Literature Review Paper

South Korea's education landscape driving overachievement as the leading cause of the youth's highest suicide rate.

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Introduction

The leading cause of death for the South Korean youth between the ages of 10 to 24 years is suicide. Suicide represented “44.8% of all deaths” (Donnelly, et al., 2021, p.1) and the rate was the highest “for over a decade…with almost one death every 40 min …represent(ing) an “epidemic” (Rasche et al., 2022. p.2). The most common method of suicide for adolescents is “jumping from a high place” followed by “hanging” (Lee et al., 2022, p. 2) which could be explained by the easy access of all the high-rise buildings but also suggestive of the youth’s degree of psychological distress. As alarming as the information on the suicide figures, South Korea is exceptionally known for the exorbitant idolization and expenditure on education. “Parental obsession for their children’s educational and social success have been widely discussed in academic articles and media reports both in and outside Korea” (Oh et al., 2020. p. 2.) The literature review is a combined exploration of the multidimensional and cultural causes of South Korea’s suicide phenomenon with a consistent highlight on the academic pressure correlated with student’s mental health.

Wang’s (2016) scholarly article focuses on how the risk of suicide is aversely affected by the results of College Scholastic Ability Test and despite good test results, the primary suicide victims are those that do not just meet the standards set by themselves but their families. The suicide-related factors are studied by Lee et al. (2022), Donnelly et al. (2021), Rasche et al. (2022) and Oh et al. (2020) against a socio-economic backdrop which determined those with less spending for academic expenses are more prone to depression, somatic symptoms, and suicide ideation or death. The limitation of Lee’s study is the fact that reports are made on the information given solely by volunteers, such as teachers, as well as Mueller and Abrutyn’s (2016) sociological case study on a community located in Popular Grove, USA, because of the

stigma surrounding suicide. Across all the literature review, there were proposals on solutions to combat the stigma around mental illness and conclusively that South Korea needs to minimize the suicide risk on a systemic level. Nevertheless, the gap in the literature is exactly what needs to be done in the aspect of overachievement in educational attainment on a family level.

South Korea's Education System

"Education attainment was found to have the largest indirect effect for attempted suicide of all investigated variables such as income or occupation" (Raschke et al., 2022. p. 11). That attainment is not merely just doing well at the school the student is attending but the necessity to be enrolled in hagwons. Hagwon is the Korean word for academic institutions with after-school private tutoring and it "refers to the supplementary education in addition to public education" (Oh et al., 2020. p.6). Parents have the best intentions to have their child excel but "private tutoring increases student's academic stress and the increase in private education is likely to lead to depression in the children of the poor due to the burden of education costs, poor academic performances, academic achievement, and stress" (Oh et al., 2020. p.2). The renowned hagwons have their own entrance procedures with extensive waitlists depending on the neighborhood, the content taught are usually a grade or two levels higher than regular school, and hagwon homework is mandatory to be completed with regular assessments on how well a student is maintaining. These hagwons often end late at night, even for elementary students, which leave little time for family or friend quality time and leisure play. Moreover, among the somatic symptoms that lead to suicide, sleep was a "statistically significant predictor in…report(ing) both male and female students…likely to be in the high-risk groups" (Donnelly et al, 2021. p. 9).

Furthermore, South Korea's education culture of public ranking as illustrated by Table 2 in the research study by Wang (2016) on a national and school level is seen by everyone.

Rankings could elevate schools but for the student, the pressure of competing and comparing can have detrimental effects. The ranking of a student could be considered a part of their identity, whether it be between the first or second title as the constant challenge of being the best or lower ranking as an acceptance of one's mediocrity. For students on both grade spectrums, "high-performing individuals…may experience an increased suicide risk when their actual performance in a high-stakes examination falls short of their expected performance, even if their actual test scores are high compared to other students" (Wang, 2016. pp.361-362) and "three studies highlighted that individuals with lower levels of educational attainment exhibited higher rates of suicide deaths" (Raschke et al., 2022. p. 12).

Overachievement

In this educational landscape, "the achievement culture is perpetuated in part through social comparisons among classmates within the adolescent society" (Mueller and Abrutyn, 2018. p. 888). Therefore, the youth's sense of belonging in the social context is based on effortless achievement which perpetuates a pressure never to fail or even make it seem as they need help. Although the study done by Mueller and Abrutyn (2018) was focused on a community, Popular Grove, the microcosm can be paralleled to South Korea because of the outstanding high suicide rates among the adolescents. Popular Grove can be generalized as a relatively individualistic culture since it is in the USA versus South Korea based on a collective Confucian context, however the two communities "emphasize high achievement and perfectionism" (Mueller and Abrutyn, 2018. p. 887). Moreover, in both locations, there is a stigma surrounding any struggle whether that be mental illness because it is a sign of weakness and a reflection of the family. In Popular Grove, there is no reporting of "mental health issues with their child due to fear of being perceived as bad parents" (Mueller and Abrutyn, 2018, p.

