The Well-being of South Korean Students in a Context of High Academic Pressure

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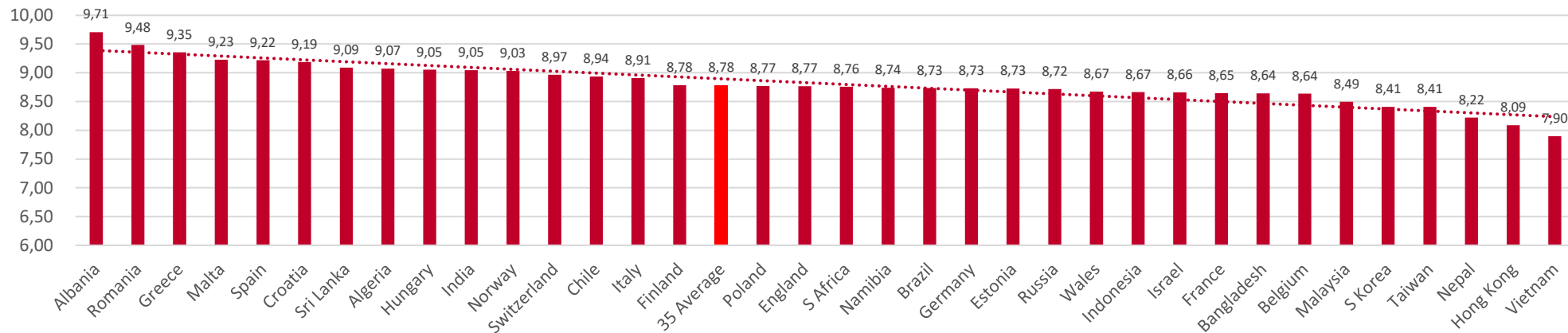# Contents

Introduction

- **High academic pressure**
  - A heavy emphasis on children's well-becoming, rather than the current well-being
  - Students are asked to devote their time to obtain the necessary skills that the parents perceive to be critical in succeeding as adults
    - Preparing for competitive college entrance exams
    - Importance of learning second language – English or Chinese
  - Results: high-level of academic achievement
    - PISA test results: among the highest among OECD countries
    - Ranked at the 8th in the 2018 PISA tests
- **At what cost?**
  - Lowest level of happiness
    - South Korean students are less likely than their peers in most OECD countries to say they are very satisfied with their life as a whole
    - More likely to report being not satisfied
  - Lowest level of subjective well-being
    - The lowest among OECD countries, with a standardized score of 79.50 compared to OECD average score of 100

Student Well-being in South Korea

- Only in recent years, Korean government has taken policy initiative to improve student well-being

- Situation
  - Korean student's well-being and happiness are in the lowest tier among OECD countries
  - Ranked at 64th when children were asked how happy they were in school (OECD, 2012)
  - High suicide rates among children and adolescents: Suicide rate for 10-19 year old at 7.2 per 10,000
  - South Korean student's subjective well-being is among the lowest when compared to even other less economically well to-do countries (Children's Worlds Survey, 2020) :

Social Contexts

- Social contexts such as leisure, environment, relationship, freedom to choose, and self-confidence are all important factors affecting children's well-being
- Korean student's family life
  - Spend significant amounts of time on private tutoring after school hours
  - Parents working long hours
  - Not having enough time for parent-child interaction at home: children spending about an hour a day with their family of which half is spent on family meals
  - Less satisfaction with the family and home context → lower the level of overall student's subjective well-being.
- High academic pressure
  - 65 % of Korean high-school students participated in private tutoring after school hours
  - Increasing academic pressure on students → less satisfaction with school life -> lower subjective well-being
- Lack of freedom to choose (Lee & Yoo, 2017)
  - "All work and no play"
  - Lack of freedom to choose can come from not having enough physical time and/or not having power to determine the time allocation
  - One of the most important reason for lower level of subjective well-being of Korean students
  - Decision on how to spend their time is made not by themselves, but by their parents → lower student's subjective well-being

Policy Response

- Korean Government is mandated to provide its student policy plan every five years

- The 2020 Plan provides the vision of overall children's policy is to achieve 'happiness' and 'respect' for students → The main policy goal: to increase the level of Korean students' happiness level up to the middle of OECD countries in 5 years.

