

Stress in High School - A Comparison between South Korea and Sweden



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ABSTRACT

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This thesis aims at learning about stress-related issues that affect high school students in South Korea and Sweden through survey studies, and ultimately finding possible solutions to tackle them.

The quantitative, qualitative and comparative research methods were utilised to achieve the objectives. Three research questions in place are: A) Do high school students in Korea and Sweden feel stressed because of school? B) Are there any similarities in terms of causes of stress in comparison? C) Do the high school students in these two countries handle stress well? Through background research it appeared that living in the South Korean society was highly stressful; South Korea had one of the highest suicide rates amongst the OECD countries, and the figures showed that many of those were high school students. On the other hand, there were sources suggesting that contemporary Swedish adolescents felt more stressed nowadays than the previous generation did.

An online survey was conducted to garner information and opinions from second and third year students in South Korea and Sweden respectively; Subsequent analysis based on the *coping* and *stressors* theories was employed to assess the outcome of the survey. The results indicate that school had significant influence on students' mental health - students felt stressed in both countries. There were similarities in terms of causes of stress, despite the South Korean students feeling more stressed than their Swedish counterparts based on the survey answers.

The students from both countries stated that fear over uncertain future was one of the main causes of stress, and that worries over university admissions put them under pressure. The study also showed certain differences in the coping ability of the two student groups.

The conclusion of this thesis aims to achieve a better understanding of high school students' well-being needs and seek possible means of tackling stress based on the student respondents' own proposals.

Key words: stress, high school, coping, stressors, internet survey, suicide, adolescents

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Preface

It has been a true eye opener to write this thesis; it has made me aware of the true definitions of 'stress' in general terms, as well as how much it affects the adolescents in today's society. I had encountered plenty of challenges and learned from them whilst writing this thesis. I found the whole research process an enriching experience, especially when reading through the students' questionnaire submissions. It has also helped me get a better understanding of how adolescents feel nowadays, which is one of the most important objectives of this study. The research in this thesis was conducted in three languages, namely English, Swedish and Korean, to gather as much information as possible, with the reports compiled in English for easy reference.

I would like to thank all the students taking part in the survey, and their teachers who had been supportive during the process. I would also like to thank Mr Peter Ekmark, the CEO of Papilly, for taking the time to talk about stress with me. I especially want to thank my supervisor who guided me through this thesis with helpful feedback, interesting discussions and good advice. Finally, a big thank you to all my friends who supported me throughout the writing of this thesis.

Caroline Rystedt

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

After commencing an undergraduate degree in Korea Studies and living in South Korea ('Korea' hereafter) for one year, I have obtained an insightful perspective on the country. Korea is known for having a low life satisfaction rate (5.9 out of 10) compared to the average score of other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (6.5 out of 10). Although students in Korea have achieved high level of academic success, there is room for improvement when it comes to the subject of student well-being (OECD Better Life Index 2018). According to Statistics Korea, the Korean National Statistics Office, it was reported that 353 youths between the age of 10 and 19 committed suicide in 2010 alone, which was nearly one person per day. It also stated that Korea had had the highest rate of suicide amongst the OECD countries since 2009 (Chöng 2015).

My experience of studying in Korea became one of the main incentives to examine the impact of stress to adolescents in education. Also, a recent conversation with one of my siblings about her experience of stress in high school had convinced me to conduct research on this subject. In reference with an article by Public Health Agency of Sweden (Folkhälsomyndigheten) in 2016, an increased number of teenagers suffered from headache, trouble sleeping and sadness. And these symptoms were more common amongst students who experienced stress over school work (Folkhälsomyndigheten 2016).

1.2 Purposes and Research Questions

This thesis aims at learning about stress-related issues in high school through survey results and ultimately finding possible solutions to tackle them. Through a series of survey results comparison and analysis, it builds a clear picture of the current high school students' emotional well-being and their needs. Three research questions have been formulated in order to conduct the research:

- A. Do high school students in Korea and Sweden feel stressed because of school?
- B. Are there any similarities in terms of causes of stress in comparison?
- C. Do the high school students in these two countries handle stress well?

The survey results of Question A will shed light on the causes and level of stress the student respondents endure. Since the study primarily focuses on stress in school, it is important to understand whether or not school was the only cause of stress. Question B will provide an insight into common traits between the students of the two countries and discover possible solutions to tackle stress at early stages. Question C helps determines the students' coping ability and tolerance of stress, since stress management provides a pathway for healthier lifestyles. Further, raising the awareness of coping ability may also help students understand their emotional responses and limits.

2. Background Research

2.1 Observations

Previous studies on the effect of stress to high school students were confined to relatively specific areas, such as stress in relation to alcohol or drug use. On the other hand, significantly fewer studies could be found on stress amongst high school students in general circumstances.

2.2 Stress and Mental Health

Feeling stressed is a common situation which can be hard to avoid, but the way individuals respond to stress may differ from one to another. It is a natural part of life. Stress can have both negative and positive effects; positive stress can make a person feel motivated, whereas negative stress can make one feel too overwhelmed to handle difficult situations (SOU 2006:77).

2.3 Stress and Mental Health in Korea

In Korea stress is reported one of the main causes of suicide. According to a survey in 2006, 56.5% of adolescents suffered from student stress. The number appeared considerably higher than that of the same survey in 2002, in which 48.9% shared their experiences of student stress (Lee Eun Hee 2009 5–27).

As mentioned above, Korea has had the highest suicide rate for the past ten years amongst the OECD countries, particularly suicide being the main cause of death amongst adolescents in Korea (Lee Ji-Young and Bae Sung-Man 2015 428–444). In 2011, more than 2 million Koreans suffered from major depressive disorder (MDD), commonly known as depression that required medical care, although only around 15% of them received proper treatments. And people with mental health issues were prone to higher risks of suicide if they did not receive medical treatments (Hö et.al 2011 358-360).

In the Korean society, the elitist culture indicates that one's status and achievements are largely defined by admissions of SKY, the three most prestigious higher education institutes in Korea (UR 2013). The SKY universities are Seoul National University, Korea University and Yonsei University (The Economist 2013). According to the UR documentary, students were expected to answer almost all questions correctly for the university entrance exam ('Sunung') in order to be accepted into the SKY universities, which put them under immense stress.

2.4 Stress and Mental Health in Sweden

A 2006 State Report showed that most adolescents in Sweden 'felt good (mår bra)'. However, the same report also suggested that there was an increasing level of stress amongst the Swedish adolescents during the past two decades, despite higher living standards. In six separate studies conducted by the Swedish state, different groups of adolescents and young adults aged between 15 and 24 were asked about the subject of mental health issues respectively. All six studies

showed that the number of interviewees suffering from mental health issues was on the rise. These mental health issues, such as worries, sadness and trouble sleeping, were signs of stress; moreover, adolescents were the most affected group in comparison to other age groups in Sweden (SOU 2006:77).

