

PERCEIVED STRESS OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN SOUTH KOREA: A DATA ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Students experience extreme levels of stress in intense academic environment in South Korea. Such school-related stress levels reach its peak in the final year of high school, as students prepare for college entrance exam. To perform better on the college entrance exam and gain admission to Korea's most prestigious universities, Korean students devote a significant portion of their early lives to studying. Stress is often linked to schooling among adolescents. Academic stress is mainly associated with school performance, including exams and homework. This paper, thus will analyze the latest trends for high school stress among students in Korea by gender and average monthly income compared to other countries and suggest main reasons with implications.

Keywords: academic stress, high school students, educational achievement, South Korean youth, college entrance, stress-management.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades high educational achievement has become widely known the East Asian countries. For instance, South Korean students achieved the highest mean scores in science and math in the International Assessment of Educational Progress (IAEP), as the Educational Testing Service administered. This worldwide success became a source of national pride (Sorensen, 1994). Due to the culture of high expectations for academic excellence and the intensity of academic competition in South Korea, students may be under excessive stress (Park and Kim, 2018). Getting into a high-rank university is reported to be a major concern for adolescent students. Mainly because it helps them to secure a higher social status and a good job. Consequently, it will cause them a greater amount of stress. Stress is reported to be one of the main of causes of suicide in Korea. 56.5% of adolescent students suffered from stress, as a 2006 survey identified (Rystedt, 2018). Even though academic pressure is found to be the major stressor among high school students, other challenges can be overwhelming as well. Therefore, investigating other factors causing stress among adolescent students is necessary to develop effective stress-management strategies.

ANALYSIS AND MAIN DISCUSSION

Table 1 illustrates the percentage and the level of school life stress among college students in Korea between 2016 and 2020. The stress intensity was from severe to none. Overall, the stress rates decreased from 8.4% to 6.0% severity in the whole country. However, the rates remained relatively the same throughout the period (7.5% in 2016 and 2020, 7.6% in 2018) in Seoul. The average stress rates were higher in female students (from 10.4% to 7.4% severity) compared to males (6.6% to 4.6% severity). Furthermore, the amount of stress experienced by individuals with 5-6 million won or more monthly income was significantly higher than those with less amount of income.

Relatively similar trends in high school stress rates have been observed in a number of international studies. For instance, in the research conducted by Lal (2014) among Senior Secondary School students, male students experienced slightly less stress ($\mu=132.30$) compared to their female counterparts ($\mu=136.01$). Another study found that more female high school (24.3 %) had serious thoughts about committing suicide than males (16.7%) because of academic pressure (Sun, Dunne, and Hou, 2012).

Gender and economic status-related trends can be explained by the major causal factors contributing to higher stress rates among high schoolers. The amount of stress caused by academic pressure was reported to be 1.78 times higher among females than males (Park, Han, & Lee, 2018). This is due to the fact that getting good grades mainly determines whether they get into a high-ranking university, which eventually can help them to get a good job, higher social status, and better life. According to another study, students with lower economic status (ES) were more likely to be more stressed ($\mu=3.45$) compared to those with higher ES ($\mu=3.14$). However, it was also proved that lower ES levels were associated with various conflicts, and unpleasant circumstances for academic achievement, while students with higher ES were more likely to experience stress due to academic performance only. This suggests that regardless of levels of ES, academic pressure was the main stressor among high school students in South Korea (Park, Jang, & Lee, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Implications. Several practical and natural implications can be indicated through these trends of high school stress. Although the stress rate went slightly down for both females and males throughout the period, it is still important to identify the negative consequences of being constantly stressed. One critical consequence is committing a suicide. According to a report by Lee (2015), suicide was the number one death between ages of 15 and 24.

There are a number of recommendations for future research. Firstly, the comparison of previous and recent studies conducted in Korea showed that there was merely a slight decrease in the amount of stress, suggesting that high schoolers are in desperate need of development and implementation of efficient stress-management strategy or intervention. Moreover, as female students are more prone to stress than males, gender-based intervention methods would be more preferable (Park et al., 2013; Park, Han, & Lee, 2018).

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Amount of stress with school life among high school students in Korea (% of total respondents)

	2016				2018				2020			
	S	M	W	N	S	M	W	N	S	M	W	N
<i>Whole country</i>	8.4	44.5	35.3	11.8	6.9	42.8	36.3	14.1	6.0	29.2	42.4	22.3
<i>Seoul</i>	7.5	44.0	35.5	13.0	7.6	39.4	39.9	13.1	7.5	29.3	42.7	20.5
<i>Gender</i>												
Male	6.6	40.7	38.2	14.6	5.5	38.4	39.1	16.9	4.6	26.4	43.1	25.9
Female	10.4	48.7	32.1	8.8	8.4	47.7	33.3	10.9	7.4	32.2	41.8	18.6
<i>Average monthly income</i>												
1-2 million won	6.4	46.8	36.3	10.5	5.5	45.8	31.8	16.9	7.1	31.0	41.1	20.8
2-3 million won	8.0	46.1	34.8	11.1	7.2	41.9	36.3	14.6	6.4	29.5	43.5	20.7
3-4 million won	9.4	43.4	36.7	10.4	7.0	40.7	39.2	13.1	4.6	28.3	46.5	20.7
4-5 million won	8.0	42.1	36.4	13.5	5.2	42.4	38.4	14.1	6.4	30.5	42.8	20.2
5-6 million won	5.8	45.3	37.1	11.8	5.6	46.5	35.7	12.2	6.9	28.7	43.3	21.1
6 million won +	8.7	44.4	32.7	14.1	8.5	41.8	35.7	14.0	5.8	26.6	39.7	27.8

S=Severe, M=Modest, W=Weak, N=None

Source: Korean Statistical Information Service