

Education Fever and Academic Rigor: Investigating the Dynamics of South Korea's Learning Process and Evaluation Systems

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Abstrak: Korea Selatan dikenal sebagai negara dengan capaian akademik tinggi dan budaya pendidikan yang kuat. Salah satu karakteristik utama sistem pendidikan di negara tersebut adalah fenomena education fever, yaitu dorongan sosial yang kuat terhadap pencapaian akademik dan keberhasilan pendidikan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana education fever memengaruhi proses pembelajaran, sistem evaluasi, dan praktik pendidikan di Korea Selatan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan literature review kualitatif dengan menganalisis artikel jurnal, buku akademik, dan laporan institusional yang dipublikasikan dalam sepuluh tahun terakhir. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa education fever terbentuk melalui interaksi antara nilai budaya, kebijakan pendidikan, dan ekspektasi sosial terhadap mobilitas sosial melalui pendidikan. Sistem seleksi masuk universitas yang kompetitif, khususnya melalui College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), mendorong persaingan akademik yang intens di kalangan siswa. Selain itu, berkembangnya shadow education seperti hagwon menunjukkan besarnya investasi keluarga dalam meningkatkan prestasi akademik siswa. Meskipun berkontribusi pada tingginya capaian pendidikan Korea Selatan, fenomena ini juga menimbulkan tekanan akademik serta potensi ketimpangan pendidikan.

Kata Kunci: Ketelitian Akademik, Demam Belajar, Sistem Evaluasi, Budaya Belajar, Korea Selatan

Abstract: South Korea is widely recognized for its high academic performance and strong educational culture. One of the most distinctive characteristics of its education system is the phenomenon of education fever, which reflects a strong societal emphasis on academic achievement and educational success. This study aims to examine how education fever influences learning processes, evaluation systems, and broader educational practices in South Korea. The research employs a qualitative literature review by analyzing peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and institutional reports published within the last ten years. The findings indicate that education fever is shaped by the interaction of cultural values, education policies, and social expectations related to upward social mobility through education. The highly competitive university admission system, particularly the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), intensifies academic competition among students. In addition, the expansion of shadow education institutions such as hagwon demonstrates the substantial investment made by families to improve students' academic performance. While this system contributes to South Korea's strong educational outcomes, it also raises concerns regarding academic pressure and potential educational inequality.

Keywords: Academic Rigor, Education Fever, Evaluation System, Learning Culture, South Korea

Introduction

The importance of education in Korean society cannot be separated from the long historical influence of Confucian cultural values (Dittrich & Neuhaus, 2023). For centuries, Confucianism emphasized the cultivation of knowledge, moral discipline, and social responsibility through education. Within this tradition, scholarly achievement was viewed not only as a means of acquiring knowledge but also as a pathway toward social recognition and authority (D. Choi & Kim, 2026). As a result, learning gradually became a deeply respected activity in Korean society. Educational achievement historically functioned as a key mechanism for social mobility and social status formation in Korean society (Chung et al., 2020). Similarly, (Mi-hwa et al., 2020) argues that the strong cultural reverence for education in Korea developed from Confucian traditions that prioritized scholarship, discipline, and intellectual cultivation. These cultural foundations continue to influence the way education is perceived and practiced in contemporary South Korea.

Following the end of the Korean War, South Korea underwent a rapid transformation in both economic and social sectors. Beginning in the early 1960s, the South Korean government implemented a series of national economic development plans aimed at accelerating industrialization and strengthening national competitiveness (Cherif et al., 2026). Education quickly became one of the central pillars supporting this national transformation. According to OECD, the expansion of educational opportunities played a crucial role in producing a skilled workforce capable of supporting rapid industrial growth (OECD, 2021). During this period, the government significantly increased investments in schools, universities, and teacher training institutions in order to improve the quality of human resources. As a result, South Korea experienced a dramatic expansion in educational participation and literacy levels (Soh et al., 2023). (Bank of Korea, 2020) notes that the rapid expansion of education during this period helped create a highly educated population that contributed significantly to the country's economic development.

Alongside this rapid expansion of education, South Korea developed a distinctive social phenomenon often referred to as *education fever* (박지원 & Hoy-Yong Kim, 2020). The term describes an intense societal enthusiasm for educational attainment, in which academic success is perceived as a primary route to economic stability and upward social mobility (Neuhaus, 2023). (Kyubin & Sung-Sang, 2021) describe education fever as a socio-cultural condition in which families devote extensive financial and emotional resources to ensuring their children's academic success. Within this context, education is often seen not merely as a process of learning but also as a competitive arena that determines future opportunities. This strong societal emphasis on academic achievement has led to the emergence of highly competitive learning environments, long study hours, and extensive reliance on supplementary private education institutions commonly known as *hagwon* (Exley, 2022).