A similar report issued by The Ombudsman for Children (Barnombudsmannen) also suggested that most children and young people in Sweden were generally happy, but the mental health issues had become more prominent in recent years. The article also mentioned that 20,000 children and young people under the age of 18 visited child and adolescent mental health services (Barn och ungdomspsykiatri) in 2008 (Persson et.al 2010, 139).

According to Ekmark, CEO of Papilly, a stress-coping software developer, 57% of young women suffer from psychosomatic problems nowadays, almost twice as many as there were in 1985. The symptoms these young adults described included trouble sleeping, worries and anxiety (interview with Ekmark in 2018).

3. Definitions

3.1 Definition of ‘Stress’

The word *stress* may have different connotations to different individuals; it can either be positive or negative, or even a combination of both depending on the person answering the question.

In reference with the Oxford Dictionary, stress is ‘a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances.’ (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). The national encyclopedia (Nationalencyklopedin) construed that stress, in psychological, medical and general biological science, is the adjustments activated by physical or psychological tensions (Nationalencyklopedin, 2018).

Stress is an ancient defence mechanism that helps beings survive since our existence. It protects individuals from having mental breakdowns and subsequent consequences. It also helps prevent overworking by raising one’s pulse, tunnel vision and blood flow from the brain to other parts of the body. In today’s society human beings have evolved and required a lower level of physical activity for survival in comparison, and hence experience of stress could have a negative impact on one’s well-being (Ekmark, 2018).

The cause of stress can be caused by vastly different scenarios and does not have to be a real-life experience. Contemporary researchers described stress as ‘...the process where a person must try to adjust to the demands of their surroundings.’ In turn, this can indicate that individuals respond differently to stress. Stress does not necessarily have a negative effect, it can become a positive challenge if one learns to balance expectations from others and what we are capable of doing (Ellneby 2001 31-32).

All definitions mentioned above will be used in this thesis to examine the research subject: *Stress* is the body’s defence mechanism and a survival instinct. It is a mental state that results from

adverse situations. *Stress* can occur when one is under too much pressure. *Stress* can be both positive and negative depending on individuals.

3.2 Definition of ‘High School Students’

The definition of *high school students* varies from country to country. In this thesis, the high school students participating in the survey were second and third year students, which fell in the age group of 16 to 18 by the Korean standard (Transferwise 2017), as oppose to that of 16 to 20 in Sweden (Skolverket 2018).

4. Research Methods

4.1 Choices of Methods

Three research methods would be utilised in this thesis to gather information for analysis. The quantitative methods emphasise measurements in an objective manner using large numbers of participants (John 2010), which would be the most ideal research methods to illustrate more general opinions and up-to-date information from current high school students.

Two research methods adopted alongside the quantitative methods are the qualitative and comparative methods; the former helps achieve a better understanding of the student participants’ psychological well-being (Vromen 2010), whereas the latter demonstrates the research results and analysis through thorough comparison (Hopkin 2010).

4.2 Limitations

A total of 122 Korean and 120 Swedish students in their second or final year students took part in the online survey. It was decided that first year students were exempt from this study owing to their lower exposure to pre-graduation stress. The amount of collected data is considered fairly adequate based on the responses of over a hundred students each side within the given time frame, despite the known principle that differences in the numbers of survey participants may influence the outcome of the survey results.

When carrying out research related to adolescents and children, group interviews are considered the best method to employ (Wibeck 2010); however, due to the limitation of not being able to travel to Korea in person during the writing of this thesis this method was not possible to employ. Further, although use of biological studies may be an informative source, it is not within the scope of the research purposes. Hence, any biology-related studies would be omitted in this thesis.

It is also crucial to bear in mind that the usage of the word *stress* goes in line with section 3.1 above, the colloquial narrations of the word ‘stress’ is often confused with the term ‘being nervous’, despite their *inherently* different definitions. The usage of the term ‘being nervous’ is limited to certain situations, for instance, when one speaks in front of a large group of people.

Being nervous could potentially make one feel anxious or flustered, which can be a cause of stress, but not necessarily the only factor (Oxford Dictionaries 2018). Moreover, each school of methods or studies has its own merits and flaws, which may result in slight variations of research outcomes.

4.3 Survey Implementation

The survey questions were first drafted in Swedish and subsequently translated into Korean and English to provide clarity of language to the student participants and easy reference to the readers of this thesis. The survey only invited the second and third year students for better justification of the result based on their better understanding of academic progress and foreseeable final exam pressure.

The survey format consists of nine straightforward questions to tackle subject matter in a simple manner. The first five questions come with scales from 1 to 10 with 1 reflects the least agreeable to the questions and 10 the most. Question six and seven are multiple-choice questions with comment sections for further elaboration of the students' choices. The last two questions include comment sections for the students to explain their answers in a few sentences, which give them an opportunity to express their thoughts thoroughly.

An online survey was conducted to maintain efficiency and anonymity, and the outcome of the survey would be automatically processed and presented in charts through the collected data. The layout of the survey was designed to process the collected different formats of data. And finally, the survey results would be presented with two comparative charts and brief explanations. The written results would be presented in section 7 by representative quotes. An analysis of both quotations and survey answers would be presented in section 7. The style of my analysis is based on the same technique used when analysing interview materials - through looking for keywords and themes (Hedin 1996). Considering the fact that discussions about stress be a sensitive subject for some students, a system of strict anonymity was in place in conducting the survey.

One problem with the internet survey arose, one question was missing from the survey sent to the Korean students, despite checking that it was correct several times before sending it out. The reason for it is unknown but it seems to be a technical error. Since it was not possible to send out the survey to the exact same students again, the question was omitted. However, this has not caused any major issues with the thesis.

4.4 Interview with Ekmark

The interview covered the general topic of stress with eight questions. Each question allowed time for discussions with more than one possible answer. The interview lasted approximately 40 minutes and was recorded digitally with the relevant materials processed through transcription.

4.5 Strengths and Weaknesses

Conducting research on human behaviours and activities can be challenging without asking in-

depth questions in person. It is also suggested by researchers that there is a risk of being ignorant about the world's complexity when using a quantitative research, this due to the open questions often asked in surveys in order to use variables to generalize (John 2010). However, seeing a bigger picture through large numbers can give an indication of what people think in general; not only a few individuals. When dealing with people and how they feel, it is important to give them a chance to explain themselves and why they think the way they do. Because of this, the possibility of explaining why they think the way they do was added to the survey. For two of the questions a second, not mandatory part was added where they could explain their answer. For the two last questions, a written answer was required. This was done in order to better understand the participating students and to show awareness of that the world is complex and cannot only be understood by variables.

Using a survey requires time. A researcher using this kind of method has to spend a lot of time thinking about the effect of each question, wording and the order of the responses to the questions. Thinking about the data that has been collected also requires a lot of time. Choosing between the received data can also be risky since the researcher can interfere and easily choose the answers that best suits the research that they are doing (John 2010). In order not to choose the answers most suited for this thesis, all of the variables are shown in this research to be able to discuss them and make it clear and easy for the reader. For the written answers, the most representative answers were shown (see section 7).

