

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Education fever in South Korea: Rite of passage
versus children's rightsHwayoung Kim¹ and Vladimir Hlasny^{2*} ¹Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Leuven, Belgium²Department of Economics, College of Social Sciences, Ewha Womans University, Seoul, South Korea**Abstract**

From enrolment in elementary school until acceptance at university, South Korean children pursue a uniform, arduous goal assigned to them by their mothers, community, and popular culture. Where this personal struggle will lead adolescents, and how, why, and at what cost? This study conceptualizes education as the rite of passage, not only for the children's social initiation but also in their mothers' pursuit of self-validation and self-worth. This social ritual aims to raise successful workers and righteous citizens but also inflicts various harms on the children, posing significant costs to them, their parents, and their teachers. We document evidence that youths endure various hardships and even long-term harms from being blindly and unidirectionally steered during their adolescence by their ostensibly emotionally cold "manager moms." We assert that giving children their own voice, shifting the prevailing social norms, and reforming the educational and career-access systems would help children attain better outcomes with lower collateral damage.

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1. Introduction

From enrolment in elementary school until acceptance at university, Korean students strive toward a uniform, arduous goal set by their mothers, society, and popular culture. The similarity lies not only in the intensity and endurance of their struggle to climb the social ladder but also in the immediate day-to-day urgency of the pursuit and the lack of guidance on where this personal struggle will lead adolescents, how, or why. Many students are rewarded only with disillusionment once they see the landscape from the plateau of the social scaffolding they have climbed – their social role and status may differ from their prior naïve expectations. Their choices then include acceptance of their fate, climbing another social pillar to yet another platform, or jumping down in a desperate call of protest.

The reality for Korean students can be described as a blind struggle of uncoordinated individuals for their interaction with their environment and culture, the organization of society, and the role of the state in shaping and controlling this nexus. This calls for critical introspection before setting off on a life path and a systemic reconceptualization – or a popular rebellion – against the established social conventions. These responses are

beyond the control of Korean students in their day-to-day up-or-out bubble, put up by their parents and amid the existing educational arrangement. Therefore, a new system-wide institutional arrangement should be pursued.

This study describes the social and cultural setting in which Korean mothers, with over-ambitious expectations toward their children, play a pivotal role in subjecting the children to excessive cramming, mental burnout, and risks of “experiential stunting” and other long-term harms. The study contributes by adopting the children’s perspective, drawing on existing theories from sociology and social anthropology, and providing new evidence in the Korean context. The study eschews detailed descriptions of the Korean educational and career management systems or the experiences of mothers in the patriarchal male-breadwinner culture and under prevailing value systems, instead focusing squarely on the developmental experiences of children.

Our study begins by observing that during their adolescence, Korean children are almost universally enrolled in private after-school academies (Hagwon, also known as cram schools or shadow education) and spend a substantial proportion of their free time there. Shadow education is so prevalent in South Korea that parents fear their children will fall behind if they do not engage in it. These privately run after-school institutions teach English, Korean language, and mathematics, which constitute a large portion of the major subjects in the university entrance examinations. Often, private classes prepare students for the following academic year, allowing them to stay ahead of their school schedule and peers. This system produces a vicious cycle in which many students have already learned course material before it is covered in public school, leading them to study harder at the private institution than at their regular school.

Our key thesis is that children’s mothers derive a sensation of entrepreneurship, existential security, self-worth, and prestige from managing their children’s advancement of capabilities, social initiation, and academic achievements (Lee, 2011; 2014). Children serve as avatars living the lives their mothers may not have been able to live themselves, through which mothers aspire to and experience their own (imagined) life dreams. The status quo is socially harmful; as children attain improper developmental outcomes, parents gain a false sense of social status with significant side effects, and the educational system becomes unduly strained.

The values espoused in many Korean families, and by extension in the Korean education system and society at large, internalize children’s academic involvement and achievement while externalizing children’s intrinsic values

and struggles. Korean social and cultural norms grant parents firm control over their children’s access to resources and capabilities, allowing them to shape their children’s constructed values, emotions, and functioning. As a result, children’s own views of their skills and prospects, their will, and their autonomy are disregarded. The emphasis on cognitive performance, coupled with parental control over children’s bodies and minds and the splintered nature of the educational experience, leads to uneven development in children, exposing them to undue burdens and long-term harms.