The development of education fever has also shaped the structure of South Korea's educational evaluation system. One of the most influential components of this system is the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), which plays a decisive role in determining university admission (Cho, 2026). Because access to prestigious universities is closely associated with employment opportunities and social status, students face intense academic pressure to perform well in this examination. (윤 수 et al., 2021) explain that this competitive environment has contributed to the rapid growth of shadow education systems across East Asian countries, particularly in South Korea. Furthermore, (H. Kim & Hlasny, 2025) highlight that the strong cultural expectations surrounding academic achievement often lead families to invest heavily in private education as a strategy to enhance their children's chances of success in national examinations.

Although the phenomenon of education fever has contributed to South Korea's strong academic performance in international assessments, it has also raised concerns regarding the sustainability and social consequences of such an intense educational culture (H. Kim & Hlasny, 2025). Several scholars have pointed out that excessive academic competition may generate psychological pressure among students and widen educational inequality between socio-economic groups (Jarvis et al., 2020). Despite the growing body of literature on education fever, many studies primarily focus on its social or economic implications rather than examining how this phenomenon shapes the dynamics of learning processes and evaluation systems within the education structure itself (Bae & Choi, 2024). Therefore, this study aims to examine the dynamics of learning processes and evaluation systems in South Korea within the broader context of education fever. By reviewing relevant academic literature, this research seeks to explore how cultural values, societal expectations, and institutional structures interact to shape the rigorous learning culture that characterizes the South Korean education system. Through this analysis, the study intends to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between educational culture, policy development, and academic competition in contemporary education systems.

Method

This study employed a qualitative literature review design to examine the dynamics of learning processes and evaluation systems in South Korea within the context of education fever. The subjects of this study consisted of academic publications discussing the South Korean education system, education fever, shadow education practices, and national evaluation systems. The data analyzed in this research included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and institutional reports related to education policy and educational culture in South Korea (Busetto et al., 2020). The data sources were collected from several academic databases, including Google

Scholar, SpringerLink, ScienceDirect, and ERIC (Education Resources Information Center). The selection of literature was conducted based on several criteria. First, the publications had to be directly related to the topics of education fever, South Korean education systems, learning culture, or educational evaluation mechanisms (Page et al., 2021). Second, the selected sources consisted primarily of peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books to ensure the credibility of the data. Third, the publications were limited to works published within the last ten years in order to maintain the relevance of the analysis (Yadav, 2022).

The research procedure was carried out in several stages. The first stage involved identifying relevant publications using keyword searches such as education fever, South Korean education system, shadow education, and academic competition in Korea (Kuckertz & Block, 2021). The second stage involved screening the collected publications by reviewing their abstracts, research objectives, and findings to determine their relevance to the focus of the study. The third stage involved organizing the selected literature into several thematic categories, including cultural influences on education, learning practices, private supplementary education, and national evaluation systems (Purssell & Gould, 2021). The analysis of the collected literature was conducted using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and relationships among the selected studies. Through this process, findings from different publications were compared and synthesized to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how education fever influences learning processes and evaluation systems in South Korea (Flemming & Noyes, 2021). Synthesizing previous scholarly studies allows researchers to construct broader analytical perspectives when examining complex social and educational phenomena. Therefore, this study focused on identifying the interactions between cultural values, institutional policies, and societal expectations that shape the rigorous academic culture within the South Korean education system (Chong & Plonsky, 2021).

Results and Discussion

Cultural Roots of Education in South Korea

The development of South Korea's education system cannot be separated from the cultural values that shape societal perceptions of learning and academic success. One of the most influential cultural foundations is the legacy of Confucianism, which emphasizes respect for education, discipline, and social mobility through academic achievement (Lee, 2024). In South Korean society, education is widely regarded as the primary pathway for improving social status and economic opportunities. As a result, academic success is often perceived not only as an individual accomplishment but also as a reflection of family honor and social responsibility (Chang, 2022). Recent studies indicate that Confucian cultural traditions continue to influence modern educational attitudes in South Korea, particularly in shaping strong parental expectations and intense

academic competition among students. According to Kim and Park (J. Choi & Han, 2023), the cultural emphasis on diligence and academic excellence contributes significantly to the persistence of education fever, a phenomenon characterized by the strong societal drive to achieve high academic performance. This cultural framework encourages students to devote substantial time and effort to studying, often beyond regular school hours (Noh et al., 2020). Furthermore, family involvement plays a crucial role in reinforcing these educational values. Parents frequently invest considerable financial and emotional resources to support their children's academic success. Research conducted by (Göransson et al., 2022) shows that South Korean parents commonly view education as a long-term investment that determines their children's future career prospects and social mobility. Consequently, many families actively seek additional educational opportunities, including private tutoring and supplementary learning institutions.

