Why aren’t Korean students happy?

Tracing back to the sources of their academic distress

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A ton of gold is not worth children’s education.

Korean proverb

High achievers with low motivation

Contemporary motivation literature dictates that learners with positive self-concept, strong confidence, and high interest learn and perform better academically compared to those with negative self-concept, weak confidence, and low interest (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). There is a reciprocal relationship between motivation and achievement such that high performers typically demonstrate more positive motivation than poor performers do (Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, & Baumert, 2005). Interestingly, the academic motivation and performance of Korean adolescents has not been following this simple pattern for more than two decades now (Bong, 2003, 2004).

Korea boasts outstanding academic performance of its youth who place high value on learning. The superb scholastic accomplishment of Korean learners has been documented in many international comparison studies. On the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015, Korea ranked 7th in both reading and mathematics achievement among 69 participating countries (OECD, 2016a). On the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2015, Korean fourth and eighth graders again performed well, ranking 3rd and 2nd in mathematics and 2nd and 4th in science among peers from 49 and 39 countries, respectively (TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, 2016). This exceptional performance of Korean students comes as no surprise, considering the high societal value placed on education. The old Korean proverb mentioned above describes this cultural value on education, which both Korean students and parents endorse strongly up until today. According to a recent survey, 97% of the Korean adolescents and 99% of the parents believe that one needs to complete at least a college education and beyond to procure a good
job, which proves tremendous importance assigned to education by both parties (Statistics Korea, 2016).

Included in both the PISA and the TIMSS reports but often eclipsed by the excellent academic attainment of Korean youth are their extremely low academic motivation and high academic distress. In TIMSS 2015, for example, several questions probed whether students enjoyed learning mathematics and science (interest) and whether they believed that they usually did well in those subjects (confidence). Korean students in both grades 4 and 8 expressed highly negative attitudes on these motivation questions. The mathematics interest and mathematics confidence of Korean fourth graders were the least favorable among the fourth graders from 49 participating countries. Similarly, Korean eighth graders ranked 38th on mathematics interest and 36th on mathematics confidence out of 39 participating countries. The picture is not much different in science.

Korean adolescents also appear to face high levels of academic stress. According to the survey conducted by the National Youth Policy Institute of Korea (NYPi, 2016), around 70% of the students in grades 4 to 12 felt distressed because of academic issues. This percentage increased with the grade level, indicating that a growing number of Korean students are afflicted with stress and anxiety as they advance to higher grade levels.

A review of available literature summarizes the motivation of Korean students with the following four characteristics: high utility value unaccompanied by corresponding interest (M. Lee & Bong, 2016), weak self-efficacy and negative self-concept that are not fitting for their achievement level (OECD, 2016b), a strong focus on performance goals instead of mastery goals (Bong, 2009), and a high level of stress (NYPi, 2016). These motivational phenomena in Korean students are inevitable consequences of the sociocultural context, educational systems and policies, and learning environments that they are exposed to. In the following sections, we review each of these factors in relation to student motivation.

Sociocultural contexts

Korea has experienced remarkable educational growth, transforming from a country in which most adults did not have any formal schooling to one of the highest achieving nations in the world (Korean Educational Development Institute [KEDI], 2016; Seth, 2005). Immediately after the liberation from Japan, the prospect of Korean education looked gloomy with the shortage of teachers and school facilities (S. Kim & Lee, 2010). In 1945, there were about 3,307 primary and secondary schools in Korea. That number has increased almost four times to 11,563 schools currently in operation. The expansion of higher education is more dramatic, having increased 83-fold from only 19 in 1945 to 1,581 universities and graduate schools nationwide in 2016 (Korean Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, n.d.; Korean Ministry of Education [KMoE], 2016). Of those who are eligible for secondary education, nearly 95%
Shin, Lee, Ha, Park, Son, and Bong are currently attending school (KEDI, 2016), indicating that almost all Korean adolescents are receiving formal education.

Like in many other East Asian countries, sociocultural practices in Korea had been dominated by Confucian traditions. Confucianism represents a humanistic philosophy that emphasizes self-cultivation, moral perfection, and family relationship (Seth, 2005; Sorensen, 1994). Under the Confucian culture, education is highly valued as not only a way of cultivating one’s mind but also a means of obtaining high social status and reputation (Chung, 1999; Seth, 2005). Below we introduce three factors that had been exercising particularly strong influence on Korean education and Korean students’ motivation, all derived from the Confucian philosophy: familism, academic elitism, and education fervor.

