on certain subjects like math or English then you feel like you’re not doing right with your life. It's not like that here like a person can have a talent in education while some people can have a talent in singing, dancing or whatever. You’re expected to perform well in every subject.”
Korean students attend school 220 days per year; American students attend school 40 fewer days per year. Jae said that summer school is also mandatory. There is a two-month period of summer school where they are in class from 8 to 5 in the summer. Now this method certainly seems “intense”, especially compared to the American education system. For Korean students, this intensity becomes their norm. It is expected for students to commit most of their time to school and studying. Dorothy explains her aunt’s high standards for her children in school, “I think she had high expectations. When my cousins would complain, rather than sympathy from my aunt they would get the attitude, “well that’s what you should be doing. You’re working hard and eventually it will work out kind of thing.”

Students do not participate in extra-curricular activities in Korea. As you can imagine there is little time to do so. “Formal learning monopolizes all of students’ time. Students have little or no time for recreational or enrichment activities, such as sports and arts. Many high schools lack modern gymnasiums or sports teams,” (Blazer, 2). Dorothy, having experience in both American and Korean schools cites the lack of extra curricular activities as the downfall of Korean education compared to school in the United States,

“There is a lack of extra cirriculars where students show their involvement in after school programs like in the States. I think that kind of is a missing dimension in the Korean school systems. Especially in the college entrance process because it’s less holistic in Korea than here. Here you get an entire application that covers your extra cirriculars to grades to everything is looked at including an essay whereas in Korea there’s an essay and your test scores and then how you did in school.”
Another intriguing part of the Korean high school experience that differs immensely from the American education system is the prevalence of private tutoring centers referred to as Hagwon. Both Jae and Dorothy cited that these after-school private tutoring services are where most the “actual learning” is perceived to take place. In her book, Ripley cited that she observed many Korean students sleeping during their high school classes during the day because they knew they would learn what they needed to know at Hagwon. Both Dorothy and Jae said most Korean students feel that they learn more at Hagwon than they do at their public school. So I wanted to look further into the increasingly popular privatized Hagwon culture that has almost become a necessity in Korean education. Hagwon is an additional monetary cost associated with the Korean education system on top of the social costs we just explored of sacrificing sleep, extra cirriculars, a summer-break, time with family and a social life for long intense hours of studying.

“I WENT TO PIANO HAGWON WHEN I WAS FOUR. THAT’S WHEN I STARTED GOING.”

HAGWON CULTURE: A BOOMING BUSINESS

“The Hagwon thing has been sort of a phenomenon I think more recent. My mom (who grew up in Korea) didn’t have to go through the Hagwon culture but she put in just as many hours to study. It was more studying at home but now there’s the Hagwon industry. Yeah it’s probably one of the biggest stressors because you start off so early. I want to say most people probably start in middle school. I went to piano Hagwon when I was four. That’s when I started going.”

-Dorothy Krebill, Iowa college student from Seoul, South Korea
Meet Andrew Kim. He is known in Korea as the “four-million dollar teacher”. He is also referred to as “rock-star teacher”. He has been an English Hagwon teacher for 20 years and he brought home four million dollars in 2010. He works 60 hours per week teaching in-person lectures and internet classes where students purchase his services for an hourly rate. Andrew Kim is a representation of just how valued Hagwons are in South Korea. The Hagwon industry is a booming business. 75 percent of all South Korean students attend Hagwon. South Korea’s Ministry of Education, counted 95,000 Hagwons and 84,000 individuals providing tutoring services, (Blazer, 2). There are more private Hagwon instructors in South Korea than there are school teachers. And enrollment is highest among high school students. In 2010, 84 percent of high school students, 50 percent of middle school students, and 45 percent of elementary students enrolled in Hagwon (Blazer, 2).

Hagwons range in subject from math to English to piano and the private instruction does not come cheap. South Korean families spend an average of $2,600 per year for each child to go to Hagwon. Wealthier families can spend over $1,000 per month on Hagwon. Dorothy and her father volunteered in an informal Hagwon teaching English.

