A Study on the Relationship Between Student Management Systems and Psychological Safety in High School Students

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ABSTRACT: This study aimed to compare the administrative systems of public high schools in the United States and South Korea to analyze differences in psychological safety levels in American and Korean high school students. In the United States, teachers are in charge of a student's academic learning, while counselors manage the other aspects of student management, including college applications, grades, and student well-being. In contrast, in South Korea, homeroom teachers are assigned to classes of 30-40 students and are in charge of both academics and student well-being, while counselors have comparatively specialized duties. For this study, we conducted interviews and surveys with 20 high school students attending school in the United States and South Korea to understand how administrative differences can affect students' psychological well-being. The results showed that American students receive more academic education from their teachers and counselors, but experience relatively low psychological safety due to weak teacher-student bonds and limited access to their counselors. Meanwhile, Korean students reported high psychological safety regarding their relationship with their homeroom teacher and class; however, psychological safety levels also varied depending on the students' perceived competence of their teacher. The results of this study suggest ways in which American public high schools can improve students' psychological well-being while maintaining the current education quality by developing teachers' competency, assigning specific roles, and introducing mentor networks.

KEYWORDS: Behavioral and Social Sciences, Psychology, Psychological Safety, Student Management Systems.

■ Introduction

The Reality of American High Schools and Mental Health Issues:

American high school students have struggled heavily with mental health issues in recent years. Youth suicide rates have increased significantly over the past decade, with 37% of students showing mental health warning signs during the COVID-19 pandemic due to isolation by quarantine, remote learning, and other detrimental factors.[1] The COVID-19 pandemic not only impacted students during quarantine but continues to negatively affect the mental health of children and adolescents, with feelings of isolation caused by the pandemic appearing to exacerbate depression and anxiety, particularly in adolescents, for whom feelings of belonging are vital.[2] Mental health refers to an individual's ability to cope with the environment and circumstances in which they find themselves, with the appropriate control of negative emotions, including psychological stress, depression, anxiety, and tension being crucial to maintaining a state of psychological well-being. According to a recent mental health survey by the National Youth Health Behavior Survey,[3] 34.2% of high school students reported perceived stress, 25.2% reported depression, 10.9% reported suicidal ideation, and 2.0% reported suicide attempts. This indicates that more than one-third of youth are exposed to stress. These emotional and psychological issues experienced by high school students become increasingly problematic as they begin to manifest as disruptive behaviors in high school students, negatively impacting their mental health.[4] Moreover, the mental health of students affects not only their high school experience but also their lives after adolescence.

As such, it is crucial to give students the resources they need to lead happy and fulfilling lives as productive members of society.[5] In addition, the United States is currently facing a serious mental health crisis in its adult population. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, over 40% of American adults have reported symptoms of anxiety and depression. As a result, these illnesses are expected to become the leading chronic health conditions among adults in the United States.[6] Furthermore, mental health issues are extremely prevalent in the United States, with one in five adults living with a mental health disorder. This makes the prevention and awareness of mental illness in high school all the more important.[7] Not only does mental illness have a negative impact on physical health, but it also puts people at a higher risk for a myriad of diseases, including heart disease, diabetes, and Alzheimer's disease. The healthcare costs of people with both a chronic and mental illness are also two to three times that of people with just a chronic disease. Lastly, poor mental health among high school students is considered a significant issue because of the strong correlation between mental health and academic performance. One survey done by a specialized student survey organization found that nearly half of the students reported that their mental health was a barrier to their ability to study.[8]

### *The Relationship Between Mental Health and Psychological Safety:*

Past research on factors that influence adolescent mental health suggests that teenagers' self-esteem, social support at school, and relationships with parents are crucial to maintaining their mental stability.[9] This is especially true for high school students, who spend the majority of their lives at school, making it all the more important to address mental health in the classroom setting and ensure their psychological safety. Psychological safety has been defined by multiple studies as a feeling of self-esteem and social support and includes the ability to function productively with the goal of growth and development,[10] adapting to daily life. It has also been defined as a sense of well-being based on subjective experiences perceived by an individual as a result of their response to the environment around them or the interactions they have with the environment's stimuli.[11] In addition, it has been defined as an individual's belief or shared belief within a team that his or her ideas or opinions will not be shut down or negatively perceived within their social relationships, making it a key factor that enhances an individual's speaking and learning behaviors, improving their performance within a group.[12] It has additionally been defined as the state of being able to freely express opinions due to the belief that expressing one's thoughts will not result in negative consequences.[13] Increased psychological safety is also associated with improved mental health and a greater likelihood of proactive behavior.[14] Previous research on psychological safety has shown that psychological safety enhances knowledge sharing and learning, creative engagement and performance, task performance, and academic performance.[15] Though psychological safety was initially noted as a concept to explain team effectiveness and learning behavior, recent research on psychological safety has evolved beyond studying psychological safety's link to freedom of expression, treating it as a complex concept that operates through structural trust, interdependence, and relational context. These studies reflect research trends of aiming to understand psychological safety as a product of interactions and group dynamics within an organization rather than through the limitations of individual perception.[16] Furthermore, the concept of psychological safety is currently actively discussed in the context of interactions between networking and relational job crafting within organizations.[17] Rather than viewing psychological safety as an isolated variable, this approach uses recent research trends to understand interactions and changing dynamics within organizations.