The rest of the article is organized as follows: Section 2 provides the context of education in Korean society and proposes a more nuanced re-conceptualization. Section 3 presents the implications of this approach in relation to social stakes, the meaning of successful matriculation, and the side effects of the current norms, drawing implications for students. Section 4 discusses public policy considerations.

2. Context and re-conceptualization of Korean Education

Existing literature contextualizes the significance of children’s education in South Korea vis-à-vis social institutions and individual norms. We build on the extant narratives to advance a more nuanced conceptualization, taking into account the role of education as the means of social initiation and self-validation.

In a society built up on Confucian traditions, individuals place high value on collective experiences and knowledge, particularly at the level of one’s kin and extended family. Yet, in spite of this collectivist value system, families have practiced the individualization of spheres of influence and the structuring of experiences attained by each family member.

South Korean family relations are patriarchal, based on clear age and gender roles and responsibilities. Under Confucianism, adolescents are prescribed a rite of passage to become righteous citizens (Seth, 2012), involving the discovery of both the external world and the self, through reading, writing, and demonstrating filial piety by working hard (Yang & Shin, 2008). Mothers have traditionally been responsible for raising children, and this role has been the sphere of their individual influence and an intrinsic part of their value system. In a society where women are often forced out of the labor market at the time of marriage (signifying their commitment to childbearing) and struggle to return upon their last child’s successful enrolment in university – resulting in a notorious M-shaped career life-cycle pattern – Korean mothers struggle to be recognized for their individual achievements (Kwon & Doellgast, 2018). Their

stake in their children's upbringing thus extends beyond the material benefits to family circumstances and the benefits bestowed on the children themselves, reflecting the women's individualized value from the community's perspective as well as their self-worth.

With the advent of a compressed, East-Asian variety of modernity in South Korea, individuals' gender and age roles underwent a transformation, making the intricate paradigm of collectivism and skewed individualization within families particularly pronounced (Chang, 2010). The sociocultural and economic reality became "intricately enmeshed with the simultaneously subservient and masterminding status of women in the highly family-centered systems of political economy, social care, educational competition, etc." (Chang & Song, 2010, p. 559). Modernity has transformed the space in which Korean mothers function and receive value and the means by which that happens. Korean mothers have individualized the management of household affairs and children's academic achievements, placing their children's achievements on the front line to be publicly seen and appropriating value from them for their own gratification and self-validation.

Modernity, by upending the existing social fabric and norms of community relations and bringing along the opportunities and risks associated with worldwide exchange and the knowledge-based economy, has focused the spotlight on individuals' cognition and education, particularly on families' role in raising children. The traditional zeal for children's education in Korean families has survived a bygone era, but its manifestations and social implications have undergone a realignment. As economic and social problems in Korean society have evolved, so have the circumstances, forms, and yardsticks of instruction.

2.1. One path and one output metric

An important element of the compressed modernity has been the validation through simple seemingly objective output metrics. The South Korean education system is notoriously effective according to these metrics. Korean adolescents have consistently scored at the top in the International Assessment of Educational Progress in math and science and in all components of the Program for International Student Assessment (Table 1). These achievements have given international recognition to the quality of the Korean schooling system and bestowed a sense of pride on the nation at large. However, what is missing from the rankings is the measure of effort and resource outlays that enable these excellent results. Moreover, while the international recognition accrues to the nation, the unmeasured burdens are borne by individual families, in particular the children. Finally, the standardized results do

Table 1. Korea's rankings on the Program for International Student Assessment 2000 – 2018

	2000	2003	2006	2009	2012	2015	2018
Reading	6	2	1	2–4	3–5	4–9	2–7
Mathematics	2	3	1–4	3–6	3–5	6–9	1–4
Science	1	4	7–13	4–7	5–8	9–14	3–5

Notes: Estimates from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019). Ranges indicate that Korea's score was statistically insignificant from those of select other countries.

not necessarily translate into actual skills, successful social integration, job prospects, or welfare, potentially leaving Korean children behind in these areas.

While the nation basks in pride, and parents derive their self-worth from identifying with their children's academic achievements, the children bear the costs and remain unaware of the true value of their education. Children become unwilling pawns in their mothers' and the state's tactical struggle to climb respective hierarchies. To the extent that the mothers' support for children's education does not stem from an understanding of their children's or their own true needs (Han, 2008), the arrangement does not enhance social welfare – or indeed the welfare of any single person.