5. Supporting Theories

The following theories are cited in support of my analysis:

5.1 Brattbergs Theory about 'Coping'

The psychological term coping is a mechanism to deal with insecurity, the unknown, and worrying. It is a term used since 1980's and is one of the most cited theories used and created by the American psychologist Richard Lazarus (Psykologiguiden 2018). It means to deal with or being able to handle something or a situation. Coping is the ability to deal with psychological stress. Stress does not have to be something negative, the better a person's ability to cope with a situation is the person has a bigger chance to live a healthy life (Brattberg 2008 p.9).

5.2 Ellnebys Theory about 'Stressors'

In the book "Om barn och stress och vad vi kan göra åt det" (translated as "About kids and stress and what we can do about it") Ellneby states that a stressor is not stress but it is stress factors and that stress is something that we feel if there are too many stress factors (Ellneby 2001).

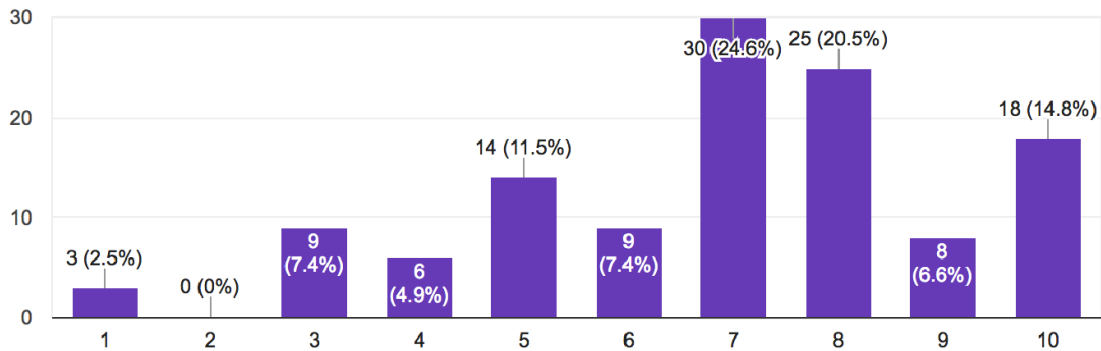
6. Surveys

The survey results will be presented in chart forms with short descriptions below each question. The purple charts represent the response from the Korean students and the blue charts represents the Swedish students. In Q.5 and Q.6 the participants could choose more than one answer.

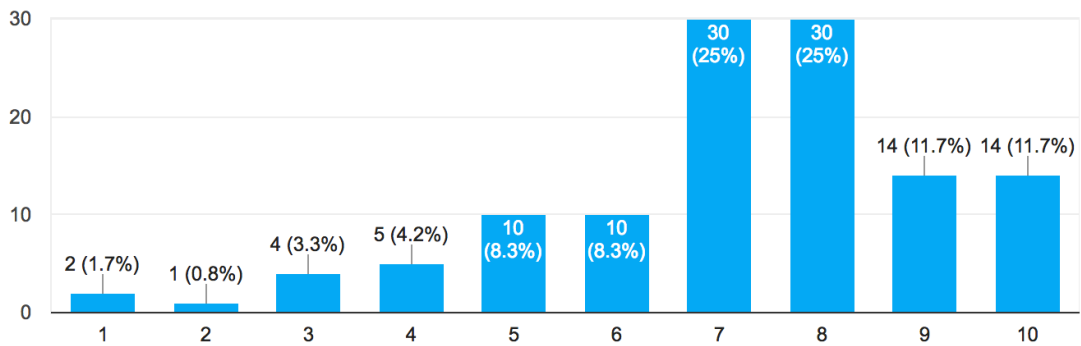
6.1 Charts

Q.1 On a scale from 1 to 10 how stressed do you feel because of school?

122 responses



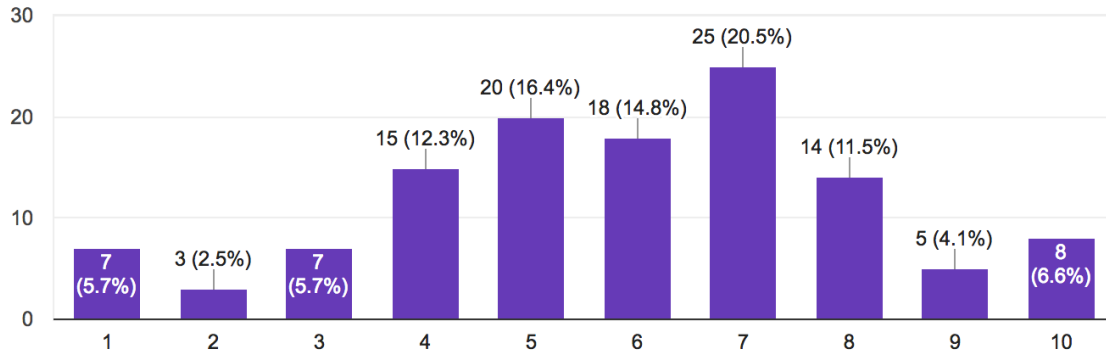
120 responses



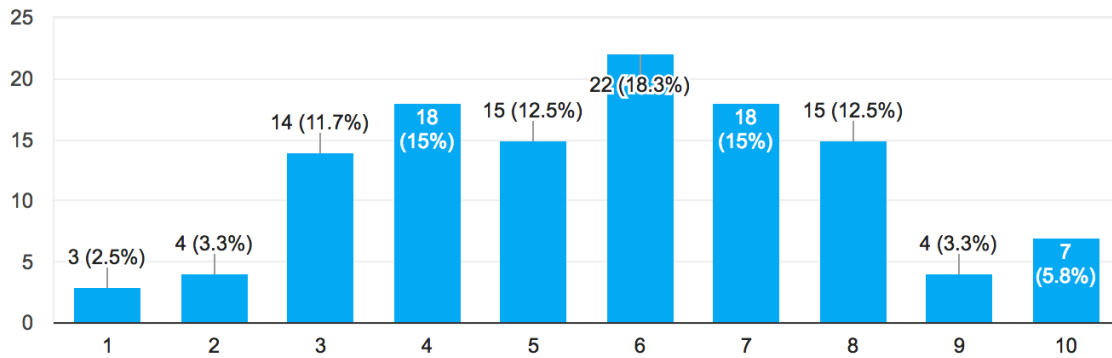
These two charts indicate the level of stress the students feel because of school; the students in both counties state they experience high level of stress.

Q.2 On a scale from 1-10 how well would you say that you can handle stress?