The Necessity of Research:

Psychological well-being is crucial not only to mental health but also to a productive high school experience, fostering creativity, mutual trust, and knowledge sharing. However, much of the research on psychological well-being has been conducted in the workplace, and there have been no studies on the effects of high school student management systems on psychological safety. In this study, student management systems refer to the support system that high school students rely on throughout their schooling experience, including classes, academic information, career counseling, friendships, and

grievance counseling. The current American school teacher and counseling system has been a cornerstone of American high school public education since the 1990s, allowing teachers to focus solely on teaching. The current counseling system was established in 1997 alongside the American School Counselor Association model, which was created to provide professional services in three categories: academic, career, and personal/social.[18] However, although the counselor system was designed with students' overall school life in mind, it is highly ineffective in meeting the personal needs of students.

According to this study's surveys and interviews, the counseling system effectively deals with issues pertaining to academics and careers, but offers little personal/social support. Teachers have limited time to connect with students and are not individually assigned, with their primary responsibility being to teach students academically. As a result, high school students in the United States generally have no adult figures to go to with personal problems. They have no one to talk to about conflicts with friends, parents, health problems, and other critical issues. This is especially true for transfer students or foreign students, making them all the more anxious. Meanwhile, South Korea operates using a system of specialized teachers (teachers who teach a specific subject), homeroom teachers, and counselors. Homeroom teachers are responsible for the overall life of students within the boundaries of a class of typically 30 students. They work as both a class teacher and supportive figures, managing their class with the responsibility of both teaching their students and supporting them personally. Figure 1 models the American student management system in comparison to the Korean student management system, presenting the different pillars of support each system has for its students. This study aims to analyze how the differences in education systems between the United States and South Korea affect psychological safety and, by extension, psychological well-being, something that is critical to the mental health of high school students and carries heavy implications for public education in the United States.
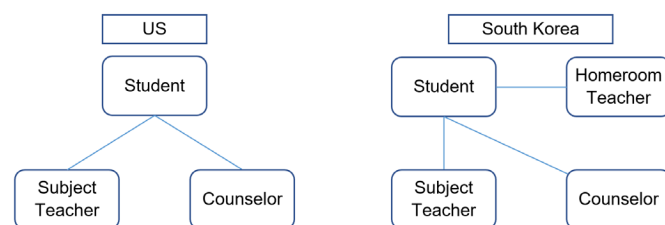
Figure 1: The typical South Korean student management system has three main components: a homeroom teacher, a specialized teacher (instructor of a specific subject), and a counselor. In comparison, the typical American student management system has only two: a specialized teacher and a counselor. The American student management system emphasizes academic and career support, but the Korean student management system places more emphasis on personal support, leading to greater levels of observed psychological safety in Korean high school students.

■ Methods
The object of study:
The study was conducted at six public high schools in the US and Korea. To obtain objective data, the research was con-

ducted across multiple schools, with surveys and interviews being done at two schools in the U.S. and four in South Korea. Table 1 presents 20 respondents, including their age, gender, and grade. Surveys and interviews were conducted with the tenth to twelfth graders. Among them, 11 were male and 9 were female, offering a diverse range of perspectives.

Table 1: Interviewees and survey participants were selected from varying grade levels across high schools in the United States and South Korea. The majority of Korean students rated survey questions on a higher scale than American students.

Interviewee	Grade	Age	Gender	Country
1	10	16	Female	
2	10	16	Male	
3	10	16	Male	
4	10	16	Male	
5	10	16	Female	USA
6	11	17	Male	
7	11	17	Male	
8	11	17	Female	
9	11	17	Female	
10	12	18	Female	
11	10	16	Male	
12	10	16	Male	
13	10	16	Male	
14	10	16	Female	
15	11	17	Female	Korea
16	11	17	Male	
17	11	17	Male	
18	11	17	Male	
19	12	18	Female	
20	12	18	Female	

Research tools:

This study utilized a combination of qualitative and quantitative research to compensate for the lack of a survey population. The qualitative research method consisted of in-depth interviews to understand the realistic experiences of American and Korean high school students, as well as to refine and improve the questions asked as interviews were carried out. Interviews were conducted in person as much as possible, with phone and email interviews conducted with Korean students who were unable to meet face-to-face. Questions were asked via email and supplemented with additional interviews via video conference and email. Table 2 presents the interview questions posed to each participant. For American students, questions were sent via email a day prior to the interviews, which were interactive and in-person. The emails explained the purpose and objectives of the study in depth, the definition of psychological safety, and the student management systems in South Korea and the United States, and only proceeded with the study with the participants' consent

Table 2: Interview questions about perceived psychological safety were presented to each participant. Questions focused on perceived psychological safety levels, factors that impacted psychological safety, and suggestions for improving psychological safety at schools in both the United States and South Korea.

