

# **A Systematic Literature Review of Korea's Testing Culture: Surveying the Landscape from An Ecological Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

This systematic review evaluates the research on pervasive testing culture in South Korea from an ecological perspective. The prioritization of testing in South Korean education is a defining feature of the educational system. Our study synthesizes findings from 46 studies, evaluating them through an ecological lens to understand trends in how much attention is paid to learning while analyzing which levels of the ecological system are over- and under-represented. We find that while much research highlights the impacts of testing culture on students' identity, limited research links testing culture to learning itself. Of those studies that do, most center on individual and interpersonal levels, neglecting broader cultural and societal contexts. Additionally, limited evidence exists on pervasive testing and conceptual understanding.

## **Keywords**

Behavioral and Social Sciences; Cognitive Psychology; Educational Psychology; Testing Culture; Ecological Systems Theory.

## **Introduction**

### ***Purpose***

Testing culture has increasingly been positioned as a central focus in South Korean education to the point it has become a defining feature of the nation's educational landscape.<sup>1</sup> This intense focus on testing mirrors broader societal aspirations for economic prosperity and social mobility, where educational attainment is seen as a crucial determinant of individual and national success.<sup>2</sup> Although



South Korea's education system has produced an abundance of well-equipped human resources,<sup>3</sup> consideration for the effect such a rigorous system can have on the student's sense of identity is often less discussed in the literature. This includes the students' perception of what learning is, their sense of self-worth, and other collateral mental impacts. The impact of testing culture on South Korean students has not gone unstudied, however. An emerging body of literature suggests that South Korea's heavy reliance on standardized exams has been linked to students' development of what the literature has called "academic hatred".<sup>4</sup>

Scholarship on the rapid growth of high stakes standardized testing across the globe has raised questions about the extent to which testing cultures support students' conceptual understanding.<sup>5</sup> Such scholarship raises concerns about the efficacy of the South Korean education landscape, which prioritizes results over the learning process.<sup>6</sup> While there is an abundance of research on individual symptoms such as student stress, anxiety, and burnout<sup>7-10</sup> no systematic analyses have been done to determine the extent to which such individual-level studies critically assess the systemic issues contributing to these problems. In considering how research can be used to develop remedies to educational injustices, as this year's AERA theme calls on us to do, the first step is to understand the themes and patterns in the epistemological underpinnings of literature. We hope that such an analysis will provide an understanding of not only the immediate effects of testing culture, but also the border educational philosophies that are able to shape and sustain it, guiding a more informed and balanced approach to the given problem. To this end, our research asks:

### ***Research Questions***

1. In what ways does contemporary educational research on South Korean contexts engage with the nation's testing culture and its effects on students' learning and identity?
2. To what extent and in what ways does the research engage explicitly or implicitly with the theories of learning and development that undergird Korea's testing culture?

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Our analysis draws on ecological systems theory.<sup>11-12</sup> From this theoretical grounding, we understand learning as a situated phenomenon occurring within a learning ecology. We see the cultural, physical, social, and historical settings of learning as being in reciprocal relationships with learners<sup>13</sup> and our review aims to examine whether there are trends and patterns in how various elements of Korean learners' ecologies are (or are not) examined in existing research.

As originally conceptualized by a researcher, a learning "ecology" refers to the various environmental contexts and systems that influence human development. The perspective conceptualized human development as occurring within different levels of environmental influence which are "a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls".<sup>11</sup> His model provides a series of distinct levels. At the innermost level is the individual learner themselves who is embedded in a microsystem which is made up of the relationships and interactions a learner has with their closest surroundings and most significant influences (e.g. family, school, neighborhood, etc.). These microsystems themselves are interconnected into a mesosystem, which is embedded within exo- and macro-systems, which refer to external environments that the individual does not directly engage with and the overarching context within which the learner lives (e.g. cultural values, economic conditions, laws, ideologies). Contemporary scholars have updated Bronfenbrenner's ideas by examining how the nested layers of

learning ecologies produce and are produced by power dynamics related to race, nation, gender, and language.<sup>12</sup>

Grounded in this theoretical perspective, we were curious about whether certain layers of the Korean learning ecology were over and under-represented in the literature, thereby skewing what is known about South Korean testing culture towards one element of the system or another. Through analysis of the ecological levels in which previous studies are grounded in, we can piece together the full picture of their asymmetry and imbalance.