2.2. Reconceptualizing education

In his exposition of the symbols and meanings of initiation rituals, Turner (1967) decomposed the elements in the society's production of fully integrated social members. The typical route involves neophytes undergoing isolation and a set of predetermined exercises conducted by someone with absolute authority to transition from an initial prima material state to a state of maturity. During the period of liminality, on the margin (or limen) of accepted social structures, neophytes are not recognized as legitimate members of either the unspoiled innocent youth or the experienced mature class, and, as such, have limited rights and civic responsibilities. During initiation, they are thoroughly exposed to a hierarchical relationship with their initiators to learn the skills and values necessary to (re)join society as full members. Children engaged in formal education in a modern society can be viewed as going through a liminal phase of an initiation ritual.

The student–initiator relationships exist between the students and their educators. The education establishment is tasked with initiating children into successful participation in the modern, democratic Confucian society and the creativity and knowledge-based marketplace. The institution of a traditional initiator is represented by the educators and by the package of norms and truths they stand for. Students are expected to accept these norms and

truths without question. The primary outcome of initiation is instilling in the student the knowledge and values that society holds to be critical for the student's successful integration and participation in society.

The primary stakeholders in the students' initiation process are private tutoring academies and the students' mothers. The academies act as agents for the students, or rather for the students' paying mothers, ensuring the successful initiation of their clients following an intensive cramming ritual. They have been found to be proficient at raising the students' standardized scores in math, English, and other core subjects (Park *et al.*, 2011).

Besides its costliness in terms of tuition, supplies, and transportation, private tutoring also affects students' outcomes. The academies rig the social initiation contract, corrupting the traditional Confucian rite of passage, by offering an alternative, more dependable, and straightforward path to successful matriculation. Matriculation is degraded into a market commodity. Instead of facilitating a broad discovery of the external and the self for students' wholesome initiation, private academies focus on preparing students for the standardized tests of interest. The academies identify the subject areas for discovery, conduct the instruction, and practice testing – all without the student's input or creative effort. Opportunities for well-rounded discovery are thus lost.

2.3. Assigning responsibility for children's shadow education

Children's education in South Korea falls largely within the sphere of influence of their mothers. Mothers serve as the children's caretakers, financiers of their capacity to be initiated, architects and arbiters of the modalities in the initiation process, and residual claimants on the outcome of initiation. The involvement of mothers may not radically affect the demanding nature of the children's initiation regime – since this is dictated by social pressures – but it affects the type of knowledge children gain and the meaning of the exercise and its outcome.

Mothers hold the keys to their children's initiation by channeling physical resources, values, and sound-bite information to them (Göransson *et al.*, 2022). They are also stakeholders in the chosen course and outcome of their children's initiation, in terms of self-perceived social status and self-worth. The initiation process involving their avatars (children) has a transformational effect on them. A parallel, interconnected initiation process can thus be characterized for the mothers themselves, whereby they are initiated into the prevailing social and cultural fabric. They are on a transformational path from being unaccomplished stay-at-home moms to becoming the entrepreneurial brains,

or “manager moms,” behind a successful graduate (Chung, 2016; Jang, 2021). The process of steering and sponsoring their children's initiation, in a chaotic “busy mother” liminal phase, leads them to anticipate achieving social prestige, at least as assessed by self.

Korean mothers' enthusiasm for their children's education and early-career success is notoriously zealous, often referred to as *chimatbaram* (치맛바람), or the swishing of a skirt (of a young obsessive woman). This term reflects mothers' social engagement and overprotection, which is not dictated by outside pressures but is undertaken in any case as it is deemed helpful for establishing the mother's position in the family and community. This engagement ranges from volunteering to clean the children's classrooms, preparing lunch boxes for teachers on school field trips, to calling employers where their grown-up children are applying to request information about recruitment criteria and their children's prospects. The engagement aims to complement teachers' efforts, attract attention to specific children, or help secure priority consideration for their children in upcoming opportunities or competitions.