- Policy direction
  - To increase children's and their parents' leisure time to allow them to spend quality time together during the evening hours
  - To provide environments where personal worth is not solely determined by the monolithic standard of academic achievement in secondary education

- Response to inequality
  - Growing concerns about educational inequality and low social mobility
  - Students in lower SES are less likely to have leisure time to spend quality time with their parents
  - Korean government implemented Child Allowance program to address socioeconomic inequality of children in 2018

Programs Implemented

- Initiated school bullying prevention education programs at all levels of schools
  - As an effort to protect students from violence in homes and schools
  - Implemented cyber violence prevention programs at schools
  - Counselling programs implemented at schools to provide services to those victims of violence
  - A comprehensive database on school bullying prevention education
  - Annual survey of all students asking school bullying experiences
- 'Right to play'
  - To improve the safe environment and playground infrastructure at the district level
- Student's well-being monitoring system
  - Began to issue an official report on Korean student well-being in 2022 (Statistics Korea, 2022)
  - UNICEF's child friendly cities initiative: 91 received the certification of child friendly cities (out of a total of 226 local governments)

New Educational Policies

- The 'Children's Policy Basic Plan 2020' provides the school curriculum change where student's 'right to play' can be protected
- The free semester system
  - The middle school students having 1 or 2 semesters without academic tests → to provide more diverse learning experiences
  - Introduced as a pilot program in 2012 and implemented in all middle schools in 2016
  - Borrowed its idea from 'transitional year' system in other countries
  - During the free semester period, there are no academic tests → students participate discussion-based classes: not 'cramming education', but doing self-initiated projects
  - Participate in career exploration and development programs at the community level
- Happiness education curriculum
  - Developed by the Happiness Research Center at Seoul National University
  - 'Happiness class' is taught in extra-curricular hours at about 4,000 participating schools
- Wee project
  - A response to the problems of school bullying and suicide risks
  - Providing student counselling to prevent risky behaviors of students
  - 3 Tiered system: Wee class at school level – Wee center at local school district – Wee school for drop-out students
  - Positive effects of reducing school bullying and increasing school satisfaction (Kim & Kim, 2014)

Monitoring system of Student Well-being

- Surveys to monitor school violence for students aged 10 to 18, implemented by Ministry of Education

- The free semester program has shown some positive effect in decreasing academic stress of students and in increasing career awareness

- The Wee project is now in place at 8,619 schools, 206 school districts, and 16 provincial offices of education → showing positive signs of to preventing at-risk behaviors of students including school bullying, suicide, and substance abuse

Conclusion: Policy Efforts and Effects

- Growing policy concern that the well-being of South Korean students suffers in a context of high academic pressure
- Efforts to improve Korean children's mental health and well-being: however, the policy impact is yet to be determined
  - Eliminating academic testing in elementary schools
  - Prohibiting 'proactive learning' in schools
  - Monitoring the school violence
  - Changing college entrance procedures
- Wee project
  - Showing positive effects on increasing students' psycho-emotional well-being (Kim & Kim, 2014)
  - Challenges: increasing man power of the Wee project and specialty improvement
- Free semester program
  - Reducing academic stress and increasing leisure time of students
  - Increasing career awareness
  - Showing positive effect of sociality of students

New Challenges

- To improve 'relational capital' of students
  - Relational competence: the ability to acquire, develop, and maintain mutually satisfying relationships
  - Increasing relation deficit and loneliness due to social distancing and school shutdowns during the Covid-19 situation
  - Schools needing to improve 'relational capital' of students
- Rapid digital transformation
  - Needing more efforts to increase students' digital capacity
  - Benefits: providing channels for education and social interaction
  - Risks: cyberbullying, sextortion and risks to privacy
  - Increasing need to put in place safety measures to protect students from serious digital risks
- All these efforts should be guided in the framework of 'improving student's well-being'

Thank you for your attention

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