## Methods

The literature search was conducted in the EBSCO database to ensure a comprehensive collection of relevant studies. The search was designed to capture a broad range of studies by using a combination of keywords and subject headings related to the research topic, as detailed in Table 1. The search terms listed in the table were joined through the Boolean phrase “OR”. To join the different categories together, “AND” was used. Furthermore, the search period encompassed publications up to July 6, 2024, thereby providing a thorough review of both recent and past literature. We found 498 studies that are relevant to our keywords and imported them for screening. In addition to one duplicate identified manually, the systematic review production tool, Covidence, detected and removed 43 duplicates. We then screened 455 studies by examining their title and abstract, and excluded articles based on the following exclusion criteria:

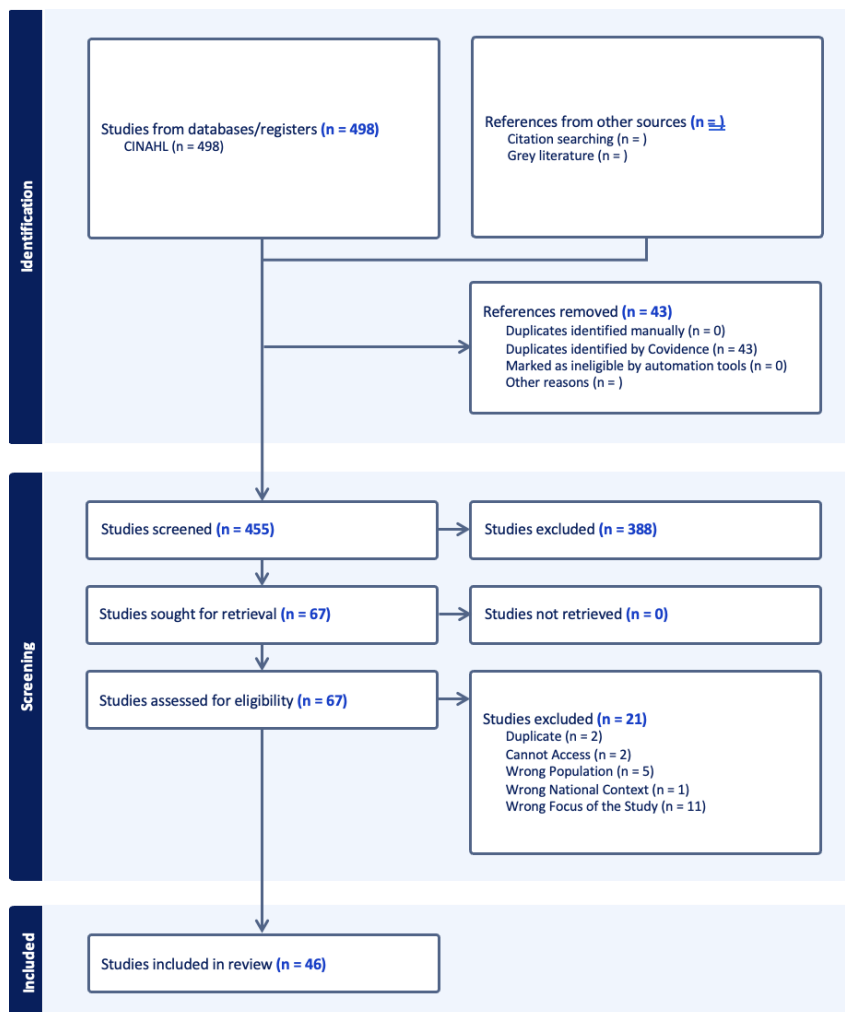
1. Must be about South Korean education
2. Must focus on high school (elementary, middle, and higher education studies are excluded)
3. Must be focused on students’ experience (studies of teachers or parents are excluded)
4. Testing culture or the impact of testing on students must be a topic of the study (a study that relies on test scores, but does not discuss testing culture or the impact of testing on students will be excluded from the review)
5. Must be written in Korean or English

**Table 1.** Examples of search terms used in EBSCO Database

<b>Search Term Category (Joined with AND)</b>	<b>Search Terms in Abstract (Joined with OR)</b>
High School Population	High school*, upper school*, secondary education”, secondary school*
Testing Culture	testing cultur*, test cultur*, culture of test*, examination cultur*, exam cultur*, exams cultur*, culture of examination*, assessment cultur*, culture of assessment*, evaluation cultur*, evaluations cultur*, culture of evaluation*, pressur*, anxiety*, stress*
Korea	Korea*

As illustrated in our PRISMA diagram (see Figure 1), the initial screening process excluded 388 studies, leaving us with 67 studies that met the preliminary inclusion criteria. To further assess the eligibility of

these 67 studies, we retrieved full texts from various databases, such as JSTOR or Taylor & Francis Open Access. We then excluded 21 irrelevant studies based on the additional criteria. Major criteria that determined the irrelevance of the 21 studies included the wrong focus of the study, targeting an element not related to the testing culture or the wrong population. Consequently, we finalized a selection of 46 studies for in-depth analysis and further research.