Mothers engage in an undeclared but fierce competition among themselves over who is more in their children's affairs, and who is more caring, active, or generous. This shows itself in ostentatious ways, such as through the brand names of clothes and bags that they or their children carry to school. To ensure that their children do not fall out of favor with their teachers (in the mothers' perception), mothers continue to participate in time-consuming and unproductive activities, sacrificing their opportunities to work formally or to develop their own capabilities. When mothers cannot participate actively in their children's affairs at school, perhaps due to financial difficulties, they experience a sense of guilt and self-blame over their perceived failure to adequately provide for their children (Lee, 2014).

These sentiments are widespread and are reflected even in aggregate national statistics. The full-time equivalent employment rate for women aged 15 – 64 is 53.4% as of 2021, near the bottom of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) rankings, and Korea's lowest score in a near-monotonic decline since the beginning of the 1990s (OECD, 2023). This is not an unskilled labor phenomenon. South Korea is the single worst performer among the OECD countries in terms of the educated-female employment rate, and the third worst performer in terms of female employment in managerial positions (ILO, 2022). Career interruptions due to childcare are partly to blame.

Even if mothers experience domestic violence or abuse from their husbands, their children's welfare and lifetime

prospects often make the mothers endure difficulties and cling to their marriage. When asked whether divorce should be avoided until all children have grown up, 82% of women respond in the affirmative (Chang & Song, 2010). In short, Korean mothers' involvement in their children's upbringing calls for personal and economic sacrifice on their part, but they accept it as the social norm. They then seek other sources of fulfillment and self-validation. Mothers' participation in their children's learning process has been found to be related to the mothers' degree of self-esteem (Kim, 2008). Children's academic achievement feeds directly into their mothers' sense of self-worth and social status. Mothers who have given up their own intellectual or professional development invest in the development of their children to regain their lost "self" and thus attain their individualized gratification. However, children with poor academic performance are often reproached by their mothers for sabotaging their efforts. Children are thus subjugated to serve as instruments for their mothers' self-advancement under the guise of the children's upbringing and social initiation (Kim, 2008).

3. Stakes at hands and implications for students

In light of the reconceptualization in the previous section, we next present the stakes at hand and the consequences for students, their families, and wider society.

3.1. Students' lifetime outcomes and social side effects

Adults' expectations toward children, and children's expectations of themselves, vary across cultures in terms of skills, understandings, and knowledge of proper behavior (Thomas, 2000). The World Economic Forum has identified 10 key skills necessary to thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, topped by complex problem solving, critical thinking, and creativity (WEF, 2016). The Partnership for 21st Century Learning emphasized the "4C" skills: Critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. These skills are notably missing from Korean students' curricula, both in their formal instruction and after-school tutoring.

In South Korea, the aspirations regarding the accumulation of values, skills, and knowledge that children are exposed to during school years focus solely on improving the children's performance on examinations and contests. The emphasis in formal education leans heavily toward skills assessed on written examinations, particularly the university entrance examination and other standardized assessments (Park, 2002). This educational focus involves a limited set of skills – primarily memorization of specific types of knowledge and receptive skills.

During the years of primary and secondary education, children in South Korea are often turned into "studying machines" (Cho, 2000). Figuratively, they are blindfolded to disregard the surrounding reality and their internal values and developmental needs (e.g., leisure, pleasure, reflection, sleep), focusing instead on fulfilling the self-worth needs of their mothers. This focus primarily pertains to the ranking of the high school and university where the students enroll, which has an enormous influence on their lifetime access to social and cultural capital as well as their socioeconomic achievements (No, 2009). "It is a shared belief among most parents that the rank of one's university determines one's worth as a social being [...] Those who fail consider themselves to be second-class citizens [...] the values of mainstream culture presuppose that getting on the escalator to academic success should be the top priority in children's lives" (Cho, 1995, p. 148). This belief contributes to the "education fever" in South Korea and its regional neighbors, which is transmitted and perpetuated by mainstream culture, community relations, and the children's own parents (Seth, 2002; Chen *et al.*, 2021).

A standardized nationwide university entrance examination determines which universities students may be admitted to. This examination holds colossal importance not only for the students themselves but also for their entire families. Mothers often perform shamanist rituals or Christian prayers near the sites where their children are taking their examinations. The government mobilizes public transportation and police, asks private citizens to avoid causing traffic jams, and even reroutes flights to minimize noise around testing sites.