122 responses



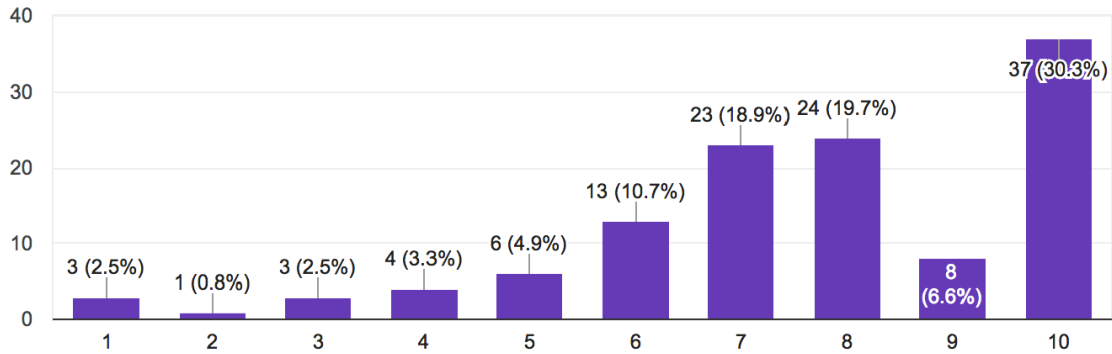
120 responses



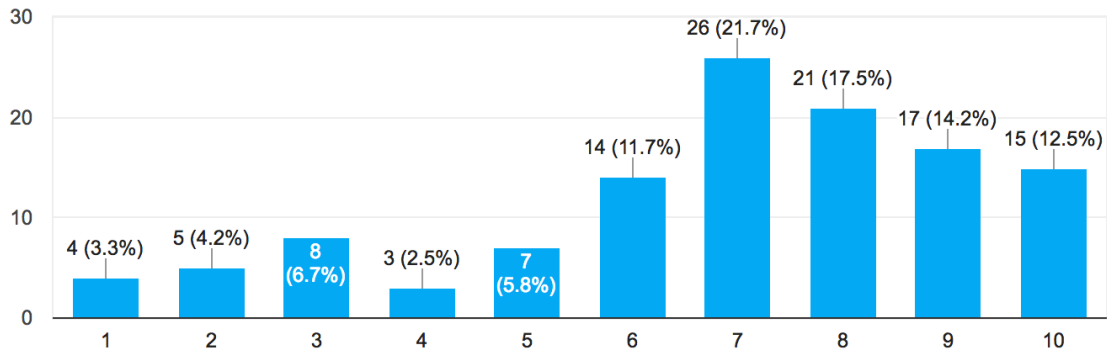
It is evident, as shown in the charts, that the Korean and Swedish students believe they handle stress.

Q.3 On a scale from 1-10 how much would you say that stress affects your mental health?

122 responses



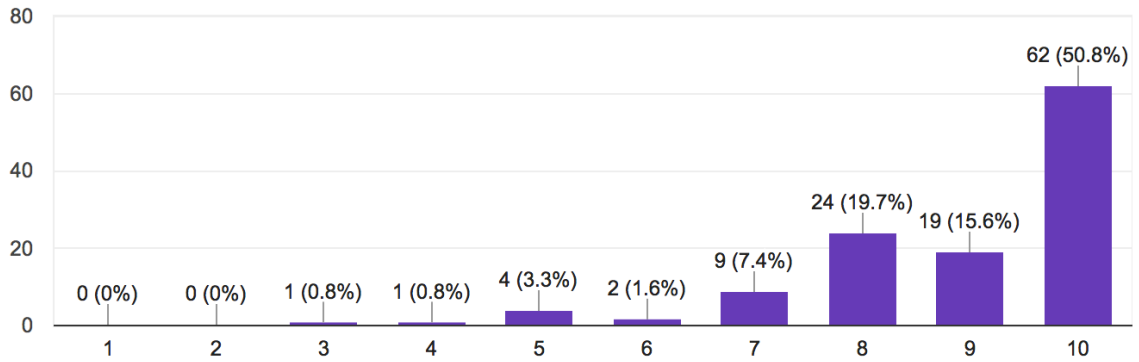
120 responses



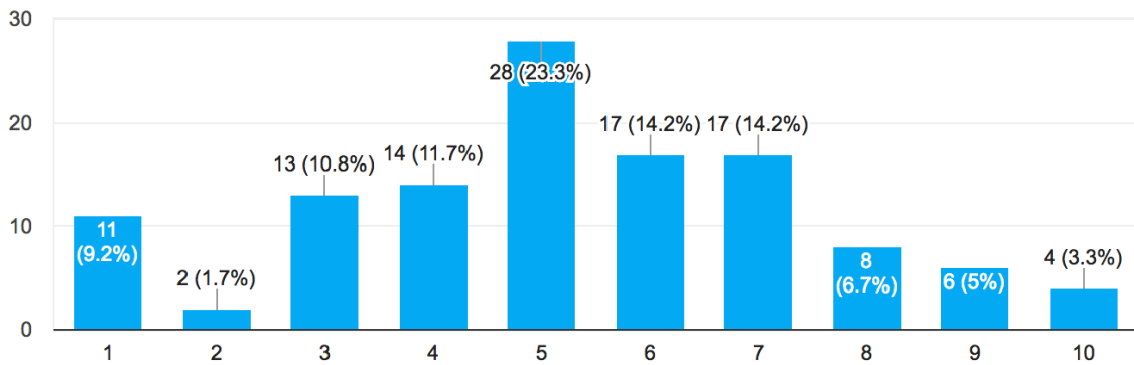
When it comes to the relation between stress and mental health, the majority of the Korean students think it affects their mental health on a larger scale. The Swedish students, meanwhile, do not share the same strong opinions.

Q.4 On a scale from 1-10, if you compare your country (Korea/Sweden) to other countries in the world, would you say that high school students in your country (Korea/Sweden) feel a lot of stress because of school?

122 responses



120 responses

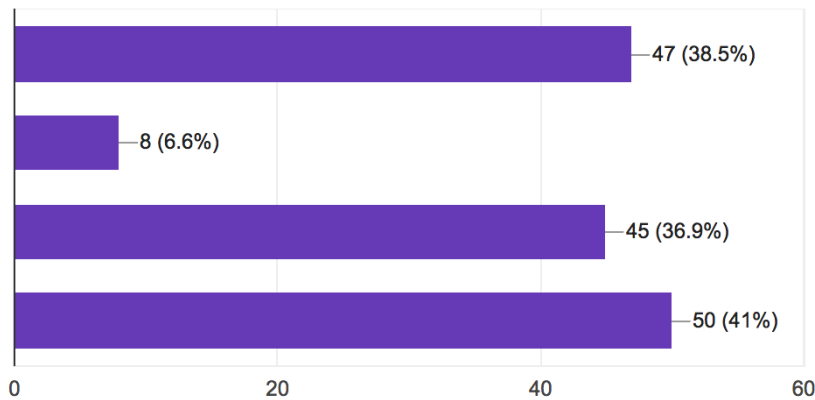


The above chart indicates that most Korean high school students feel they are under a lot of stress; the answers from the Swedish students are more spread out across the scale. N.B This question was asked to see the way students think of stress in relation to others countries, it is not based on them knowing facts of stress in countries all over the world.