**Familism**

Familism, a doctrine that emphasizes strong cohesion among family members and puts interest of the family before those of individual members, is a salient characteristic of Korean society based on Confucianism (Park & Kim, 2006). Years of economic hardship until the mid-20th century intensified solidarity of the family as a unit that shares a common destiny. Parents willingly make sacrifices for their children’s education, in the hopes of providing a better life for their children and profiting from their children’s success during their later years (Bong, Kim, Shin, Lee, & Lee, 2008).

Korean children, subjected to the Confucian teaching of filial piety, feel strong obligations to recompense their parents’ sacrifice with high academic accomplishment (Bong et al., 2008). A sense of indebtedness and guilt toward parents looms large in the psychology of Korean adolescents, which is a strong source of their motivation (Park & Kim, 2006). Because intentions to achieve do not necessarily result in high performance, Korean students’ perceptions of expectations and achievement pressure from their parents often trigger stress and anxiety in them (Lee & Bong, 2013; Song, Bong, Lee, & Kim, 2015).

**Academic elitism**

Another sociocultural creed that stems out of Confucianism is academic elitism. The term describes an attitude that blindly favors degrees and credentials conferred by institutions of high social prestige. On the surface, academic elitism appears similar to meritocracy, a belief that distribution of power should be based on the ability of individuals and not their background (Chang, 2011). However, academic elitism differs from meritocracy on at least one critical aspect: It concerns the credential alone and, once obtained, largely disregards the subsequent effort of the individuals. Cliques are created based on academic credentials, with the assumption that anyone who has achieved the coveted credential possesses higher ability and is deserving of higher social status compared to those who have not.
Not surprisingly, academic elitism is behind the education fervor in Korean society and fuels competition at school. As the number of Korean universities has multiplied in recent years, simply obtaining a college diploma no longer ensures the limited “elite” positions (Seth, 2005). Because entrance to top-tier universities is considered a sure means to gain social recognition and wealth in Korean society (Choi, Calero, & Escardíbul, 2011; Matthews, 2015), it has become a common goal for most Korean students and an implicit criterion to judge others for many Korean adults (Moon & Youm, 2010). While academic elitism may increase students’ academic involvement to a certain degree, its extrinsic nature thwarts the quest for intrinsic reasons to learn. As such, it decreases the motivation of Korean students and harms their psychological well-being (Moon & Youm, 2010; Park, Park, Seo, & Youm, 2010).

**Education fervor**

What results from the joint operation of Confucianism, familism, and academic elitism is the education fervor in Korean society. It is represented by parental preoccupation with and exorbitant sacrifice for the children’s academic success. By supporting the children’s education, Korean parents aspire to create opportunities for their children to gain mobility up the social and economic ladder (Sorensen, 1994). Because many Korean parents regard their children as an extension of themselves, they hope to enjoy the vicarious gratification from their children’s success (Park & Kim, 2006). Some parents even forgo a family life of living together to provide their children with better education. Most typically, mothers go abroad with children to English-speaking countries; fathers remain in Korea and support their families financially. This social phenomenon has created a new jargon called “wild goose fathers,” comparing the situation of these deserted fathers to that of migratory birds (Lee & Koo, 2006).

Such extraordinary commitment of Korean parents towards their child’s education was once praised as the foundation of Korea’s rapid economic growth and high educational attainment (Park & Kim, 2006; Seth, 2005). It is not without its downsides, though, which unfortunately are becoming increasingly more evident than its positive effects. For example, Korean parents often perceive top priority in their children’s academic achievement over the children’s social, personal, and emotional development (Chang, 2011; Kim & Lee, 2008). The strong and exclusive emphasis on academic accomplishment communicated by parents puts many Korean adolescents under heavy pressure and is a frequent source of tension and destruction in the parent-child relationship (Park et al., 2010). Korean parents’ education fervor also contributes to making the learning environment unnecessarily competitive, as they send their children to one after-school cram academy to another (Chung, 2017). Such parental pressure makes students become unduly anxious about the possibility of failure (Lee & Bong, 2013; Song et al., 2015).
Educational systems and policies

The basic framework of K-12 education in Korea is K–6/3/3, with only six years of primary education and three years of lower secondary education (i.e., middle school) being compulsory. However, most Koreans view high school and college education to be essentially mandatory, owing to the sociocultural influence described above. The proportion of students among the 18 to 21 years of age who advance to colleges and universities has been between 65.1% and 70.1% since 2005, evidencing the strong demand for higher education in Korean society (KEDI, 2016).