All the skills and knowledge that students have perfected during the preceding school years are assessed on a single morning, during the university entrance examination day. This singular assessment gives rise to substantial pressure and stress that start accumulating years before the examination date. From early childhood, even before elementary school – commonly considered the basic stepping stone on the path to the university entrance examination – children are enrolled in English-language kindergartens and after-school private tutoring in anticipation of getting ahead of other children (Cho, 1995; Bae & Park, 2020). The competitive pressure follows the students over the years. On weekdays, middle school students typically spend as much as 9 h on formal and informal study, while university students spend only 4.5 h (Statistics Korea, 2022). The skills and knowledge that children focus on are all closely related to the requirements of the university entrance examination.

The side effect of the students' preoccupation with a handful of standardized written tests is that they lack a

broader worldview, intuitive understanding of complex material, creativity, and emotional maturity. Due to the limited form of instruction – principally self-study from written materials and sample examinations – Korean adolescents lack the social, emotional, and problem-solving skills necessary to mature at the same age as their foreign peers. This is aggravated by a tight after-school tutoring program, which does not allow for close personal relationships with their peers, social awareness beyond what is being tested, or the development of soft skills such as socializing and creative problem solving. The academy-hopping – arranged by “manager moms” (related to the well-known role of soccer or hockey moms in North America) – has been referred to as transboundary post-schooling (Kim & Jung, 2019). Because the decisions regarding the number and choice of subjects, and the study schedule, are made for the students, they miss out on gaining self-control, perspective, and experience in making their own decisions.

The pursuit of a high score on the university entrance examination day deprives students of 12 school year’s worth of opportunities to develop an array of physical, emotional, psychological, and social functions – notably their sociability, creativity, critical analytical skills, and independence. At home, throughout their childhood and adolescence, students are directed by a carrot-and-stick approach to fulfill their parents’ expectations, with their autonomy and self-governance under suspension.

Korean mothers’ overzealous engagement in their children’s upbringing has a number of negative repercussions, including excessive need for physical and social contact, extended infantilization, hindrance of independent behavior and social maturity, and a distorted (low or high) degree of parental control over the children’s life choices (Levy, 1966).

Students merely learn to amass and compartmentalize theoretical facts without the capacity to judge the facts’ validity and relevance, or the legitimacy of their mentors and the learning process broadly. This lack of critical thinking is problematic as the transmitted knowledge may be incorrect, irrelevant to the students’ long-term needs, or mischaracterized by biased instruction. Indeed, students’ English proficiency is often limited to reading comprehension and providing standard written responses, and even that proficiency may wither after the conclusion of qualifying examinations (Cho & Brutt-Griffler, 2015). The academies also distort the learners’ discovery of knowledge (or the initiate–initiator relationship) through the fragmented perspectives offered by multiple part-time, overworked instructors.

Parents and teachers themselves are not immune to the impacts of the education fever, facing significant

financial, psychological, and mental burdens. Families’ gross expenditures on private after-school tutoring and instruction far exceed those on formal high-school tuition and school supplies. According to Statistics Korea (2022), 75.5% of elementary, middle, and high school students received private education in 2021, averaging 29 hours per month and costing 485,000 Korean won per month per student, or 367,000 Korean won when including non-participants (equivalent to approximately US\$373 or \$282, respectively). Nationwide, 23.4 trillion Korean won (equivalent to approximately US\$18 billion) was spent on private tutoring in the year 2021. Meanwhile, rich and poor families differ in their means of arranging shadow education. Parents who cannot afford it take out loans due to a sense of shame, peer pressure, and “prestige orientation” (Lee, 2006; Lee & Shouse, 2011). These financial burdens further constrain their disposable incomes and cause additional distress down the line.

Public teachers preparing students for the university entrance examination also experience stress (Kim, 2016), overwork, strained voice, and other adverse health outcomes – particularly homeroom teachers in the third year of high school (Kim & Lee, 2001; Shin *et al.*, 2013; Lee *et al.*, 2018a; 2018b). Aggression from students is also prevalent (Moon *et al.*, 2015). This evidence corroborates the presupposition that the status quo in Korean adolescents’ upbringing and initiation is deleterious to social welfare and should be reformed.