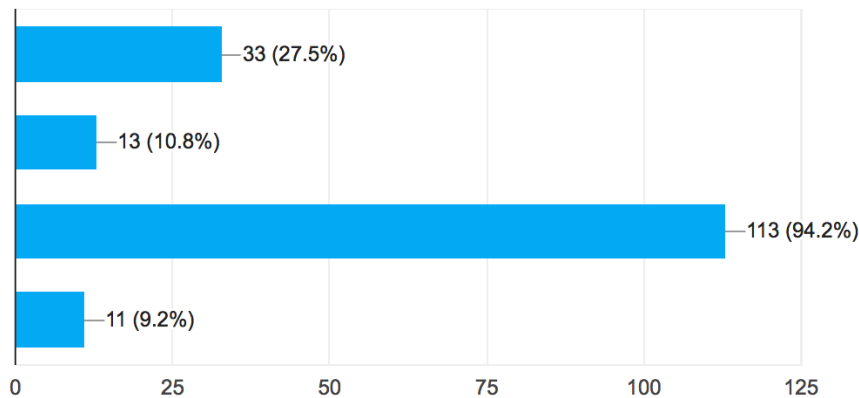
Q. 5 When do you feel the most stressed? If you can explain why, please write your answer below. (You can choose more than one option)

- **During class**
- **During breaks**
- **Outside school hours**
- **Other:**

122 responses



120 responses

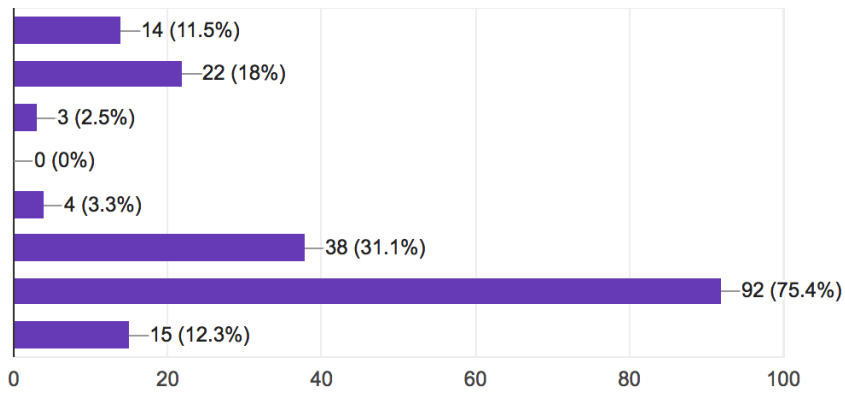


The answers from the Korean students are sparse; the majority choose “other” as an answer. The majority of the Swedish students, on the other hand, state that they are most stressed outside school hours. N.B. Each option was converted into percentage out of the total number of student respondents.

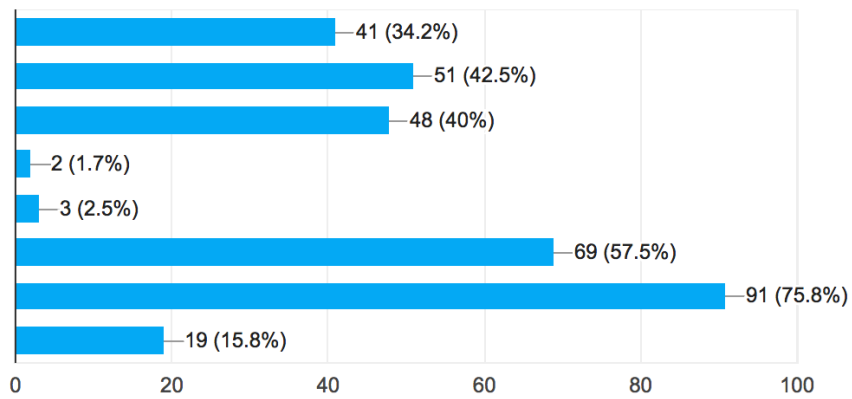
Q.6 Is there any of these factors that make you stressed? If you can explain why, please write your answer below. (You can choose more than one option)

- Family
- Friends
- Social Media
- Movies
- Books
- Society
- The future
- Other:

122 responses



120 responses



The students are given the opportunity to choose several answers in answering this question. The Korean students choose mainly one or two factors, whilst the Swedish students choose two or more on average. One of the most prominent similarities is the answer of 'the future' when asked about the factor that makes them stressed out the most. N.B. Each option was converted into percentage out of the total number of student respondents.

6.2 Written Results

Q.7 What would you say, in relation to school, makes you the most stressed?

Representative quotes will be shown in section 7 with translation by the author of this thesis.

Q.8 If there is one thing that you think could be changed in the school system in order to feel less stressed what would that be?

Representative quotes will be shown in section 7 with translation by the author of this thesis.

7. Analysis

The analysis section will first look at the question of whether or not the students experienced stress in school, and, at which point in time they felt most stressed. A subsequent assessment will be employed using the Brattbergs and Ellneblys theories to explore the relevant causes of stress to the students and their coping ability; and finally, a close examination to understand the students' perspectives of stress, and the likely solutions to diminish their stress.

The focus of my analysis will be broken down into three subsections; each of them contains detailed assessments of the related survey questions: subsection 7.1 replies to survey questions Q.1, Q.3 and Q.5; subsection 7.2 relates to Q.2 and Q.6; and last but not least, subsection 7.3 responds to Q.4 and Q.8.

7.1 Students and Stress

After assessing the answers from the student respondents, it is evident that students in both countries felt stressed. As mentioned earlier, students in Korea were known to have stressful school life (Chakrabarti 2013); on the other hand, there was a sign of increase in stress level for the Swedish students, albeit not as severe as their Korean counterparts (SOU 2006:77). In assessing survey Q.1, the majority of the students in both Korea and Sweden expressed their experiences of stress. The students from both countries also considered stress as a large contributing factor to their mental health well-being.

When asked about in what circumstances they felt most stressed, the Korean students held rather diverse views. The majority of the Swedish students, on the other hand, felt most stressed after school hours. The diverse views amongst the Korean students were due to the fact that more *stressors* could be found in their lifestyles and culture - not only did they have longer school hours but also afterschool private teaching institutions or cram schools. Apart from these factors, the hefty amount of school work made the Korean students stressed.

As for the Swedish students, their response indicted that being in the school environment was less stressful; some students even found the lessons interesting and took ownership of their learning. In answering the survey question about the point in time they felt most stressed, the Swedish students' main concerns lay with homework and grades they received and the grading system. Despite not feeling a constant sense of competition between classmates as the Korean students did, the Swedish students did feel an increased level of pressure due to higher university entry requirements. Such distinction between the students of the two nations can be explained through the differences in higher education entry requirements and systems and in social expectations – pupils in Sweden, generally speaking, are not required to attend private teaching institutions, and the expectation of them getting admitted to top-ranking universities is not as high.

Representative quotes from the Korean students are as follow:

‘I think we learn things we don’t need so the school lessons only cause stress. The lessons in school doesn’t help us in life. (If you go to a less good school, even if you get a job, the one thing that you can do is making coffee. Students really think so.)’

‘It’s really boring, I can’t understand but they try to make me understand, and I’m tiered and don’t know why I attend the class, and it’s so forced and I’m usually in school for 14 hours, so it’s strange if I don’t feel stressed.’