No.	Interview Questions
1	Do you feel a sense of psychological safety at your high school?
2	What factors affect your sense of psychological safety at school?
3	In particular, how do relationships affect your sense of psychological safety at school?
4	In elementary school, did having a homeroom teacher add to your psychological safety?
5	Would having a mentor whom you can talk to about your school life add to your sense of psychological safety?
6	What could be improved at your school to increase your psychological safety?

※ Survey questions are attached as a separate file

Data Analysis:

The interview results were recorded completely during the interview process, and the study results were synthesized and derived from the participants' responses. To ensure objectivity in analyzing interview responses, students from multiple schools were interviewed, and the results of the interviews were verified by a professional with a Doctor of Business Administration degree and extensive research experience. The survey results were used to complement the interview responses by utilizing the average value of the respondents' answers on the 5-point scale questionnaire prior to the interview. Four of the survey items on the questionnaire were revised versions of questions appearing on a previously validated survey questionnaire[19] to measure psychological safety.

Research Ethics:

In conducting this study, we followed the following criteria to ensure compliance with established research ethics. First, before conducting the interviews, we explained the purpose of the study, the purpose of use, and the sharing of future results in detail to the participants via email and phone calls to confirm their informed voluntary participation. Second, we explained in advance that if the participant felt uncomfortable during the interview or did not wish to have their responses shared in the study, the interview would be stopped, and their responses would not be used. Third, to ensure the privacy of the participants, we did not inform other participants of others' participation, and all names were anonymized. Fourth, we informed participants that the data collected during the interviews and questionnaires would be used solely for the study and its research. Fifth, the results of the study were reviewed by an expert to ensure the objectivity of the collected data due to a limited survey population.

■ Results

This study is directly quoted from the interviewees' thoughts and opinions about their school experience. The results are organized by interview question order and responses to the survey.

Psychological safety in high school:

Table 3 presents the average rating of psychological safety at the participants' schools. Both American and Korean high school students reported above-average levels of psychological safety, but there were differences between the countries. Korean high school students scored an average of 4.3 out of 5, while American students scored slightly lower at 4.0. Most of the students interviewed entered high school after the COVID-19 pandemic, so the impact of the pandemic was minimal. During the interviews, many students mentioned their experience beginning high school, particularly the unfamiliarity and anxiety they felt, and its impact on their sense of psychological safety. Due to the structure of Korean student management systems, Korean students' sense of psychological safety was well-established prior to their high school experience, allowing them to feel safer and more supported in the classroom.

"My anxiety was highest right after entering 9th grade. I expected someone to explain and guide me through high school, but there was no one. I had to change classes mid-semester because I didn't get enough explanation, and it's harder to make friends when you move from out of town. You can get the information you need

through emails and posts, but it took me at least a couple of months to figure everything out on my own. Everything was too unfamiliar to feel psychologically safe." (10th, United States)

"The student management system is similar in elementary school, middle school, and high school. You can start with new friends in your class and get the answers you need by asking your homeroom teacher. You can participate and voice your opinion if you want to, but it's culturally not expected. There is a high level of psychological stability because the familiar environment continues." (10th, South Korea)

Table 3: Level of psychological safety in high school (N=20, U.S and Korea). Korean students, on average, felt more psychological safety compared to American students.

Survey Question	Average (US / KOR)
Do you feel a sense of psychological safety at your high school?	4.2 (4.0 / 4.3)

※ Five-point rating scale: 1point (Strongly Disagree) ~ 5point (Strongly Agree)

The connection between high school relationships and psychological safety:

While classroom atmosphere and structure, commuting distance, method of transportation, and other factors contribute to psychological safety, the most important factor is relationships. Relationships at school include those with friends, teachers, and counselors. Compared to American students, Korean students' relationship with their homeroom teachers was more impactful on their psychological safety.

Table 4 presents the participants' rating of the importance of different relationships on psychological safety. First, relationships with friends were the most important factor in both the United States and South Korea, with an average score of 4.7 on the survey, showing the heavy influence it has on psychological safety.