3.2. The psycho-emotional and physical harms of forced schooling

Relying on carrot-and-stick approaches to children’s initiation reduces their status within the home to that of objects to be groomed, and warps family bonds from intimate person-to-person mutual-learning and respect relations to person-to-object command-and-submission relations. In this setting, parents act as their children’s managers rather than companions, with negative consequences for children’s development outcomes (Jang & Suh, 2021). The disassociation between parent and child may lead to the child’s “experiential stunting” (Smith, 2013). Hence, paradoxically, the manager moms engaging in *chimatbaram* and following their children relentlessly could be reproached for emotional neglect toward their children.

Besides emotional and cognitive consequences, physical harms are also inflicted. Because students face high pressure to produce academic results, their stress levels are elevated for extended periods of time. High school students experience substantial stress during the two years leading up to the examination date, a phenomenon known as the “disease of the third grade of high school.” Clinical

depression is common (Lee & Larson, 2000; Kim, 2021). Low exposure to emotional stimuli makes them vulnerable to external factors and unable to cope with emotional challenges such as peer violence, sexual violence, or personal tragedies. These and other experiential shortfalls during adolescence may have lifelong and irreversible consequences.

It has been estimated that up to 90% of students in large East-Asian cities suffer from myopia, compared to 20 – 30% in the UK not due to genetic factors, but primarily environmental and thus preventable factors. Excessive desk study and lack of exposure to outdoor light have been blamed (McGrath, 2012). High school students enter school by 7:30 a.m., take classes until 6 p.m., and then remain at school until late at night to study quasi-voluntarily at their own pace. Even middle and elementary school students are not spared, under the constant pressure from looming examinations and the nudging from their parents and peers.

The pressure on children from their mothers and by society at large can lead to explicit harms. Naver, the most popular search engine in South Korea, has a virtual consulting service where people with various personal concerns can post anonymously. Posts by high school students reveal the seriousness of their desperation and exhaustion. As one female student wrote:

“I don’t know why, but I just get angry with myself. I can’t sleep until 4 a.m. as I’m extremely worried that I’d be late for school and be scolded by my teacher. Every day, I wonder why I have to live if my scores are not good in Korean language, English, and Math. There are so many students with better scores than mine. If I can’t go to the university my parents want, why should I live? I know my parents don’t have money to pay for private tutoring anymore. I feel so behind and lost. That’s why I keep hitting myself.” (Anonymous, 2014)

More than 90% of high school students posting on the anonymous consulting platform attribute their desperation to their poor academic results. Students internalize their scores and rankings compared to their classmates into their sense of self-worth and their perception of the meaning of life. Instead of viewing their circumstances as composed of various experiences in which education plays a limited part, their sense of the meaning of life rests solely on their academic results. Low quotas on university acceptance leave a mark on the students who fail, as they have not just failed an examination – they have disappointed their parents and permanently disgraced their families’ honor (Ellinger & Beckham, 1997). Only a small subset of them can re-enroll in private academies to repeat the examination 1 year later.

When students fail to meet the goals they have set for themselves or those set by their parents or teachers, they feel ashamed to the extent that they may become passive and lethargic, or aggressive and even self-abusive. The most prevalent cause of death among Korean teenagers, ahead of car accidents in most years, is suicide. Widespread stress over upcoming or recently failed university entrance examinations is one of the most commonly reported causes (Phosaly *et al.*, 2019; Liu, 2020). Other behavioral responses of students to stress include violence toward teachers and one another (Park *et al.*, 2014; Moon *et al.*, 2015; Bax & Hlasny, 2019). **Figure 1** shows that the prevalence of private tutoring, its intensity in terms of typical hours, and its cost were stagnating or declining in the early 2010s but have been on a continuous rise since 2015. Correspondingly, the youth suicide rate increased sharply during 2015 – 2021, reaching double the rates observed at the turn of the century.

4. Discussion

This study emphasizes the conceptualization of education in South Korea as a rite of social initiation for children, coercing them into attaining narrow, standardized education subject to high personal costs and unclear benefits. Throughout their educational journey, children have little opportunity to voice their views or reservations. The value system of Korean mothers, and by extension, that of the Korean education system and society at large, internalizes children’s academic involvement and achievement while largely externalizing children’s intrinsic values and suffering. Korean social and cultural norms equip parents with firm control over their children’s access to information and their basic functions, thus allowing parents to dictate their children’s constructed value structures, emotions, and choices. The pressure for academic performance, the control of students’ bodies and minds by parents, and the splintered nature of the educational system result in uneven development for children, imposing undue burdens and even long-term harms. Children are deprived of opportunities to develop into wholesome, autonomous human beings and citizens because of prevailing norms, reductionist instruction at private institutes, and the insecurity and prestige orientation of children’s mothers.