‘Because classmates next to me during class are all competition the atmosphere is heavy and because I have to be better compared to these friends I feel very stressed. Also, if I don’t look at the content we did in class and if I don’t review it after school I will fall behind for the next class. Because of that pressure, there is stress that makes me feel like I have to finish all of them in that day.’

Representative quotes from the Swedish students are as follow:

’Home, when I know that I have a lot to study or but haven’t begun.’

‘It’s mostly homework that makes me stressed, I think the lessons are fun and good, but it is mostly thoughts about results and press from myself that is hard.’

‘I get stressed because of homework and assignments I have to do outside of school hours.’

7.2 Cause of Stress and Coping Ability

The Ellneby theory in subsection 5.2 construes that stress can be the result of multiple factors. In assessing *stressors* explained in the theory, the survey participants were asked about other causes of stress besides school. The results suggested that the Korean students had mainly one to two other causes, whilst the Swedish students had more than two on average.

Although the majority of these participants considered uncertain futures as one main stressor, the Korean and Swedish students had significantly different perceptions on the definition of ‘uncertainty’. The Korean students also responded strongly to survey options such as **society**, which was a clear indication that they were largely influenced by the incentives of socioeconomic success, such as attending top universities or being employed in high-paying occupations. By contrast, stress over uncertainty arose mainly from the fear of not **finding their paths in life** for the Swedish students. In other words, the stressor came from an introspective perspective of future uncertainty. In addition to future uncertainty, the Swedish students also stated that family discord and parental pressure caused stress. Other stressors for the Swedish students included friends and social media as a result of peer pressure and social anxiety.

In summary, the Korean respondents chose fewer than two stressors, which could point to the fact that academic success was their main focus and hence other factors did not have the same significance. On the other hand, the charts and comment analysis showed that the Swedish respondents were more consumed by matters other than school.

The survey Q.2 was designed to put the Brattbergs theory to the test. The Brattbergs theory construes, as mentioned in 5.1, that the effects of stress on individuals is highly relevant to one’s own coping ability. The result of Q.2 indicates that students from both countries believed that they could handle stress to a certain extent, but their coping ability would not be as adequate when the number of stressors increased.

Representative quotes from the Korean students are as follow:

‘Our country’s society structure gives us pressure about the future.’

‘Through my grades I can go to university, and I listen adults say that I have to graduate from a good university so that I can be successful. If I think about it, I want to curse. The reason for stress in society is because it’s Korea. If you wonder why it’s like that, you can see the answer by looking once at Koreas educational system.’

‘It’s both difficult to get a job in Korea and it’s also very hard to get in to a good university.’

‘I’m not very good at studying so I’m worried that I won’t get in to a good university or get a job.’

‘While competing with other students you are just looking at university and it’s hard to get a genuine relation with friends.’

‘However, this century work hard to achieve their dreams but just like there is a saying that life’s end is a fried chicken restaurant, no matter if you graduate Seoul National University or a local

private university, the fact that there is no guarantee about the future and it's is the truth. In the future I will go with my grades and my class rating and this grade rating and whatever I do. How to live is vast and it feels like I will be stressed to a certain degree. When you do counselling in school with a teacher, they say that dreams are just dreams. I also dislike thinking about the future.'

Representative quotes from the Swedish students are as follow:

'Family and friends are not always on the good side with each other or a calming environment. There is a lot of fighting and arguing that makes me stressed and because of it I don't focus on the right things. I'm a person who plans my life in detail and I get stressed when it feels like things don't go as planned.'

'Body ideals and ideal about how you should be as a person (personality and outer appearance), when a person's daily life turns around after graduating (high school).'

'Friends: it is easy that you trigger each other Social Media: Not that much school stress but more social stress. That you could do things. Future: You don't know what will happen/ or if you will succeed in what you want to do.'

'Social media since I both feel like I don't hang out with friends as much as other people and also uploading pictures and such on Instagram for example, the society's view on what a teenager 'should' be doing, hang out with friends, part and so on. And future because even though I have a goal I don't have a clue of how to get there.'

'All of the three things have a connection to achievement to do. The family want's as good grades as possible, in social media you always see people who seems to have more fun or have it better than one self and a lot of people don't want to end up on the street, so you worry and think about the future.'

'Friends: Several of my friends are not feeling well and I worry for them sometimes. Social Media: I spent too much time on them. Society: The whole society stresses themselves to death (which affects me but mostly worries me), and not that many seems to care about the environment (which is quite alarming), and there is a little too many people who is showing hate against others. Future: I'm just so very scared, it probably won't be as bad as it feels. I'm just scared that I will lose my friends and not find new and that I won't find my "way" (which sounds ridiculous, but I mean like that you don't like it or feel good and can't find a way out).'

7.3 Stress – Students' Own Thoughts and Perspectives

The Korean students who took part in the survey were aware of the high stress level they endured during high school. On the contrary, the Swedish students believed that school life was not as stressful as it seemed compared to other countries.

In response to Q.9 of the online survey, many Korean students repeatedly expressed their fear of future uncertainty, and 16 out of the 122 students (13.1%) questioned about the necessity and

quality of the school curriculum. Some suggested that students should be allowed to choose classes in which they were interested, and others proposed a curriculum with more outdoor activities and Physical Education lessons; 6 (4.9%) believed that a less transparent grading system would ease academic competition. 9 (7.4%) of the students went on and suggested a more liberal school timetable, in which a small group of these students recommended removal of afterschool studies. A minority of the Korean students stated the society needed changing in order to solve stress-related problems, whereas a couple of them did not believe there was any possibility to change the culture of the education system. According to Bohlin Mette and Robild Eva training can be immensely helpful in order to decrease stress due to hormones related to stress being consumed when exercising, this also results in better sleep. It can also help preventing depression and therefore lower the risk of suicide. The same authors also emphasise that being able to give oneself time of in order to relax is of high importance, and by doing so not only does the stress level decrease, it can also increase ones learning skill (Bohlin Mette & Robild Eva 2006 p.55).

In the same vein as the answer from the Korean student, 17 out of the 120 (14.2%) Swedish students believed an overhaul of the school curriculum and planning. These students went on and stated that there would be fewer stressors with better organisation of the school work and improved communications between the teachers. 5 (4.2%) The Swedish students expressed their wish to take ownership of learning, such as timetable planning and types of school assessments. 6 students (5%) pointed out that classes about handling stress and mental well-being could be extremely helpful in dealing with mental health related issues. 15 of the Swedish students (12.8%) believed a total abolishment of the grading system for younger students would help them focus on learning per se instead of on grades. 16 (13.3%) students express their wish to remove, or at least decrease the amount of homework. Bolhin and Robild mentions in their book that meditation can help a person on several levels, both in order to decrease stress, but also in order to avoid depression, strengthen the immune system and, as mentioned above, improves one's learning skills (Bohlin & Robild 2006 pp.28-29).

Representative quotes from the Korean students are as follow:

‘Subdivide the basic curriculum and make the curriculum in a more professional direction.’