In addition to parental expectations, societal competition also intensifies the educational pressure experienced by students. Academic achievement is strongly linked to admission to prestigious universities, which are often associated with better employment opportunities in major corporations and government institutions. As noted by (문초 & Koh, 2023), the strong connection between educational attainment and labor market outcomes further reinforces the culture of intense academic competition within the South Korean education system. Another important cultural dimension is the collective orientation of Korean society, which often prioritizes group success and societal contribution. In this context, educational achievement is frequently framed as a contribution to national development. South Korea's rapid economic growth over the past several decades has strengthened public confidence in education as a key driver of national progress. As a result, both government policies and societal attitudes tend to support rigorous academic standards and high expectations for student performance (Fleckenstein et al., 2023). The cultural roots of education in South Korea therefore create a unique educational environment characterized by strong motivation for learning, high parental involvement, and intense academic competition. While these cultural factors have contributed to the country's impressive educational outcomes, they have also generated significant pressure on students, leading to debates regarding student well-being, educational equity, and the sustainability of such a demanding academic culture (Tlessov et al 2026).

Development of the Modern South Korean Education System

The modern education system in South Korea has undergone significant transformation since the second half of the twentieth century. Following the end of the Korean War, the South Korean government placed strong emphasis on expanding access to education as part of its national development strategy. Education was viewed as a crucial instrument for economic modernization and human capital development. As a result, the government implemented a series of educational reforms aimed at improving literacy rates, expanding school

infrastructure, and establishing a standardized national curriculum (오성철, 2020). One of the defining characteristics of the South Korean education system is its highly centralized structure. The Ministry of Education plays a dominant role in regulating curriculum standards, teacher qualifications, and national assessments. This centralized governance ensures that educational policies are implemented consistently across the country. According to (Shin & Seo, 2022), the Korean government has historically maintained strong control over educational policy in order to guarantee both quality and equality in the national education system. Through centralized planning and rigorous standards, South Korea has been able to achieve high levels of educational performance in international assessments.

The structure of formal education in South Korea generally follows a 6-3-3-4 system, consisting of six years of elementary education, three years of middle school, three years of high school, and four years of university education. Elementary and middle school education are compulsory, while high school attendance rates are also extremely high due to strong societal expectations for continued education. This structure allows the government to maintain clear educational progression and standardized academic benchmarks across different levels of schooling (Ministry of Education, 2022). In addition to institutional structure, South Korea has also implemented various curriculum reforms aimed at fostering critical thinking and creativity among students. In recent years, policymakers have attempted to move beyond rote memorization toward more student-centered learning approaches. However, scholars note that the intense focus on high-stakes examinations often limits the effectiveness of these reforms. As highlighted by (Brutt-Griffler & Kim, 2023), despite policy efforts to promote creativity and problem-solving skills, the pressure associated with university entrance examinations continues to shape classroom practices and learning strategies in many schools.

Another key feature of the modern South Korean education system is the strong linkage between educational achievement and labor market opportunities. Admission to prestigious universities such as Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University is widely perceived as a major determinant of future career prospects. Consequently, students face intense competition throughout their academic journey. This competitive environment contributes to the persistence of education fever, as families seek to maximize their children's chances of academic success through rigorous study and supplementary educational resources (Korea Development Institute, 2024). Despite these challenges, the South Korean education system is often recognized internationally for its high academic performance. South Korean students consistently achieve strong results in global assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Researchers argue that these outcomes are closely related to the country's strong educational culture, effective policy coordination, and high societal commitment to learning. However, the success of the system has also raised important debates regarding student well-being, educational inequality, and the long-term sustainability of an

examination-driven educational model (Hwang, 2021). Overall, the development of the modern South Korean education system reflects the interaction between government policy, economic development, and cultural values emphasizing educational achievement. While the system has successfully produced highly skilled human resources, it also continues to face challenges related to academic pressure, private tutoring expansion, and the need for more balanced educational approaches.