“I use to volunteer with my dad in high school in a poorer part of Seoul to sort of mirror a Hagwon for students who couldn’t afford it. We were just tutoring English and stuff just because even if their parents weren’t able to pay for them to get a tutor there had to be some way that these students had to supplement their normal education or else they wouldn’t have been competitive.”
According to Dorothy and Jae, attending Hagwon has practically become a necessity in Korea to be competitive. More money can buy better Hagwon instructors. Some rich students can even access leaked SAT answers and other test answers if they shell out enough cash. “I think it’s the same in every country but money is everything…if you have money you can do anything,” said Jae. He also said it would be very rare for a rich student to do poorly in school, “That’s a very rare case. Because usually the family with lots of money will get them a private tutor. The best private tutor.” Hagwon may help some students perform better than others, but Jae thinks academic performance ultimately depends on the dedication of the student, not how much money their family has. Jae said,

“It depends on your standard of living but it usually costs around 300 dollars per month. Most people can afford to go unless you’re poor. Then you cannot go. It’s usually the case that if you can’t afford to Hagwon, you won’t do as well. At the same time even if you go to Hagwon, I have seen many people who still don’t do well in school. So it depends on you I guess.”

I also learned through my research that Hagwon is an opportunity for students to socialize and also for them to learn “more” than they do in their public schools during the day. Jae explains,

“Well it’s like a second school. You can call it a second school you socialize. One thing good about Hagwon are that you can befriend students from different high schools or districts so it’s a very good socializing place. At the same time its kind of more challenging than school sometimes. They give out more homework than high school at Hagwon, so the life must suck for people who go to high school and Hagwon at the same time and most students do both.”
When asked if people enjoy going to Hagwon, Jae laughed and said, “Oh no. Nobody likes to go to Hagwon.” Jae attended math Hagwon before he started high school but did not continue Hagwon because he knew he wanted to attend college in America. He estimates 90 percent of his friends attended Hagwon throughout high school. While it is a time to socialize and learn, it has become an added cost for Korean students to pay. There is a bit of stratification based on income with the increasing popularity of this private industry but the Korea attitude appears to be that grades and test scores ultimately depend on how hard the individual student is willing to study, not how much money their family has. Although it is clear money can buy better instruction. With the increasingly popular Hagwon culture we see a shift from students being primarily educated in public systems where they are on a level playing field (especially because Korea has a national curriculum). Now, we see this private industry has become a necessity in becoming educated and competitive in Korea. Attending Hagwon has become part of the education culture in Korea. It has become an additional cost Korean students must pay for their world-class education. All of this money that is being poured into this private industry is largely in preparation for the Sueneng, which is the national standardized exam taken by Korean high school students that largely determines where they will attend college, what profession they will go into and sometimes even who they will marry. Certainly the Sueneng is a high stakes exam that Korean families are willing to shell out cash for
Hagwon if it means their child will receive a better score, which is believed to be synonymous with a better life in Korea.

“IF THEY FAIL, THEY FEEL THAT THEY FAIL THEIR LIFE.”

THE SUENENG: A HIGH STAKES EXAM

“The Suneung happens one time thing per year in their last year of high school. So if they fail, they feel that they fail their life. Because of that they think of all the bad consequences like, how will my parents think about this? How will my cousin and friend or society think about this? I’m not going to go to a good college, I’m not going to get a good job, I’m not going to get a good wife, my life would suck and just depression comes I guess." 

-Jae Jeon, Iowa college student from Busan, South Korea

Korean high school students take the Suneung, nation wide on the same day in their senior year of high school. It’s a comprehensive test of everything you have learned throughout high school and you only get one shot. If students do not do well on the exam there is the option to take what is called a Jesah year, which is a gap year where students will study intensely for a year and then re-take the exam. Dorothy’s cousin is currently taking a Jesah year. The exam is the largest determining factor for college entrance. And the competition to get into a respected university is fierce. Blazer explains,

“The U.S. has almost 7,000 postsecondary educational institutions and programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). In contrast, there are only about six or seven prestigious South Korean universities. Performance on a culminating national university entrance exam is the sole determinant of which university a student can attend. Students’ academic careers are dedicated entirely to earning high enough scores on
the university entrance exam to gain acceptance into one of these top universities.”