‘The essential after school lessons should be optional.’

‘They should not compare us through grades and I want to change so that even if you don't study, there is no problem.’

‘They should make it (the future) safer.’

‘If I were rated because of my ordinary life that would be nice. I don't want to have a life to create a student record.’

‘Our country came from being a country that couldn't live, till today where while developing we only have to study and be successful to the extent to death. It is such a conservative vision that the well-established have, and capitalism is a huge wall. Because of that we can't get a job we really

are good at or one that we want to get. South Korea's education is falling apart because everyone studied to get jobs that have a high income or are safe, like a doctor or a lawyer or even a public officer. Whether it's the quality or the environment, there is a difference between the local district and the metropolitan areas. People who have a lot of money let their kids go through a lot of education from a young age and all the way to a good job, but if you compare the other side with the rich, poor people can only study public education in a rundown education environment, and they cannot follow along the education that people with a lot of money receive. It is like this the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and high school students don't only feel stressed, the whole Korea seems stressed.'

'I think we should remove subjects that are of no use, lessons, calculus and geometry and factors. Truthfully, what is not needed for professional work we don't need and on top of that if you go to university, the things for industrial use is calculated on a calculator but they insist that you solve the problems by hand. It's the same with literature, it is of no use. Even in the case of science there is really no use in life science. Rather, if they taught us things like hygiene that is actually useful in life, I think it would be good. I also think that they should teach us computers (I have more opinions but if I say all my opinions it's not Caroline that will write the thesis, I will write so much it's like a thesis, so I suppose I will write until here.)'

Representative quotes from the Swedish students are as follow:

'I think that it would help if the school planned the curriculum so that the courses you read at the same time don't compete with each other or are so difficult and heavy that one cannot make it. More like in high school instead of studying nine courses at the same time.'

'More education to strengthen students and their psychological health, work more during class, don't give too much homework, take heed to other subjects and that teachers don't only think about their own subjects.'

'Discuss stress. Have lectures and education about it. Mindfulness on the schedule. Let the students be part of examination structuring (if it should be oral, written, discussion or home examination).'

'Often it's making the planning better and organizing oneself. At the same time to keep it clean and tidy a place where you are able to have a good study atmosphere. Also, to develop one's discipline'

'Remove grades in lower ages and lower the importance of the grades in order to get in to university. Like for example the university system in Uruguay where everyone can get in to the university.'

'Better planning between the teachers to spread out the work. Less work at home if possible. I think forbidding (or maybe some milder way) mobile phones during lectures. I don't really know, it just feels like there is some sort of mentality in the whole society that says so much wrong. Like that everything and everyone has to be perfect. You hold the impossible standard against oneself and you hold it against others.'

‘It would be connected to my previous answer. Maybe you shouldn’t criticize EVERYTHING. You teach the students to criticize everything they do and that affects everything. I notice how I overthink and criticize even the smallest little thing and that strongly stops that I can never be pleased with anything. You teach adolescents that they are never good enough in anything and that is not right.’

8. Conclusion

The primary objectives of this thesis, as reiterated, are to learn about high school students’ emotional well-being needs and to seek possible means of tackling stress. The finding of the survey results in response to the following three research questions under *introduction* demonstrates a strong connection between student stress and educational structures:

A. Are high school students in South Korea and Sweden stressed because of school?

The survey analysis shows that both survey groups felt certain amount of stress, with the Korean students appearing to feel more stressed than the Swedish students did. The collected data suggests that raising the awareness of stress in school forms a crucial part of education, which enables the pupils to recognise the underlying issues that affect their well-being. In addition, the students’ opinions about their emotional well-being being easily overlooked or neglected indicate needs for a more robust support system to deal with stress-related issues. The outcome of the survey shows that there is a clear indication that the Korean students are more stressed, this due to the fact that when asked to select stressors apart from school, the Korean students mainly choose one or two other stressors. The explanations to why they choose these factors were mainly related to school, indicating the Korean students extreme focus on school.

B. Are there any similarities in stress factors between the countries?

The survey results reveal that the seminaries lay in with the aspects of uncertain future, competitions and lack of spare time. Although the causes of such uncertainty slightly varied between the countries, the students unequivocally stated that future uncertainty was the main stressor. High school students of the two countries may benefit from learning about dealing with stress through understanding of respective student lifestyles – the Korean students can find peace with themselves through the idea of self-discovery, whereas the Swedish students may appreciate more about their less competitive school environments.

On the other hand, the survey outcome teases out the inconvenient truth about the student welfare issues in Korea, which could be served as a mirror that prevents Sweden from heading towards the same direction. The need of spare time was another similarity found in the online survey. It is proven that there are plenty of benefits to give students the time to rest, it decreases stress and prevent depression, strengthening the immune system and improving learning skills.

C. Do the students feel they can handle stress well?

It appears that there is need to teach students from both countries about the coping techniques, based on the similarity of their survey answers.

In conclusion, although stress arising from education systems is a complex matter and unlikely to be rooted out, the students' survey responses offer compelling and constructive suggestions to mitigate stress and improve the school environments. The Korean's students proposal of a less transparent grading system would ease the competitions and build a healthier relationship between pupils. A number of replies from the Swedish students suggested that a more flexible university entry requirements tailoring down to students' needs would decrease stress. By the same token, a curriculum with longer lessons in replace of homework would give the students enough out-of-school rests to recharge. These could be achieved by allowing students to partake in designing school timetables themselves or giving them the opportunities to select their preferred ways of assessments. Further, educating students about stress awareness and coping techniques at early years of school education could improve overall well-being in later life. Finally, the two school systems may also take advantage of their respective merits and provide healthier learning environments in the long run.

Further reading: -

During the writing of this thesis a few new questions have accrued, and I have started to wonder what we all can do about these kinds of problems and also what schools are doing to prevent it at the moment? What can the individual do to decrease stress and what can students do to help each other? I also wondered more about the school systems, what differences and similarities are there in between the two countries and what can we learn from looking at both of them? Could a combination of the two systems help students get better education and less stress in school?

In order to do further research on the subject of stress in high school, research about the school systems would be necessary, and a survey or interview with teachers could also be helpful. Maybe doing some in-depth interviews with students and teachers could give a better picture of how the relation is between students and teachers and if there are any improvements that could be made on such level. I believe that this is a problem that is growing and that is not only causing problems for individuals but also for the society as a whole. Doing research on the subject and trying to figure out way to prevent this in an earlier age would not only make the society happier as a general but it would also open up opportunities for a country to develop.

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Appendix

Exhibit 1. Survey request to Korean teachers

xxx 선생님께

안녕하세요,

저는 스톡홀름 대학교를 다니는 카롤린 입니다. 제 전공이 한국학입니다. 이 고등학교 졸업한 xxx 통해서 이 이메일을 받았습니다.

지금 마지막 학기 돼서 한국과 스웨덴 고등학생들이 받는 스트레스를 비교하는 논문을 쓰고 있습니다.