We conclude that Korean students do not receive the protection from the educational system that they are entitled to. Rather, they are robbed of their autonomy, childhood experiences, and the learning they should have received. This situation results mainly from the tacit social compact among families, the state, and the education industry, which views youths in their liminal stage as incomplete and believes they should be shaped in ways

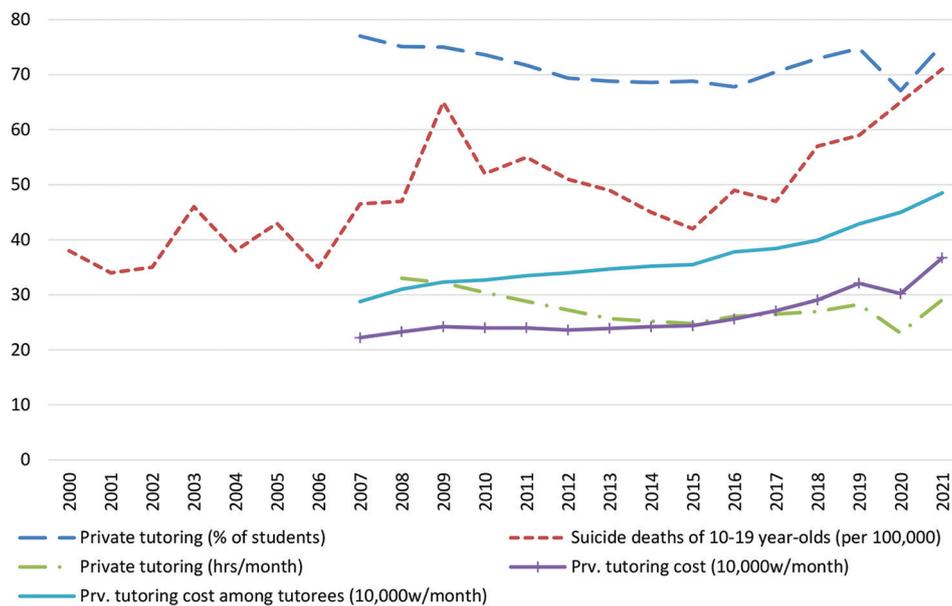


Figure 1. Indicators of the burden of shadow education on students and parents, 2000 – 2021. Note: Data from Statistics Korea (various years). Monetary values are in nominal terms

that only adults deem valuable. The students’ opinions, individuality, and diversity are trampled on, and they are molded to fit standardized social norms and knowledge.

We assert that the pervasiveness and endurance of the practice amounts to a violation of Article 6.2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which South Korea has ratified. This article states that “States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child” (UNICEF, 1989). Just as with child labor, children’s sexual exploitation, trafficking, organ harvesting, child witchcraft, or the recruitment of child soldiers in other contexts (Bales, 2004), the mental violence inflicted on Korean children stems from a deeply rooted, complex social rite that deserves scrutiny by social scientists, including sociologists and anthropologists, and a response by policymakers. This is despite the fact that children’s shadow schooling occurs subtly, in broad daylight, in modern and safe classroom settings.

4.1. Policy responses

For 10 years of their life, Korean students partake in a grueling regime, acting as blind studying machines, suspending their aspirations, demands, and dreams of a free future. During this period, their independence, capacity for critical and creative thought, and ability to protect themselves from external assaults become inhibited. This regime is also grueling for the students’ mothers and teachers, who participate in the process due to peer and career pressures, respectively. To break the vicious, self-reinforcing cycle,

comprehensive, multipronged reforms addressing the root causes and the positions of all actors are necessary.

Transitioning to a state in which Korean children are acknowledged as independent human beings and empowered to use and develop their creativity and critical thought will require serious societal and policy actions (Kitamura *et al.*, 2022). These actions include reforms of the public and private educational sectors, and public campaigns targeting social norms, family roles, and community and individual-level responses. Mapping out children’s own recourses is essential. Systemically and rigorously addressing children’s anxieties and other physical and mental side effects of accumulated stress is warranted. Facilitating a stress-free, smooth, and level school-to-work transition for youths and tackling the exclusion of mothers from the formal labor market would go far in mitigating some of the root causes.