Because graduation from few “elite” universities guarantees easy access to limited resources (Bong, 2003), Korean parents and students pay vigilant attention to even the slightest changes in educational systems and policies related to college admission. They favor objective and quantitative assessments over those with subjective or qualitative components, fearing that various inner circles based on kinship, school ties, and regional relations may exercise undue control over the outcome (Jeon, 2003). Coupled with academic elitism and education fervor, the preference of the Korean public for objective and transparent indexes of scholastic attainment has been molding the Korean government’s assessment policies of educational progress and the instructional practices at school, sometimes in ways that interfere with motivation and genuine learning gains by the students.

Normative evaluation

Normative evaluation, for instance, prevails in Korean educational settings. It is considered by many as an objective and fair form of assessment, with little room for external influence. The end-of-semester achievement scores of high school students, once obtained, are classified into nine levels within each school subject by their within-school rankings. Likewise, scores on the nationwide College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), a standardized test required for college applications, are classified also into nine levels within each subject by students’ national rankings (Lee, 2011). It is these ordinal scores that determine students’ fate in the competitive admission process for specialized high schools and universities. Successful acquisition of the skills and mastery of the content do not guarantee acceptance, unless students outperform the other students.

When attainment of comparative superiority is prized, students focus on besting others rather than improving their task-based competence (Ames, 1992). Such strong orientation toward performance not only hinders progress toward learning objectives but also reduces interest in learning and evokes anxiety during performance (Daniels et al., 2009; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, & Elliot, 2000). Further, normative evaluation can easily make students perceive themselves in a negative light because hard work and even superb accomplishments do not always translate into high marks. It is a likely culprit behind the low academic interest and negative self-views of Korean adolescents that do not correspond to their excellent academic performance (Bong, 2004; Lee, 2005, 2009).
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Ability grouping

What accentuates the harmful effect of normative evaluation on student motivation is ability grouping. Korean high schools administer within-school, between-class ability grouping in core subjects for providing students with instruction that either matches their abilities and talents better or compensates for their weaknesses (Sung, 2008). When implemented properly, ability grouping can allow teachers to deliver their lessons and address students’ needs more effectively. In reality, however, it stigmatizes students in lower ability classes and widens the achievement gap between high- and low-achieving students (Choi, 2016). Schools often implement ability grouping to primarily help high-achieving students to achieve even better at the expense of low-achieving students, who are faced with declining views of themselves as students (i.e., self-concept) and of their capabilities to achieve desired academic outcomes (i.e., self-efficacy; Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Hwang, 2010; Kim, 2006).

At the between-school level, ability grouping takes a different form. In Korea, there are diverse types of high schools with a distinct focus, such as foreign language or science high schools. The original aim of establishing these specialized schools was to facilitate the growth of students’ unique talents (Hwang, 2015). These schools use highly selective criteria in admitting students and only the graduating middle-school seniors with a solid record of aptitude and prior achievement can enter them. It is not surprising, therefore, that students of the specialized high schools enjoy a significantly higher rate of admissions into major universities in Korea. Consequently, these schools have gained reputation as a sure route to top-tier universities, intensifying the competition to enter them.

As students attending foreign language or science high schools are generally considered more capable than students attending regular high schools, this situation creates what can be viewed as between-school ability grouping but with no apparent winners. Students who fail to enter a specialized high school feel defeated and lose a sense of academic competence; those who successfully enter such schools struggle to maintain exceptional levels of performance among high-achieving peers, experiencing heightened levels of stress and lowered self-concept than before (Kim & Im, 2016).