저는 1년동안 연세 한국어학당을 다니다가 스웨덴과 한국이 얼마나 다른지 느낄 수 있었기 때문에 논문을 쓸 때 한국하고 스웨덴을 비교하고 싶었습니다. 세계적으로 한국고등학생들이 다른 나라보다 더 많이 공부하고 스트레스도 더 많이 받는 것을 많이 듣는데 요즘 스웨덴 고등학생들도 스트레스에 대한 이야기 를 많이 합니다. 이런 것들 알게 돼서 한국과 스웨덴 고등학교 무엇이 다르고 비슷한지 알고 싶습니다.

논문을 쓰기 위해 한국과 스웨덴 고등학생들에게 설문조사를 해서 지금 공부하고 있는 학생들의 생각을 알고 싶습니다. 선생님께 학생들의 설문조사를 부탁드리고 싶어서 연락드립니다.

이 학교 다니는 2-3학년 학생 10-20명에게 설문조사를 부탁드리고 싶습니다. 인터넷에서 할 수 있는 조사라서 핸드폰이나 컴퓨터로 쉽게 할 수 있습니다. 4월 3일까지 학생들이 대답 할 수 있으면 좋겠습니다. 부탁드려도 될까요?

감사드리며,

카롤린 올림

Exhibit 2. Survey request to Swedish teachers

Hej!

Mitt namn är Caroline Rystedt och jag har genom xxx fått tag på den här mailadressen.

Jag går just nu mitt sista år på kandidatnivå på Stockholms universitet och studerar Korea Studier. Eftersom det är mitt sista år så skriver jag just nu min kandidat uppsatts som är fokuserad på en jämförelse angående stress i Gymnasiet i Sverige och Sydkorea.

Jag blev intresserad av att skriva något i relation efter mina utlandsstudier i Sydkorea, Seoul förra året. Det var en otrolig press på studenterna och jag fick själv känna på hur det känns att studera som en koreansk student. När jag kom hem pratade jag även en hel del med min lilla syster som just nu studerar sista året på gymnasiet och hon sa att hon och många av hennes vänner var väldigt stressade. Det fick mig att fundera på vad för likheter och skillnader som finns i Sverige och Sydkorea.

För att skriva min uppsatts har jag valt att göra en mindre enkätundersökning för att få fakta som är mer uppdaterad än den som går att få tag på genom böcker eller andra forskningsarbeten.

Jag skulle verkligen uppskatta om eleverna i den här klassen skulle vilja kunna svara på min internetenkät! Om det är möjligt fram till den 3 april skulle det vara mycket uppskattat. Om möjligt så skickar jag enkäten nästa tisdag, den 20/3.

Mvh, Caroline Rystedt

Exhibit 3. Survey questions

English: The scale is 1 dis agree and 10 agree.

Q.1 On a scale from 1-10 how stressed do you feel because of school?

Q.2 On a scale from 1-10 how good would you say that you can handle stress?

Q.3 On a scale from 1-10 how much would you say that stress affects your mental health?

Q.4 On a scale from 1-10, if you compare Sweden/Korea to other countries in the world, would you say that high school students in Sweden/Korea feel a lot of stress because of school?

(How often would you say that you feel stressed? - Everyday - A few days a week - Some day a week - Sometimes every month - Very seldom - Never) – Omitted due to technical error.

Q. 5 When do you feel the most stressed? I you can explain why, please write your answer below. - During class - During breaks - Outside school hours - Other:

Q.6 Is there any of these factors that may make you stressed? If you can explain why, please write your answer below. - Family - Friends - Social Media - Movies - Books - Society - The Future - Other

Q.7 What would you say, in relation to school, makes you the most stressed?

Q.8 If there is one thing that you think could be changed in the school system in order to feel less stressed what would that be?

Svenska: Skalan är 1 instämmer inte och 10 är instämmer.

Q.1 På en skala 1-10 hur stressad känner du dig på grund av skolan?

Q.2 På en skala 1-10 hur bra skulle du säga att du är på att hantera stress?

Q.3 På en skala 1-10 hur mycket skulle du säga att stress från skolan påverka din mentala hälsa?

Q.4 På en skala 1-10, om du tänker på andra länder i världen, skulle du säga att det är stressigt för gymnasier elever i skolan i Sverige?

(Hur ofta skulle du säga att du är stressad? - Varje dag - Några dagar i veckan - Någon dag i veckan - Någon gång i månaden - Våldigt sällan - Aldrig) Borttagen på grund av tekniskt fel.

Q.5 När känner du dig mest stressad? Du kan kryssa i flera alternativ. Om du kan förklara varför, var god förklara i rutan nedan. - Under lektionstid - Under raster - Utanför skoltid

- Annat:

Q.6 Gör någon/några av dessa följande faktorer dig stressad? Du kan kryssa i flera alternativ.

Om du kan förklara varför, var god förklara i runtån nedan. - Familjen

1. Kompisar

2. Sociala medier

3. Filmer

4. Böcker

5. Samhället

6. Framtiden

7. Annat:

Q.7 Vad skulle du säga gör dig mest stressad i relation med skolan?

Q.8 Om det fanns en sak som du tror skulle kunna ändras så att elever i gymnasiet känner sig mindre stressade, vad skulle det kunna vara? Har du en idé till en lösning/reform som skulle kunna påverka stress i skolan positivt?

한국어:

Q.1 에서 10까지 스케일로 학교 때문에 스트레스를 얼마나 많이 받습니까?

Q.2 당신이 스트레스를 얼마나 잘 견딜 수 있다고 생각합니까?

Q.3 에서 10까지 스케일로 스트레스는 정신적 건강을 영향을 많이 미친다고 생각합니까?

Q.4 1에서 10까지 스케일로 한국은 다른 나라보다 학교 때문에 스트레스를 많이 받는다고 생각합니까?

Q.5 언제 스트레스 제일 많이 받습니까? 이유에 대해서 아래 박스에 설명해

주십시오.(선택) - 수업 때 - 쉬는 시간 때 - 학교 끝난 후 - 기타

Q.6 보기들 중에서 당신에게 가장 스트레스를 많이 주는 것들은 무엇입니까? 그 이유에

대해서 아래 박스에 설명해 주십시오.(선택) - 가족 - 친구들 - SNS - 영화 - 책 - 사회 -

미래 - 기타

Q.7 학교와 관련해서, 어떤 요인이 당신에게 가장 스트레스를 줍니까?

Q.8 학교로 인해 받는 스트레스를 줄이기 위해 학교 시스템에서 어떤 것을 바꾸고

싶습니까?

Exhibit 4. Interview questions

1. Hur skulle ni definiera ordet stress?
2. Hur vanligt upplever ni att det är bland unga (gymnasiet) att det upplever stress?
3. Vad skulle ni säga kan vara bra för unga att tänka på för att minska stress?
4. Vad tror ni gör unga stressade?
5. Vad tror ni att man skulle kunna göra för att minska stress bland unga som samhälle?
6. Vad tror ni är det som påverkar ungas stress mest?
7. Varför tror ni att vårt samhälle är så stressat idag?
8. Vad tror ni är det som gör svenskar mest stressade?