In fact, the government embarked on educational reforms in the mid-2000s (Kim & Chang, 2010; Kim, 2016), cracking down on the special business rights of private academies, reducing their legal operating hours, updating the curriculum in public schools, and reforming the university, corporate, and public-service admission processes. Regulation of private tutoring has since wavered according to the focus and resolve of the administration in power, amid various political distractions. Families’ demand for tutoring has also proved to be inelastic, and families have responded to regulation by simply switching from one type of tutoring to another (Choi & Choi, 2016).

The government has also worked with the industry to strengthen equality of opportunities in hiring, offer workers second chances if they failed initial examinations, make it easier for workers to change their career tracks, and promote vocational training. These initiatives were partly possible thanks to the state-led nature of the country's industry and the system of incentives such as public tenders and fiscal support during downturns (Kalinowski & Hlasny, 2017), subject to eligibility criteria in terms of firms' inclusiveness.

Political debate has also considered the extent of children's participation in decision-making over their interests, and the applicability of related decrees in other cultures. In this regard, Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child calls for children's participation in matters affecting them:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

4.2. Future directions of policy discourse

Notwithstanding the calls in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children's competence to form and voice sound opinions has often been underestimated in deliberations over policies affecting children's welfare, and children's participation has been overlooked. Thomas (2000) documented cases of discrepancies between adults' assumptions regarding children's ability and willingness to participate, and children's competence and desire to direct themselves.

In traditional societies, parenting has entailed preparing children for a fixed pattern of living; therefore, obedience to parents has been viewed as good preparation for future life. As custom and authority have given way to freedom of choice under modernity, individuals are increasingly held responsible for shaping their own lifestyles. Helping children to form and express their opinions and make sound choices is becoming a critical parental task (Thomas, 2000). Pedagogy and educational methodology affecting children should be aligned with their wishes and with the local and cultural contexts.

In South Korea, children have had limited ability to position themselves as agents in control of the narrative

of their plight. They largely internalize and accept their role as cogs in the machine-perpetuating social hierarchy. This is because their community and social media portray educational fever as playing out in safe and modern conditions, and children's abuse as subtle and performed under the guise of children's own upbringing and social initiation. Korean students' plight is thus easy to discount even by the students themselves as a cruel necessity.

Broadly speaking, children are entitled to all opportunities for wholesome development, but predicting which learning and skills students will need for their self-realization is difficult. Unbiased by past norms, students themselves should be trusted as best placed to judge which skills will be valued in their age cohort, in the information and social environment they are growing up in. Further consideration should thus be given to the modalities of children's participation. Children should be considered as agents expressing their version of the narrative fully and candidly, under the support of professional counselors.

Rather than imposing predetermined types of knowledge and lifestyles on their children, parents should encourage children to articulate their own desires, hopes, and concerns so that they can help shape their life destinies. By taking part in their own life design, children may find more meaning and motivation to realize their individual dreams. This could relieve some of the pressure on the mainstream educational system and the main career entry points, alleviate competitive pressure for students choosing the traditional trajectory, and bring positive effects to communities cherishing diversity.

To ensure that students choose the correct social pillar to climb in their adolescence and realize their full potential without lifelong scars, they must become more closely involved in their initiation process. The problem of imbalance in their school-to-work transition and in their mothers' value system must be addressed via systemic reforms. Upskilling opportunities will need to be expanded to provide for balanced youth development, particularly for children with alternative learning needs, styles, and academic interests.

5. Conclusion

From enrollment in elementary school until acceptance at university, South Korean children, as well as their mothers and teachers, are subjected to a grueling regimen of preparation for standardized examinations. This study re-conceptualizes the educational experience as the rite of passage, not only as part of the children's social initiation but also in their mothers' pursuit of self-worth. Given that the blind and unidirectional steering of children toward a common goal subjects them to hardships and long-term

harms, we assert that public awareness campaigns and educational-sector reforms can improve welfare for all those affected. The advocacy and search for a preferred regime should bring together various stakeholders – including education scholars, employer groups, and representatives of children and healthcare – with the common interest of ushering in a harmonious society preoccupied not with the test scores of 18 year olds, but with what the next generation broadly can do and become.

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