High-stakes testing

Another salient factor that negatively affects Korean students’ motivation is the extremely high-stakes nature of the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT). High-stakes testing refers to an evaluation in which a test score determines the outcome used to make crucial decisions (Madaus, 1988). In Korea, CSAT is easily a single test with the highest stakes, which yields a significant impact on the entire education system and policy-making. Scores on CSAT are a major determinant of college entrance, along with high school GPAs. Despite the enormous weight the test carries in Korean students’ quest for entering a prestigious university, CSAT is only administered once a year, which makes it
even more anxiety-provoking for students and parents alike. The public and the government acknowledge the significance of the event as well. For example, subway services are expanded on the morning of CSAT to help examinees arrive at their test-taking sites on time; airplane departures are banned nationwide during the English listening comprehension portion of CSAT, so as not to interfere with the test (Shim, 2010). Each year, around one-fifth of the CSAT applicants are re-takers, who have waited a year to have another chance for getting into their desired colleges (Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation, 2013).

CSAT has unintended adverse effects on classroom instruction (Kwon, Lee, & Shin, 2017). Teachers frequently teach to the test to help their students get higher scores on CSAT. Students practice superficial strategies and tactics to solve problems more quickly and guess the answers correctly. They also endure years of private tutoring and extensive after-school study hours to prepare for CSAT (Chae & Ryu, 2008). The unnecessarily arduous process of test preparation decreases students’ motivation to engage in learning for its own sake (Kim, Yoon, & So, 2008) and amplifies students’ anxiety and stress, to the degree that some students entertain suicidal ideation (Ha, 2015). Low achievers are particularly at-risk of feeling helpless and dropping out of school (Keum, 2008).

Learning environments
Collectively, the sociocultural factors and educational policies illustrated thus far define the characteristics of the immediate learning environments that Korean students are exposed to. It is these characteristics that exercise perhaps the most tangible influence on student motivation. Below we discuss three of them that are particularly consequential: over-competition, private education, and outcome-oriented instruction.

Over-competition among students
Because students’ grades are relative to others’ achievement, they are forced to compete for good GPAs, which make them fall into unhealthy temptations at times. For instance, students steal other students’ notes because asking to borrow them to supplement one’s learning is usually met with refusal in this competitive setting (Seo, 2011). Intense competition drives students who cannot take it anymore to make extreme decisions such as killing themselves. Their suicide notes testify the horrors of competition that smother them (Kim, 2013).

Excessive competition hampers students’ intrinsic motivation (Vallerand, Gauvin, & Halliwell, 1986) and peer relationships (Roeseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008). Competition does not necessarily improve performance because it increases both the desire to approach success and the fear of potential failure (Murayama & Elliot, 2012). A classroom becomes a place for winning or losing but not learning. Under such an atmosphere, low achievers feel helpless and incompetent and gradually lose interest in learning (Epstein & Harackiewicz,
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Students are obsessed with grades and strive to outperform others (Bong, 2003). It is not difficult to imagine fierce competition to cause anxiety and stress in students (Kim, 2013; Lee & Bong, 2013).

Private education

To win the competition, one must go ahead of others. Private education provides the means to fulfill this need. Most Korean children receive their first private education when they are between two to five years of age (Chung, 2017). The demand for private education stays high despite the price because students find its quality better than that of public education (Kim, 2008), giving rise to the crisis in the public education system. Students learn the subject content in advance by attending private education academies, hence they lose interest when they have to learn the same materials at school (Kim et al., 2008). They develop disrespect for school teachers and dissatisfaction with their instruction (Kim, 2010). At the same time, they are faced with an increased workload of having to complete assignments from both school and private education academies.

Unequal access to private education is another source of social concern. The socioeconomic status (SES) of parents, represented best by family income, influences the type and amount of their children’s private education in Korea (Park, Byun, & Kim, 2011). Parents of higher SES are more able than those of lower SES to afford high-quality private education for their children, which subsequently creates a difference in the children’s academic performance. There are regional differences as well, with students living in the capital area having easier access to better private education and actually achieve better than those living outside the capital area (Park & Ma, 2015). Students from low SES families become helpless because they have no control over their parents’ income or their residence.