890) and South Korean's "perfectionism shapes the binary thinking of individuals about their lives and enforces a success or failure dichotomy…(and) experiencing or disclosing suicidal ideation may have negative consequences" (Donnelly, et al. 2021. p. 2). The major insight by Mueller and Abrutyn (2018) was "creating programs to help youth navigate perceived failures and cope with academic stress toward reducing pain and hopelessness…in turn, diminish(ing) suicidality" (p.894), however, the pressure of the parents and denial of their child's need for help is still not addressed.

The neurological and psychological health of the youth is bound to be affected in a climate of overachievement if students cannot express emotional grievances. For instance, in Donnelly et al.'s (2021) study "56% had apparent concerns during the year before their death by suicide but without impacting school attendance or acceptance level at school" (p.9). On top of academic performance, the upkeep to maintain a face of well-being in front of others, is weighing on not just the student but the entire family. In South Korea, "fathers do not spend time with their children but only care about their child's academic performance" (Oh et al., 2020. p. 6) and the biggest factor leading to the youth suicides is the "absence of reliable relationships (which) may increase children and students' vulnerability to negative stressful events and consequently their risk of suicidal behaviors" (Lee et al., 2022. p. 9). The study showed that "student's usual concerns observed by teachers in the year before their death, family problems were highest at 53.8%, followed by academic problems (46.4%)" (Lee et al., 2022. p. 8). Without the proper support from family members and having any mental or emotional issues "the discrimination in a family-oriented collectivistic society can be more severe and impede help-seeking behaviors…due to the belief that the stigma of mental illness reflects negatively on the entire family" (Donnelly et al., 2021. p.2).

The overachievement is bleeding into the parental pressure upon the children to the extent that in Popular Grove, “many parents worried how it would look to others if their child were known to have serious mental health problems” (Mueller and Abrutyn, 2018, p. 891). The denial of the youth’s struggle or the “preoccupation with how help-seeking would look to others” (Mueller and Abrutyn, 2018, p. 891) further isolates them to an isolated suicidal abyss.

Suicide in South Korea

Suicide is a significant problem in South Korea with “the average suicide rate for children and young adults aged 0-19 in OECD countries as 1.70, the average of Korea was 2.13, which ranks Korea as the top 10 among 38 countries” (Lee, M.S. et. al, 2022, p.2). Across the suicide studies, the commonality was the lower socio-economic status as a major risk factor among the youth. The purpose of overachieving in academics is to get into the most prestigious college to earn the most at the presumed best companies, “according to the Korea Statistics 2018, education levels and hourly wages are highly correlated” (Oh et al., 2020. p.8). As a result, the less income that is earned by the family, the less they are able to provide in the goal of providing private education. The annual increase in spending for afterschool academics was “about 342 dollars per student” and “the higher the average monthly household income, the higher the private education costs and participation rate” (Oh et al., 2020. p. 2). The entire family system is pressured to ensure academic success which drives “into an endless competition, but this competition only results in intensified inequality” (Oh et al., 2020. p.8) and continues a cycle of “hopelessness and their fear of not living up to the intense expectations” (Mueller and Abrutyn, 2018. p.893). Despite Korea’s rapid economic growth and excelling academic achievement, the youth suicide conflict is increasing as well with “intergenerational conflict emerging as a major social problem” (Lee et al., 2022. p.9)

Since suicide is stigmatized in South Korea, the resources are not as readily available especially in the lower socioeconomic neighborhoods and overall “utilization of psychotherapy treatment in Korea is noticeably low” (Donnelly et al., 2021. p.1). In the selected research reports, which admitted its limitations, the authors needed to go by teacher’s reports or ask questions regarding somatic symptoms because examining mental health concerns is stigmatized. In Lee’s study (2022), more boys (52.6%) than girls died by suicide, but any personal or emotional problems went unnoticed in boys, perhaps due to the cultural acceptance of boys not being able to express their inner feelings.

Finally based on Wang’s (2016) case study on the effect of high-stakes testing on suicide of teenagers, the results indicate the highest-risk group were elevated not when the student does worse than her expectations but “her suicide risk increases because she fails her parent’s expectations rather than her own” (p.359). When reviewing the expectation aspect as a significant factor, the study at Popular Grove can provide insight into how “many youths reported, that parents live through their children; thus a child’s failure or success is experiences as reflecting strongly on the parents” (p.887). In a shame-based culture such as South Korea, by failing to meet the perfect score and expectations of the family or plan for the future, the youth are most vulnerable.

Conclusion

The education system’s culture of overachievement and various socio-economic factors contribute to the high suicide rate in South Korea for the youth. The pressure to succeed academically may be seen as the primary means of upward social mobility and economic prosperity, leading to increased stress and anxiety among students who fear they will not

succeed. Further into the literature review, the cultural context and expectation of the family exacerbates the risk of suicide.

What would it take to break the cycle of idolizing education and overachievement as the means to success as a family? If academic achievement is a direct reflection of the family, which means so much to the children, what is the alternative replacement? What social programs could be implemented in bridging the family based on values of love and not education? The gap in the literature review is what and how educational attainment could be replaced to prevent the unfortunate deaths of the vulnerable youth.

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