**Figure 1.** PRISMA diagram of the identification process through Covidence

After the screening process, the extraction process was performed by coding the data in multiple steps in order to analyze how relevant literature discusses South Korean education’s potential effect on student identity, perception on learning, and pre-established learning theories (if applicable). We first determined whether research establishes a clear connection between the Korean education system and a specific type of learning theory. Then, we categorized the ‘focus of the study’ into three groups: Individual, Interpersonal, and Societal or Cultural level (See Table 2). Such categories were divided through reference to ecological systems theory. Individual learning refers to the “individual” element, which mainly focuses on the learners themselves; the interpersonal level including the micro and mesosystem refers to interactions within immediate settings like classrooms and schools, focusing on peer relationships, teacher-student interactions, and school climate; the cultural and societal levels —

encompassing the exo and macrosystem — indicates broader influences such as national educational policies, cultural attitudes towards academic achievement, and societal expectations placed on students.

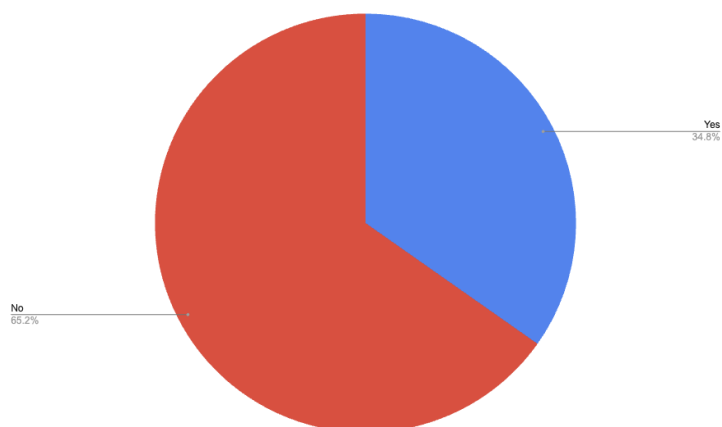
**Table 2.** Categorization and Distribution of Reviewed Literature as it Relates to Learning

<b>Level of analysis</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>Distribution of articles</b>
Investigate Learning at the Individual-Level	<i>The individual level was defined as research that mainly focuses on the influence that was exerted on the individual, personal level: an experience that an individual would go through, such as students' perception, stress level, etc.</i>	An example of the study is (Shin, 2016), which explores the effect of social support on how students perceive schoolwork in future goal attainment. This research is viewed at an individual level as it focuses on the individual students' perceptions of schoolwork, and its influence on the future.	17.39% of articles
Investigates Learning at the Interpersonal-Level	<i>The interpersonal level was defined as the research that delves into the influence of an external individual (eg. a teacher) on the students themselves. This level analyzes how the student, the individual, is affected by external individuals.</i>	A study that exemplifies interpersonal level would be (Lee, 2023). This study presents the role of teacher's autonomy support, and its influence on the student: as this study does not solely focus on the individual experiencing, but also the external influence of a teacher, this was deemed to be an interpersonal level analysis.	10.87% of articles
Investigates Learning at the Societal/ Cultural-Level	<i>The societal or cultural level was defined as the research that looks at the educational or testing culture in South Korea in the broader societal perspective without deep analysis into the experience of individual nor interpersonal level.</i>	An example study would be (Sorensen, 1994), which presents the societal level analysis of the education system in South Korea. Such can be seen as a societal level analysis as it does not focus on the smaller individual; rather, a broader scope on the educational environment of South Korea.	6.52% of articles

