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Hyper-competitive classrooms feed the corporate world's narcissist pipeline

When schools prize individual achievement above all else, they shape future leaders who mistake domination for success.

Students taking the College Scholastic Ability Test, or Suneung, at a school in Seoul on Nov 14, 2024. South Korea's hyper-competitive education system represents an extreme version of competitive educational practices spreading globally, creating a generation of corporate leaders who view every interaction as a contest to be won, says the writer. PHOTO: AFP

Ben Chester Cheong

On Nov 14, 2024, South Korea fell silent. Construction sites stopped working, aircraft were rerouted from flight paths and businesses delayed opening. The entire nation held its breath for nine hours while more than 500,000 teenagers took the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSat). The state-administered Suneung, as it is known, determines their university placement and, by extension, their entire future.

The pressure on students to succeed has created what experts call a "life-defining moment", where performance in a single exam determines not just university choices, but job prospects and even marriage potential.

South Koreans believe that doing well in the exam means getting a spot at top universities, then landing jobs at companies like Samsung or Hyundai, which will even increase marriage prospects by connecting them with people of equal social and educational background.

This extreme educational pressure produces predictable results. According to the OECD Pisa report, more than 20 per cent of Korean 15-year-olds in 2015 reported they were not satisfied in their life, compared with less than 4 per cent of students in the Netherlands. South Korea has one of the world's highest youth suicide rates, with teenagers ranking among the most depressed globally, largely due to educational pressure surrounding the Suneung.

But South Korea's hyper-competitive education system is not an isolated phenomenon. It represents an extreme version of competitive educational practices spreading globally, creating a generation of corporate leaders who view every interaction as a contest to be won.

EDUCATION'S EMPATHY GAP

Walk into classrooms from Delhi to Detroit and you will find students pushed to outperform, to score higher, to shine brighter than their peers. Success gets measured in grades, ranks and trophies. This competitive mindset spans cultures.

In East Asia, exam rankings dominate student life. In the West, debate skills and "standing out" in college applications take priority. Across all these systems, children learn that victory over others defines success, while collaborative and altruistic instincts get sidelined.

To be fair, competition can drive innovation, motivate excellence, and prepare students for real-world challenges. However, when competition becomes the dominant framework for all learning, it crowds out equally important skills like empathy, collaboration, and emotional intelligence.

Global research has shown that while competition can serve as a useful motivating force, teachers overwhelmingly reported that "competition negatively affects moral development" and "creates negative emotions such as jealousy, grudge and hatred" among students.

Sara Konrath from the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research conducted an analysis in 2010, combining results from 72 different studies of American college students between 1979 and 2009. Her findings revealed that college students are about 40 per cent lower in empathy than their counterparts of 20 or 30 years ago, as measured by standard personality tests.

Konrath's study, involving nearly 14,000 college students over three decades, found that students are significantly less likely to agree with statements such as "I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective", and "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me".

The biggest drop in empathy occurred after 2000, precisely when social media and hyper-competitive educational practices intensified. This empathy decline coincides with what psychologist Jean Twenge of San Diego State University has documented as a "narcissism epidemic", with more students showing selfish qualities and traits associated with narcissistic personality disorder.

As educational environments become increasingly competitive, emphasising individual achievement over collaborative learning, students have learnt to see peers as obstacles rather than partners. The result has been an assembly line producing brilliant but self-obsessed minds, the exact personality types now dominating corporate leadership.

THE NARCISSIST PIPELINE

The connection between competitive education and toxic leadership becomes clear when examining corporate boardrooms.

Research by Charles O'Reilly from Stanford Graduate School of Business and his colleagues reveals that about 18 per cent of chief executive officers score moderately or highly in narcissistic traits, compared with just 5 per cent of the general population. These traits include grandiose self-importance, entitlement, lack of empathy and an insatiable need for admiration.

The US-based study found that narcissistic CEOs receive median total compensation that is 33 per cent higher than their non-narcissistic counterparts, earning US$10.34 million (S$13.1 million) compared to US$7.79 million.

Studies show that students with higher empathy scores not only exhibit less aggressive behaviour, but also demonstrate better academic outcomes and superior communication abilities. Some schools and universities are already adapting by including empathy training, ethical leadership and collaborative decision-making in their curricula.