Education Fever and Academic Competition in South Korea

One of the most distinctive characteristics of the South Korean education system is the phenomenon widely known as education fever. This term refers to the intense societal enthusiasm for educational achievement and the strong belief that academic success is the most reliable pathway to upward social mobility. Education fever has become deeply embedded in South Korean society and significantly shapes students' learning experiences, family expectations, and national education policies (Kang & Kim, 2025). Education fever is largely driven by the strong connection between academic achievement and future socioeconomic opportunities. Admission to prestigious universities is often perceived as the gateway to stable employment, higher income, and social prestige. As a result, students experience intense academic competition from an early age. According to (Moon, 2020), many families in South Korea view education not only as a means of personal development but also as a crucial strategy for securing long-term economic stability. Consequently, parents frequently invest substantial financial resources in their children's education, including supplementary learning programs and private tutoring.

This competitive environment is further reinforced by the highly selective university admission system. The College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) plays a central role in determining students' access to higher education institutions. Because university admission is strongly influenced by CSAT scores, students often devote extensive time to exam preparation. Studies indicate that high school students in South Korea typically spend long hours studying both inside and outside the classroom in order to improve their chances of obtaining high scores on national examinations (Gregory James Heathco, 2023). Another factor that intensifies academic competition is the social expectation placed on students to meet family aspirations. In many cases, parents' educational ambitions strongly influence students' academic goals and study habits. (Chun et al., 2023) found that parental expectations are a major driving force behind education fever, as families tend to regard educational achievement as a reflection of family success and responsibility. This dynamic often leads students to engage in rigorous study schedules and participate in multiple forms of supplementary education. Although education fever has contributed to South Korea's high academic performance and rapid human capital development, it has also generated several social concerns.

Researchers note that excessive academic pressure may negatively affect students' mental health, sleep patterns, and overall well-being. In addition, the high financial cost of supplementary education may contribute to educational inequality, as families with greater economic resources are better able to support additional learning opportunities. Despite these challenges, education fever remains a powerful social force that continues to shape the structure and dynamics of the South Korean education system. The phenomenon illustrates how cultural values, economic incentives, and institutional structures interact to produce a highly competitive educational environment. Understanding this dynamic is essential for analyzing both the strengths and the limitations of South Korea's educational success.

Shadow Education and Hagwon Culture

One of the most significant consequences of education fever in South Korea is the rapid growth of shadow education, a term used to describe private supplementary education that operates alongside the formal school system. Shadow education includes various forms of additional learning activities such as private tutoring, online instruction, and enrollment in specialized learning institutions commonly known as hagwon. These institutions provide intensive academic training designed to help students improve their performance in school subjects and prepare for competitive examinations (Piao & Hwang, 2021). The expansion of shadow education in South Korea is closely linked to the highly competitive nature of the national education system. Because academic success is strongly associated with admission to prestigious universities, many students attend hagwon after regular school hours to gain additional academic advantages. According to (J. Kim et al., 2024), participation in shadow education has become a widespread practice among Korean students, particularly at the middle and high school levels. Families often perceive hagwon education as an essential strategy for improving students' chances of achieving high academic results.

Hagwon institutions offer a wide range of academic programs, including mathematics, science, English language education, and test preparation courses for national examinations. These programs often adopt intensive teaching methods that focus on exam-oriented learning strategies and repetitive practice. As a result, many students spend long hours studying not only in school but also in private educational institutions. Research indicates that Korean students frequently attend hagwon late into the evening, which significantly extends their daily study schedules. While shadow education provides additional academic support, it also raises concerns regarding educational inequality. The cost of private tutoring and hagwon programs can be substantial, making them more accessible to families with higher socioeconomic status. As highlighted by (Jin-Won Noh, 2021), the expansion of shadow education may reinforce existing social inequalities because students from wealthier families are better able to access high-quality supplementary education. Consequently, differences in family income can influence students' academic opportunities and outcomes.

Another concern associated with the widespread use of shadow education is its impact on student well-being. Extended study hours and intense academic competition may contribute to stress, fatigue, and reduced leisure time for students. Policymakers in South Korea have attempted to regulate the hagwon industry through measures such as limiting operating hours and strengthening public education systems. However, the strong societal demand for supplementary education has made it difficult to significantly reduce the influence of hagwon in the Korean education landscape. Despite these challenges, shadow education continues to play a central role in the academic lives of many South Korean students. The persistence of hagwon culture illustrates how education fever extends beyond the formal education system and shapes broader educational practices within society. Understanding the dynamics of shadow education is therefore essential for analyzing the broader structure of academic competition and educational achievement in South Korea.