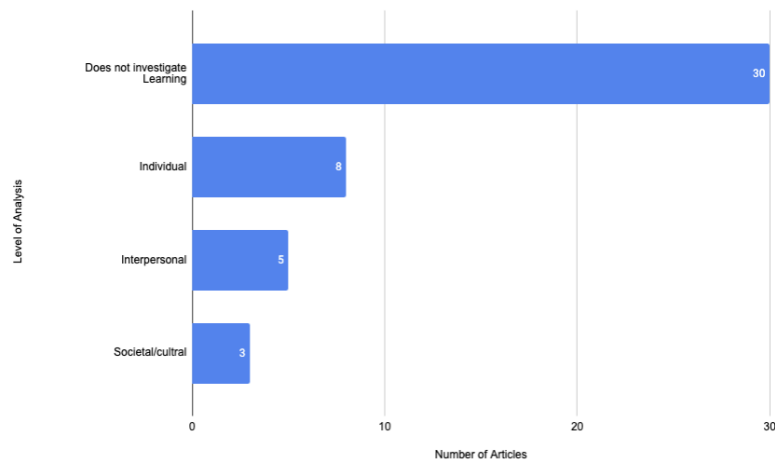
<p>Does not investigate Learning</p>	<p><i>Studies determined to be unrelated to the concept of learning are defined as research on various elements of South Korea's education system that doesn't explicitly investigate student learning and understanding.</i></p>	<p>An example study is (Park, 2018), which investigates the relationship between health behaviors and stress perceptions of Korean high school students. While the study focuses on stakeholders and concepts relevant to our investigation, no explicit connection is made to the academic context of the nation.</p>	<p>65.22% of articles</p>
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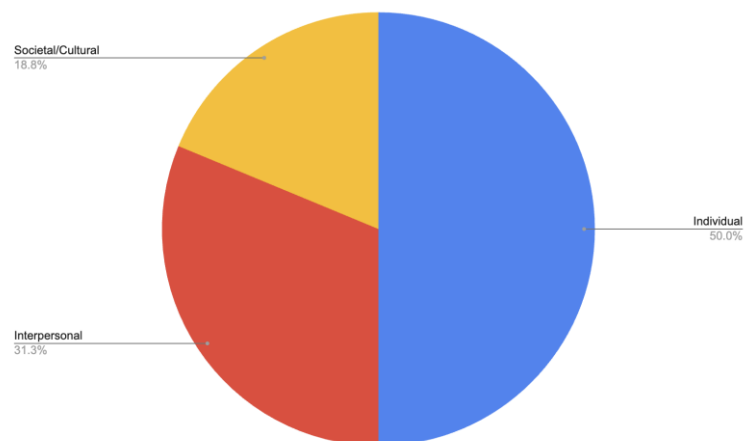
Following the full-text screening, we quantified the number of articles in each 'study of focus' category and sorted them into whether they mention the idea of learning or not. Counted number of articles were additionally converted into percentages. Finally, we were able to produce relevant graphs based on this quantitative data as shown in figures 2, 3, and 4.



**Figure 2.** Percentage of Journals Investigating Learning



**Figure 3.** Distribution of Total Articles by Level of Analysis



**Figure 4.** Distribution of Articles by Level of Analysis (Excluding “Does not investigate learning”)

## Results and Discussion

Interested in how contemporary educational research engages with South Korea’s testing culture and student learning, we screened the literature centered on the testing culture of South Korea. Based on the literature, our analysis revealed that less than half of the studies reviewed investigate testing culture in a way that focused on learning (See Figure 2). Among those that did center on learning, the majority examined testing culture at the individual or interpersonal level. However, these individual and interpersonal analyses rarely investigated outcomes related to students' understanding or comprehension. Additionally, there is a notable absence of cultural-level analysis. Research that directly investigates Korea’s testing culture is extremely limited and doesn’t address the cultural factors such as societal expectations, values, norms as well as stereotypes that influence the Korean testing culture. In the following paragraphs, we will dig deeper into these findings, exploring the gaps in existing literature.

Upon postliminary categorization, out of the 46 selected studies, only 16 of the studies focus on learning. We found that 13 out of 16 studies approached the Korean education system from an individual or interpersonal level, choosing to frame the competitive testing culture as a mere backdrop (See figure 3). These studies' investigation on student outcomes didn't include metrics that indicate learning and understanding, or lack thereof. Most studies instead strictly aligned with motivational theories of learning resulting in high rates of academic burnout, stress, anxiety, depression, and in severe cases, even suicidal ideation.