Outcome-oriented instruction at school

Along with the extreme significance of CSAT, prevalence of normative evaluation, and focus on achievement outcomes, both students and teachers in Korea comply with the demands of tests. The byproduct of this trend is that teachers increasingly resort to the outcome-oriented instruction in the classroom – teaching students to the test. For example, because of requests from students, parents, and schools, teachers tend to teach only the content that is likely to be included in CSAT (Park, 2014). They often go over the problems from past CSATs in class and drill students in test contents (Hwang, 2004).

Teachers’ reliance on outcome-oriented instruction creates problems for both teachers and students. It narrows down the school curriculum and lowers the quality of instruction, which in turn hinder curriculum improvement. Having to teach to the test also hurts teachers’ psychological well-being. Many teachers of high school seniors in Korea complain about psychological burnout and stress (Jang, Park, & Lee, 2014). Outcome-oriented instruction is detrimental to
Among these factors, Confucian teaching and familism, academic elitism, and education fervor are the most influential sociocultural forces underlying Korean students’ academic distress, which serve as foundation for Korean educational systems and policies as well as proximal learning environments. Normative evaluation, ability grouping, and high-stakes testing exemplify the basic characteristics of Korean educational systems, which make Korean classrooms to be overly competitive and outcome-oriented, with excessive interference from private education.

Korea’s Efforts to Overcome Educational Challenges

The dire motivational consequences that Korean education is confronted with have caught the attention of the Korean government, which has been making various endeavors to alleviate these problems. Since 1993, the government has...
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been pushing hard for learner-centered educational policies that take the interest, value, and achievement of individual students into account (KEDI, 2012). Below we describe some of the relevant policies.

One policy that the government is encouraging secondary schools to adopt is standards-based assessment. It is a criterion-referenced evaluation system under which student performance is evaluated according to whether they have met the specific achievement standards. Within-school ranks that used to accompany student achievement scores are no longer reported. Instead, students are assigned letter grades of A to E in each subject, determined by the percentage of completion in core competencies (KMoE, 2011). The non-normative nature of assessment is expected to reduce unnecessary competition and anxiety among students and help them focus on learning, while being intrinsically motivated (Vallerand et al., 1986). Standards-based assessment is gradually replacing normative assessment in secondary schools in Korea.

A related policy that aims at relieving early adolescents of academic stress and increasing opportunities for them to explore future career options is the Test-free Semesters at Middle School program (KMoE, 2013). The program came into full effect nationwide in 2016 after a three-year trial period. Middle-school freshmen take the second semester as their test-free semester, during which they participate in various student-oriented discussions, clubs, projects, experiments, and field studies in and outside school, all of which are designed to help them find and develop career-related interest and aptitude (KEDI, 2015). Preliminary evaluation of the program indicates that it improved general academic motivation of all stakeholders, including students’ interest, engagement, and happiness at school, teachers’ perceptions of their teaching competence, and parents’ satisfaction toward their children’s schools (KMoE, 2017a).

The Korean government has also been striving to weaken the impact of private education on college admission. It tries to do so by both improving the quality and availability of after-school education programs at public schools and increasing the reliance of CSAT on free and publicly available learning materials, such as the subject lessons provided by the Educational Broadcasting System (EBS), up to 70%. Furthermore, teachers are prohibited from giving students examination questions that go beyond contents covered in the textbook (Han, 2017). These approaches have been successful and appeared to cut back private education expenses dramatically (KMoE, 2017b).

Finally, there are programs that specifically seek to alleviate students’ academic stress and negative psychological symptoms. The “Wee (We + education/emotion) Project,” which has been in operation since 2008, is one such program (Jung, 2009). The program is designed to offer systematic help to learners identified for severe stress, depression, and academic or non-academic issues, which could potentially lead to school abandonment. It also provides professional development training to teachers to help them extend appropriate emotional support to their students. By treating students’ psychological problems, the Wee Project has led to a decrease in students’ stress that comes from fierce competitions and the burden of studying (Bae, 2017).
Concluding remark

While issues regarding Korean students’ low academic motivation have not been completely resolved, Korean education is nonetheless moving forward, steadily improving its quality. Policy makers, researchers, teachers, as well as students and their parents unite forces in relentlessly appraising the current status of the educational system and striving to amend problems, once detected (Chang, 2011). Such collective endeavors toward the betterment of education have been, and will continue to be, a powerful source of positive changes in Korean education and Korean students’ motivation.

Note

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