

IS ACADEMIC PRESSURE & DECLINING MENTAL HEALTH THE NEW NORMAL FOR SOUTH KOREAN YOUTH?

by

Josephine Ørgaard Rasmussen

Introduction

With a culture rooted in Confucian traditions, where personal value is inseparable from social rank and lifelong comparison, South Korea's dynamic and vibrant modern lifestyle masks the strain of a hyper-competitive society. This is particularly so among young people. From early childhood, students are evaluated by academic performance, which determines access to prestigious middle or high schools, admission to top universities, and ultimately employment at major conglomerate—the ultimate level of “success”.

As academic pressure intensifies, accompanied by declining mental health and high youth suicide rates, legislation and social campaigns are urgently required to reduce this pressure and introduce preventative tools to improve the mental well-being of current and future generations.

Confucian Traditions

Though Confucianism dates back to 551-479 BCE, its ideals are still deeply influential in South Korea today, and continue to shape educational expectations.

Academic success is regarded as a [moral duty](#); failure is seen not only as a personal failing but also a reflection of flawed character, and family inadequacy. Under the Confucian principle of “[Hyo](#)” (filial piety), a child's successes and failures represents the entire family, and any academic setbacks feel like betrayal.

Furthermore, Confucian “[hierarchy](#)” reinforces social comparison. Age, professional title, and academic achievement influence the “respect” one receives.

This creates a culture in which one's value as a human being is determined by an arbitrary measure of “success” and makes falling behind peers socially unacceptable.

The Pressure and its Consequences

The so-called “[education arms race](#)” can begin as early as ages three to five. The drive to excel thus begins early on, internalizing academic pressure as a normal part of children's upbringing. Admission to elite English-language kindergartens may require early schooling and testing, accelerating academic stress even before formal schooling begins. This [rigorous testing](#) continues throughout their school years, shaping the children's future academic prospects from an early age. The prevalence of peer comparison, with [report cards](#) displaying the students' rank in each subject within their class and throughout the school, intensifies the fear of inferiority.

Private “cram schools” ([hagwons](#)) extend the academic day, with many students studying [12 and 16 hours per day](#). With acceptance into the best cram schools also relying on test scores, there is pressure to study for these while doing “normal schoolwork.” Recent surveys indicate [that 1 in every 3 students](#) experiences clinical burnout before reaching high school, with many reporting that their daily lives consist solely of school, *hagwon*, and sleep.

The mental health consequences in the form of anxiety, stress, and depression are severe. Studies show that [42.3 percent](#) of middle and high school pupils exhibit signs of stress and 27.7 percent experience symptoms of depression. Furthermore, academic stress is directly linked to [12.1 percent](#) of all adolescent suicides nationwide, while [32.9 percent](#) of teens report suicidal thoughts arising from the stress of the “[Suneung](#)” (College Admission test). Academic pressure has thus become the primary driver of the country's high youth suicide rate.

With these sobering statistics emphasizing the urgency of the situation, immediate action is required to address and ease the pressure on South Korean youth.

The Silence Barrier

But the deep-rooted cultural values often create a “silence barrier” regarding mental health concerns, complicating intervention and making it harder for



young people to seek help. This “silence barrier” also discourages any open discussion of mental health. [Indirect](#) communication patterns—such as asking “Have you eaten?” (밥 먹었어요) instead of “How are you?” (잘 지냈어요)—often result in superficial exchanges that leave little room for emotional honesty. The general social acceptance of stress as an inevitable side effect of pursuing academic and economic objectives leaves little room for divergence from the norm, propelling students to accept (and suffer) the status quo.

Admitting depression is perceived by many as “[losing face](#),” a public loss of dignity, reputation, or social status, prompting young people to hide symptoms in order to avoid stigma. Afraid of being ostracized by their peers, close relatives, and even their parents, students have limited opportunities of open dialogue and delay seeking help, compounding the crisis

Recommendations

South Korean President Lee Jae Myung has labelled the country’s chronically high suicide rate and mental health crises as a “social disaster,” and introduced a “[multilayered support system for students’ mental health](#)”, including social and emotional learning in elementary, middle and high school curricula.

While these steps by the administration are promising, additional targeted measures are needed. To address the youth mental health crisis in its entirety, a combination of preventative measures aimed at reducing academic pressure as well as efforts to aid young people seeking treatment will be required

Social Campaigns to Engage Parents and Overcome the “Silence Barrier”

Government-sponsored social campaigns should promote open family communication about stress, anxiety, and depression. Efforts should be made to overcome the current “silence barrier” that hinders South Korean adolescents from discussing emotions of stress, anxiety, or depression with their primary caregivers and normalize talking about feelings on a household basis. Proactively pushing for a cultural shift from within the household and encouraging

parents to discuss emotions regularly can help identify warning signs early. [Research](#) from 2025 highlights the positive effect of increasing family communication as a means of buffering the negative effects of academic pressure on adolescents, emphasizing the value of such initiatives.

Reforming the Comparative Education System

Eliminating class rankings of students from their reports cards is a fast and easily implemented measure to reduce unhealthy competition. This could lead the way for more comprehensive reforms, including steps to alter the [Korean grading system](#) which is widely considered one of the toughest in the world, primarily due to its relative evaluation model, forcing students into direct competition for a limited number of top-tier slots.

Reducing the comparative character of the education system is essential to ensure the long-term mental health of the country’s students.

Introduce a Government-sponsored Psychologist Program

To ensure equal access to treatment of mental health issues, the Lee administration should follow the Nordic example of providing a state-funded psychologist program. All [Nordic countries](#) provide pathways to free psychological support for young people, often integrated into their public healthcare and school systems.

Targeting and assisting the younger generation through state-funded psychological programs has shown to be a successful direct intervention strategy in addressing mental health issues among adolescents. In [Denmark](#), offering free psychological services to young adults led to a 25 percent decrease in suicide attempts among those aged 18-24. A comparable program in South Korea would provide direct, accessible intervention for vulnerable youth.

Conclusion

South Korea faces a youth mental health crisis rooted in relentless academic pressure and reinforced by cultural expectations. The Lee administration is

already beginning to institutionalize steps to address the country's high suicide rate and overall mental health crisis. While these reforms indicate progress, deeper structural and cultural change is essential. By reducing the unrealistic and unfair academic pressure, dismantling the silence surrounding mental health, and ensuring access to equal treatment, South Korea can promise a better future for the country's future generations.

Josephine Ørgaard Rasmussen is the Project Manager at the ISDP's Stockholm Korea Center. She graduated with a master's degree from the University of Southern Denmark in International Security and Law. Following the completion of her master's degree, she studied Korean at Pukyong National University in Busan for eight months. Her research focuses on domestic politics and the security situation on the Korean Peninsula.