Seoul University, Korea University and Yensei University are among the top universities. Jae told me, “If you go to a good college then your life is set. You are going to have a successful life and it has been that way since such a long time ago.” Dorothy said if she knows of someone who is going to Seoul University, she is blown away. It is a high honor in Korea to go to one of these top colleges and the best way to get into these prestigious universities is to do well on the Sueneng. Korean students can go to Hagwon specifically to prepare for the exam. When I asked Dorothy how her cousins felt before they took the exam she laughed and responded, “I didn’t talk to them at all. They were busy studying. Usually they would miss family gatherings because even on the weekends they’re doing something to prepare. The only time they weren’t at academy was sleeping or church. It’s just so intense.”

“South Korean high school seniors often sleep only four hours per night for several months leading up to the university entrance exam,” (Blazer, 2).

Temples are packed with parents on the days leading up to the test as well as on the day of the test. Parents pray intensely for their child to perform well on the exam. Younger high school students throw a parade before the students come take their test. The entire community is engaged and invested in the senior’s big day of taking the Sueneng. There is a lot of pressure that is put on
the test. Pressure can be so intense it is causing Korean students to take their own lives.

“EVERYBODY IN SEOUL LIVES IN HIGH-RISE BUILDINGS SO IT’S NOT THAT HARD TO FIND A BUILDING TO JUMP OFF OF.”

SUICIDE IN SOUTH KOREA: A NATIONAL CRISIS

“Suicide rates are super high in Korea. In seventh grade when I was living in one neighborhood I remember someone (a high school girl) had jumped off of a building. Everybody in Seoul lives in high-rise buildings so it’s not that hard to find a building to jump off of. I remember she lived in a different apartment complex and everybody in the neighborhood obviously knew about it. She was a high school student so usually most people think that it’s caused by stress. I just know that suicide rates within young people is so high and it’s usually accredited to academic pressure.”

-Dorothy, 21, Seoul, South Korea

“Because they stress this test so much and the Suneung is a one time thing per year in their last year of high school. So if they fail they feel that they fail their life and because of that they think of all the bad consequences like how will my parents think about this? How will my cousin and friend or society think about this? I’m not going to go to a good college, I’m not going to get a good job, I’m not going to get a good wife…my life would suck, and just depression comes I guess.”

-Jae, 21, Busan, South Korean

We have seen the costs thus far of the Korean method of educating its students. There has been a social cost in that Korean students largely sacrifice their social life, sleep, time with their families and fun for long hours of intense studying. There has been a monetary cost associated with paying for private tutors and Hagwon that can create stratification in the quality of education one can get based on their family’s income. The most powerful finding from my research however was the prevalence of youth suicide in South Korea. It is the
ultimate cost to pay for academic success. A cost that many students are paying. Suicide is the leading cause of death for people under 40 in the nation. Rates have doubled in the last decade. The South Korean suicide rate is second in the world according to the World Health Organization (second only to Greenland). The U.S. ranks 33rd. (2011); South Korea has the highest suicide rate among the 30 OECD countries. Nearly double the rate of the OECD average. To give perspective, the U.S. ranks 18th.

While it is hard to determine exactly why these students committing suicide, my research and interviews both revealed that academic pressure is a huge stressor and is believed to be a leading cause in youth suicide within Korean society. My ethnographic methodology produced telling results about the issue of youth suicide in Korea. Both Dorothy and Jae brought up the issue of youth suicide in Korea without being provoked to speak about it. Dorothy recalls her mom’s reaction and the way she told her of the suicide of a girl in the apartment building next to hers,

“It was just like, (pauses), like my mom didn’t sound upset when she was explaining it to me. If there was a suicide in the states going on and someone heard about it in the news it would have cut a lot deeper. Whereas in Korea, I don’t think it hurts any less but its just like, “Oh this happened….again” type of thing.”

Jae recalls his experience learning of a suicide of a girl at the next school over from his.

*How did you hear about it?*

“It was a neighborhood school, so teachers tell you,” said Jae.

*Is it surprising or not?*
“Oh it’s not surprising. (Jae quickly answered) I mean it’s a surprise that someone has committed suicide but it’s not like a shock,” Jae said.

_So what do teachers say when they’re telling you one of your peers committed suicide?_

“The teacher will say, don’t do stupid things like that. College is not everything. They try to console the students who haven’t gotten a good grade. It (the test) is really big in Korea. _Really big,_” Jae responded.

Through my research, I found that most Korean students have an acquaintance, friend, peer or family member who has contemplated, attempted or committed suicide. Certainly a disturbing reality. Korea is now facing a nationwide suicide crisis. I have reason to believe the stress and pressure that is put on students in Korean high school is contributing to the sky-high youth suicide rates.