More troubling, further research by O'Reilly and his team demonstrates that narcissistic CEOs actively undermine organisational cultures of collaboration and integrity. Their studies of nearly 900 business school alumni working at 56 large publicly traded high-tech firms found that more narcissistic CEOs were significantly less likely to lead companies with collaborative cultures.

The career progression data reveals how competitive educational systems feed this pipeline. Research by Paola Rovelli from the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano and Camilla Curnis from Politecnico di Milano, published in The Leadership Quarterly in 2020, studied 172 Italian CEOs and found that those scoring higher in narcissistic traits advanced to CEO positions 29 per cent faster than their peers.

The researchers noted that narcissistic individuals progress by "behaving like stars", armed with higher ambition and greater confidence that help them seek and obtain leadership positions more quickly.

COSTS OF ALPHA LEADERSHIP

The business consequences of narcissistic leadership extend far beyond inflated compensation packages. Stanford's O'Reilly warns that "lots of studies show that companies with cultures that are less collaborative and have lower integrity are more likely to get in trouble and violate laws". His research finds that narcissistic CEOs are more prone to lengthy litigation and earnings manipulation.

Lorenz Graf-Vlachy from TU Dortmund University led a comprehensive study published in the Journal of Management in 2024, analysing over 12,000 LinkedIn profiles of top managers at US companies. The research revealed that narcissistic CEOs systematically appoint other narcissists to their management teams, creating a toxic echo chamber. An increase in CEO narcissism by one standard deviation leads to an 18 per cent higher level of narcissism in each newly appointed executive.

These management teams experience significantly higher turnover rates, creating substantial costs for companies as executives clash and burn out. Recent corporate disasters from Wells Fargo's fake accounts scandal to Theranos' fraudulent claims share this disturbing pattern.

They feature leaders who prioritised personal glory over stakeholder welfare, who saw ethical corners as obstacles to cut rather than boundaries to respect.

REWRITING CORPORATE LEADERSHIP

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Educational institutions should prioritise empathy development alongside analytical skills and include courses in ethical leadership and stakeholder engagement.

Singapore has recognised this need for systemic change. In 2024, the Ministry of Education (MOE) implemented full subject-based banding across all 120 secondary schools, abolishing the traditional streaming system that had separated students into Express, Normal Academic, and Normal Technical tracks.

Students now learn in mixed form classes where they can interact with peers of different strengths and interests, taking subjects at varying difficulty levels based on their individual abilities rather than predetermined academic tracks.

In 2023, mid-year exams for all Singapore primary and secondary schools were removed. In 2012, MOE stopped its practice of announcing top-scoring students in the release of all national examinations results.

The Government has also launched comprehensive mental health and well-being initiatives. The Singapore Centre for Character and Citizenship Education was established in May 2023 to advance research and professional learning in character development.

These reforms reflect Singapore's broader evolution from an education system focused primarily on economic needs towards one emphasising holistic student development, including character formation and societal participation.

To build on this shift and move further away from narrow competition and its pitfalls, we can afford to be bolder and continue to tread on this path of holistic development.

Other countries offer promising models. Since the 1990s, Finnish schools have operated without standardised testing, and school rankings, or merit-based comparisons between institutions. Instead, they embrace what educational researcher Pasi Sahlberg calls "intelligent accountability" based on trust and collaboration rather than competition.

Finnish educators explicitly reject the Darwinian competition mindset, instead fostering environments where cooperation is the norm and student welfare takes priority over test scores. The results speak volumes. Finland consistently ranks among the world's top education systems while maintaining the highest levels of student well-being.

Instead of rewarding only individual achievement, we must celebrate collaborative success. Rather than just asking "Who finished first?" we should ask "Who helped others succeed?"

We can continue producing narcissistic leaders who view business as conquest, or we can develop empathetic leaders who understand that sustainable success requires lifting others up rather than tearing them down.

• Ben Chester Cheong is a legal academic affiliated with the Singapore University of Social Sciences, University of Reading, Cambridge C-EENRG, and NUS APCEL. He is also a lawyer at RHTLaw Asia.

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