National Examination System and the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT)

Another crucial component that reinforces the phenomenon of education fever in South Korea is the national examination system, particularly the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), commonly known as Suneung. The CSAT is a standardized national examination administered annually to determine students' eligibility for admission to universities. Because university prestige in South Korea is closely associated with career opportunities and social status, performance on this examination plays a decisive role in shaping students' educational trajectories. The CSAT evaluates students' competencies across several academic domains, including Korean language, mathematics, English, social studies, and science. The examination is widely regarded as one of the most influential educational assessments in the country. The high stakes associated with CSAT scores have created an environment in which students dedicate extensive time and effort to exam preparation throughout their secondary education. This emphasis on examination performance has contributed significantly to the persistence of education fever and the broader culture of academic competition.

In many cases, preparation for the CSAT begins several years before students actually take the examination. High school students often engage in rigorous study schedules that combine regular school activities with private tutoring and supplementary education programs. As noted by (Yarine Fawaz, 2022) the pressure associated with university entrance examinations has historically shaped the structure of Korean education, encouraging students to prioritize exam-oriented learning strategies and intensive academic practice. This exam-centered learning culture has become deeply embedded in both formal schooling and private educational institutions. The national examination system also exerts strong influence on teaching practices within schools. Because students' academic success is closely tied to examination performance, teachers often align their instructional methods with the requirements of standardized assessments. Research by (Jung, 2020) indicates that many classrooms emphasize structured problem-solving exercises, practice tests, and content review

sessions designed to maximize students' performance on national exams. While such approaches may help students achieve high scores, critics argue that they may limit opportunities for creative learning and critical thinking.

In addition, the high stakes associated with the CSAT have significant social implications. On the day of the examination, various national measures are implemented to minimize distractions for students. For example, government offices open later than usual, flights are temporarily restricted near testing centers during listening sections, and police officers assist students in reaching examination venues on time. These practices demonstrate the immense societal importance attached to the CSAT and highlight the collective commitment to educational achievement in South Korea. Despite its central role in determining university admissions, the CSAT has also generated debates among policymakers and scholars regarding educational equity and student well-being. Critics argue that heavy reliance on a single high-stakes examination may intensify academic pressure and reinforce socioeconomic disparities, particularly when combined with widespread participation in shadow education. Nevertheless, the CSAT remains a fundamental component of the South Korean education system and continues to shape students' learning experiences, institutional policies, and societal perceptions of academic success. Overall, the national examination system plays a pivotal role in sustaining education fever and reinforcing the highly competitive academic culture in South Korea. By linking educational achievement to university access and future career opportunities, the CSAT has become one of the most powerful institutional mechanisms shaping the country's educational landscape.

Conclusion

This study examined the dynamics of the South Korean education system through the lens of education fever, focusing on how cultural values, institutional structures, and societal expectations interact to shape learning processes and evaluation mechanisms. The findings indicate that the strong emphasis on education in South Korean society is deeply rooted in cultural traditions that prioritize academic achievement as a pathway to social mobility and economic success. These cultural foundations have contributed to the development of a highly competitive educational environment in which students are strongly motivated to pursue academic excellence. The analysis also highlights the significant role of institutional factors, particularly the national examination system and the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), in reinforcing academic competition. The high stakes associated with university admission have encouraged students to invest substantial time and effort in exam preparation, often extending their learning activities beyond formal schooling through participation in shadow education such as hagwon. While these practices have contributed to South Korea's strong performance

in international educational assessments, they have also raised concerns regarding academic pressure, student well-being, and educational inequality.

Furthermore, the expansion of shadow education demonstrates how education fever extends beyond the formal education system and influences broader social and economic practices. Families' willingness to invest heavily in supplementary education reflects the widespread belief that academic success is essential for future career opportunities. Consequently, the interaction between cultural expectations, national policies, and private educational markets has created a complex educational ecosystem characterized by both high achievement and significant academic pressure. Overall, the South Korean education system illustrates how strong societal commitment to education can contribute to national development and academic success. However, the persistence of intense competition and examination-oriented learning also suggests the need for more balanced educational approaches that prioritize creativity, student well-being, and equitable learning opportunities. Future research may further explore policy innovations and educational reforms aimed at reducing academic pressure while maintaining high standards of educational quality.

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