Dorothy explains why she believes suicide rates are so high in Korea,

> “Because so much is on the line. Up until that point (the test), everything that started from whenever your parents started sending you to Hagwon and intensive schooling started. Whenever that started to the point of their suicide if you think about that its all their life was. If you’re not performing up to standard or if you’re pushing yourself too hard I can understand why students are committing suicide.”

Jae echoed Dorothy in that he could rationalize a reasonable explanation why so many students are committing suicide. He too attributed academic pressure and testing to contributing to the youth suicide rate in Korea. When asked why he thinks suicide is such a big problem in Korea, Jae quickly responded,

> “Because in high school they stress that grades are everything. That’s how the whole society is, like that grades are everything when you’re in high school.”
Neither Dorothy nor Jae could recall or share any type of memorable suicide prevention that took place in their communities or schools.

The Mapo Bridge is the largest bridge in Seoul. It is a fascinating example of how the Korean government is attempting to deal with this national suicide crisis. The Mapo Bridge is a notorious suicide spot that got a makeover in 2012. If you were to walk across the Mapo Bridge, which crosses the Han River today, you will see encouraging messages inscribed on the bridge. Messages such as, “Your worries will feel like nothing when you get older” are now inscribed on the bridge. Also on the bridge is a statue of an older man consoling a younger boy. This renovation to the notorious suicide spot shows that it is a recognized issue in the city, but this appears to be a band-aid approach to suicide prevention in that it is not addressing the root of the problem, which is what is causing individuals to kill themselves. According to my research, certainly the education system that is currently employed in Korea is seen as a source of stress and a possible explanation for the high youth suicide rate.

Jae believes the people of Korea want a change in their system,

“Yep everyone thinks that way, that we need a change, but none of ‘em know how to change that. The standard is so high, very high. But because some people actually achieve that impossible, most of the parents think, ‘my son can do it too’. That’s why they push them.”

When I set out to study Korean education I was not aware of the alarmingly high suicide rates. The discovery of those high suicide rates took my research in a different direction. The high youth suicide is truly the underside, the dark side of the Korean education system. It seems like every Korean student
has a friend or at least knows of someone who has attempted or committed suicide. This is what is happening beneath the tip of the iceberg. Which is a shocking reality and truly, I feel, the ultimate “cost” of the Korean education system.

We can see that the need to perform, the drive for success has created a national crisis for the country of South Korea. They have an educational system worthy of global envy if we simply look at their test scores on international exams but when you look closer, is it truly a system of worthy envy? Certainly, I do not envy the quality of life that Korean students have after concluding my semester of research. I think that if students are paying the ultimate cost, being their lives, because of academic related pressure there is certainly something that must change within their system.

In conclusion, we can see that there are substantial costs that Korean students are paying for their world-class education and outstanding performance on international tests. They sacrifice a social life, hobbies, spending time with family and sleep for long, intense hours of studying, especially in high school. There is a monetary cost associated with private tutors and Hagwon that have not only become a booming industry in Korea but a necessity in performing well at school. Finally, some students are paying the ultimate cost, that of course being their lives due to pressure associated with the need to achieve academic success. My research revealed that many Koreans like Dorothy and Jae and their family and friends recognize there is a need for change in the Korean education
system, but they are not sure what that solution is. As we just saw with the 2012 Mapo bridge renovation, the Korean government acknowledges the national suicide crisis but has largel‌y used band-aid solutions to attempt to curb the high suicide rates rather than re-evaluating the systems that may be causing some of these suicides, such as the education system. Korea’s impressive performance on international exams paints the picture from the outside that they have an education system worthy of envy. The macro perspective from the outside looking in is that Korea has perfected an education system that is producing world leaders in reading, math and science. But when one explores what is happening on the micro level, what cannot be told or explained by examining test scores, there is another story to be told. Test scores, as we have seen, do not account for individual student experience within and education system. In Korea we see sky-high test scores being produced but we also see an alarmingly high suicide rate, and an unpleasant high school experience for most Korean students. So yes, Korea has an education system worthy of global envy if one is only accounting for scores on international standardized exams, but when you look closer, the individual students within that system are paying a high cost for their world-class education.
Works Cited