Perhaps our most intriguing finding, however, is that the literature on South Korean educational contexts is the relative absence of cultural-level analyses. Among 46 studies that were screened, only 3 of them reviewed studies under a sociocultural lens (See figure 3) : one article criticized the competitive nature of South Korea's test-driven system as an impediment to the nation's value of engaging in culturally significant leisure activities.<sup>14</sup> Others related the problem to historical contexts such as humanistic Confucianism,<sup>15</sup> or past government efforts to eliminate educational disparities.<sup>16</sup> The rest of the papers focus on individual or interpersonal levels of analysis, accounting for approximately 81% of the total interest among studies that do investigate learning (See Figure 4). While extensive attention is paid to micro-level factors such as personal motivations, teacher-student interactions, and classroom dynamics,<sup>17-18,10</sup> there remains a conspicuous oversight of broader societal perspectives. This disparity highlights a critical gap in the current research framework concerning the testing culture in South Korea. The prevailing discourse largely neglects the broader cultural, historical, and institutional contexts that profoundly shape educational practices and outcomes in the country. In short, while current scholarship offers valuable insights into individual and interpersonal factors in learning, a more robust exploration of cultural influences is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the testing culture in South Korea.

## **Conclusion**

Our findings regarding research on Korea's testing culture offer a significant contribution to ongoing conversations in the research sphere. The noticeable lack of research on the relationship between testing culture and student understanding suggests a critical shortcoming in the nation's empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of test-based education systems. The prevailing research prioritizes quantitative measures of individual outcomes over qualitative understandings of cultural and societal impacts, creating a hierarchy of knowledge that undervalues the latter. As a consequence, we observe that the general consensus in proposed solutions tends to narrowly focus on additional interventions that alleviate individual consequences of the testing culture (e.g. burnout and anxiety) rather than calling for a fundamental reform in the education system itself. Future research should investigate further into Korea's education by leveraging various learning theories to extract empirical support for the system. Until further studies have been conducted, an ultimate answer to the effectiveness of South Korean testing culture is certainly inconclusive. By broadening the epistemological landscape of the existing research, we hope our research prompts, in alignment with AERA's annual theme, others to address the gaps in research and offer the field more system-level remedies to the harm the system have caused. Ironically enough, our findings suggest that contemporary research mimics the very testing-culture the research aims to dissect or criticize prioritizing results over processes.



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Taeri Kim, from South Korea, is currently studying at Blair Academy in New Jersey. She aims to bridge Korea and the United States by examining their sociocultural differences and how they psychologically impact the shaping of adolescents. Taeri also enjoys drawing, cheerleading, and food blogging in her free time.

**Table 3** Overview of Study Characteristics

<b>Study</b>	<b>Author, Date</b>	<b>Investigates Learning</b>	<b>Study Focus</b>
The relationship between high school students' health behaviors and perceived stress: Based on the 2015 Youth Health Behavior Online Survey.	Park et al.,2018	No	Individual Level
Youth Suicide in Korea Across the Educational Stages.	Lee et al.,2019	No	Individual Level
Ways of coping with excessive academic stress among Korean adolescents during leisure time.	Park & Kim,2018	No	Individual Level
Unfinished Bildungsroman: The Year in Korea.	Park,2023	No	Individual Level
Too Much of a Good Thing: Social Capital and Academic Stress in South Korea.	Jarvis et al.,2020	No	Individual Level
The Testing Culture and the Role of Private Education	Brutt-Griffler & Kim,2021	No	Individual Level
The Impact of EFL Testing on EFL Education in Korea	Choi,2008	No	Individual Level
The dynamics of demotivation and remotivation among Korean high school EFL students.	Song & Kim,2016	No	Individual Level
Socioeconomic Inequalities in Adolescent Depression in South Korea: A Multilevel Analysis.	Park et al.,2012	No	Individual Level
Risk Factors for Smoking Behaviors among Adolescents	Chung & Joung,2014	No	Individual Level
Risk Factors and Mediators of Suicidal Ideation Among Korean Adolescents.	Kim et al.,2018	No	Individual Level
Relationships between social support and student burnout: A meta-analytic approach.	Kim et al.,2017	No	Individual Level
Recent Developments in Korean School Education.	Kim,1999	No	Individual Level

Private Tutoring and its Effect on Students' Learning Performance.	Shokirova & Rasulov,2024	No	Individual Level
Peers' Private Tutoring and Adolescent Depressive Symptoms: Quasi-Experimental Evidence From Secondary Schools in South Korea.	Kim & Jang,2021	No	Individual Level
Is Reputational Pressure Enough to Create Competitive School Choice Effects? Evidence from Seoul's School Choice Policy. EdWorkingPaper No. 23-860	Kim & Ron,2023	No	Individual Level
From emotional exhaustion to cynicism in academic burnout among Korean high school students: Focusing on the mediation effects of hatred of academic work.	Lee et al.,2020	No	Individual Level
Frequency of irritable bowel syndrome, entrance examination-related stress, mental health, and quality of life in high school students.	Park & Lim,2009	No	Individual Level
Factors Affecting Teenager Cyber Delinquency	Joo et al.,2013	No	Individual Level
Epidemiology of Suicidal Behavior among Korean Adolescents.	Juon et al.,1993	No	Individual Level
Cigarette smoking among Korean adolescents: Prevalence and correlates.	Joun et al.,1995	No	Individual Level
Association of school, family, and mental health characteristics with suicidal ideation among Korean adolescents.	Lee & Choi,2015	No	Individual Level
Assessment of life factors affecting the experience of depressive symptoms in adolescents: a secondary analysis using the Korea Youth Risk Behavior Survey.	Lee et al.,2021	No	Individual Level
All work and no play? The effects of ability sorting on students' non-school inputs, time use, and grade anxiety.	Wang,2014	No	Inter-Personal Level
Academic stress levels were positively associated with sweet food consumption among Korean high-school students.	Kim et al.,2012	No	Inter-Personal Level
Academic burnout profiles in Korean adolescents.	Lee et al.,2010	No	Inter-Personal Level

A Window into South Korean Culture: Stress and Coping in Female High School Students	Vandergast al.,2015	et No	Inter-Personal Level
A multilevel analysis of change in emotional exhaustion during high school: Focusing on the individual and contextual factors.	Lee et al.,2020	No	Inter-Personal Level
A Cross-National Study of Mathematics Anxiety	Yuan et al.,2022	No	Societal/ Cultural-Level
Effects of Parent-Child Relationships and Classroom Goal Structures on Motivation, Help-Seeking Avoidance, and Cheating.	Bong,2008	No	Societal/ Cultural-Level
The Effects of Social Supports on Changes in Students' Perceived Instrumentality of Schoolwork for Future Goal Attainment	Shin et al.,2015	Yes	Societal/ Cultural-Level
Success and Education in South Korea.	Sorensen,1994	Yes	Societal/ Cultural-Level
Structural Relationships between Cognitive Achievement and Learning-Related Factors among South Korean Adolescents.	Lee,2022	Yes	Societal/ Cultural-Level
South Korean Male Adolescents' Internal and External Influences in Academic Achievement	Geesa Salloum,2014	& Yes	Individual Level
Role of Peer Support in Competitive Classroom Climates: Focusing on the Mediation Effect of Academic Hatred in the JD-R Model	Lee et al.,2021	Yes	Individual Level
Role of Achievement Value, Teachers' Autonomy Support, and Teachers' Academic Pressure in Promoting Academic Engagement among High School Seniors	Lee et al.,2023	Yes	Individual Level
Private Tutoring and Mass Schooling in East Asia: Reflections of Inequality in Japan, South Korea, and Cambodia	Dawson,2010	Yes	Individual Level
Parental Influences on Korean Youth Academic- and Career-Related Motivation during the Transition to Tertiary Educational Settings: A Situated Expectancy-Value Theory Approach	Park,2023	Yes	Individual Level

Korean Adolescents' Examination Hell' and Their Use of Free Time.	Lee,2003	Yes	Individual Level
High Stakes Assessment Preparation Experiences in South Korea: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study	Heathco,2023	Yes	Individual Level
Development and Validation of a Mathematics Anxiety Scale for Students	Ko & Yi,2011	Yes	Individual Level
Age-Related Differences in Academic Burnout of Korean Adolescents	Lee et al.,2013	Yes	Inter-Personal Level
Affective Variables, Parental Involvement and Competence among South Korean High School Learners of English	Morris et al.,2023	Yes	Inter-Personal Level
Academic Hatred: Focusing on the Influence of a Supportive Classroom Climate	Lee et al.,2022	Yes	Inter-Personal Level
A Multilevel Analysis of Change in Hatred of Academic Work during High School: Focusing on the Sociocultural Background of Korea	Lee et al.,2019	Yes	Inter-Personal Level
A Cross-National Validation of the Academic Expectations Stress Inventory with Chinese and Korean High School Students	Zhang et al.,2016	Yes	Inter-Personal Level