"Overall, I get the most psychological safety from my friends. I feel comfortable talking to them when I'm in trouble, and I talk to them the most about choosing classes and going to college. However, when it comes to official information such as college admissions information, they are not as helpful." (10th, United States)

"My friends have the biggest impact on my psychological safety. They are more trustworthy than teachers and parents, and I can talk to them whenever I want. The information exchange between friends is especially important because I can get the information I need at the right time and in the most relevant way." (10th, South Korea)

However, there is a big difference between South Korea and the United States when it comes to teacher influence. Korean students scored a 4.1, while the US scored a 3.5, which is relatively low in comparison. Students were asked about specialized teachers and homeroom teachers separately to check for differences in the education systems between the two countries, and American students who do not have homeroom teachers were asked if they think they would benefit from having a homeroom teacher in high school, just as they did in elementary school. While both groups scored similarly for specialized teachers, when homeroom teachers were included, both groups scored significantly higher (4.3).

"I can always talk to my teachers and get help when I need it. It was hard for me to talk to them at first, but after I got comfortable, I got enough help. However, since she is not responsible for helping

me, it is not easy to talk to her about small problems. In particular, since the face-to-face time is not long, I have to meet before or after class or during lunch." (10th, United States)

"Specialized teachers don't really interact with you unless it's subject-related. However, when it comes to the subject matter, I feel comfortable expressing my opinions and getting the information I need. I get a sense of psychological safety from my homeroom teacher. You can ask them anything about school life, and they are always available via phone or social media. Also, because she has a lot of experience, she helps and guides me a lot when it comes to college admissions." (11th, South Korea)

Finally, the influence of counselors was low in both countries, with an average score of 3. Students did not see counselors as someone they could easily meet with, but rather as administrators who helped them choose classes and get into college.

"I can only see them by appointment, and they don't contact me outside of class for career advice. They have specialized knowledge and experience in their field, which makes me feel safe. I don't think the counselors are there to talk about problems. There is a mental health counselor, but I don't think I've ever contacted them to discuss my problems." (10th, United States)

"There is an academic counselor and a mental health counselor, but I have never met with them. I don't think it's necessary because my homeroom teacher covers the counselor's role well enough. I feel like the counselor is more of an administrative support rather than a professional." (11th, South Korea)

Table 4: Effect of relationships on psychological safety in high school (N=20, US and South Korea). Korean students, on average, rated the importance of relationships on psychological safety higher than American students. Friends had the greatest impact on psychological safety, while counselors had the least impact.

Survey Question	Average (US / KOR)
Does your relationship with friends affect your sense of psychological safety?	4.7 (4.6 / 4.7)
Does your relationship with teachers affect your sense of psychological safety?	3.9 (3.5 / 4.1)
Does your relationship with the counselor affect your sense of psychological safety?	3.0 (2.9 / 3.1)

※ Five-point rating scale: 1point (Strongly Disagree) ~ 5point (Strongly Agree)

How to increase psychological safety:

To feel more psychologically safe, people need to feel more comfortable, have a direct line of communication, and have a clear sense that someone cares about them. Participants claimed that having one-on-one relationships gives them a sense of belonging, security, and connection. However, because teachers have a strong influence on grades and college admissions, students are more likely to feel that a mentor with a looser, more detached relationship with academics can help them feel more secure, especially if the mentor is an alumnus who graduated from the same high school as the student, is pursuing higher education, and is active in society. Table 5 presents the importance of a mentor figure to psychological safety.

"Mentoring with an alumnus from the university I want to attend would help me feel more secure. I think I would be able to relate to someone who has been through the same experiences as me, and I would be able to approach them more easily than a teacher." (10th, United States)

"It would be nice to have a college alumnus mentor that I could easily communicate with, but it's pointless to just connect with them.

I think the school should pay the mentors, and they should at least have counseling skills and expertise. Mentors who are not qualified and capable can be frustrating for students." (10th, South Korea)

Table 5: Effect of a mentor on psychological safety in high school (N=20, United States and South Korea). Korean students, on average, rated the need for a mentor higher than American students, but both demographics rated the need for a mentor highly.

Survey Question	Average (US / KOR)
Do you need a mentor (alumni, senior) with whom you can discuss your school life?	4.4 (4.3 / 4.5)

※ Five-point rating scale: 1 point (Strongly Disagree) ~ 5 point (Strongly Agree)

Possible improvements for American high schools:

The results of the study showed that among the factors that add to psychological safety, friendships have the most impact, but the impact of teachers and counselors is much less significant. Based on the responses of Korean students, it can be concluded that the role of a homeroom teacher significantly impacts psychological safety. However, adding a homeroom teacher in addition to specialized teachers can be expensive. Currently, the American public education system has great difficulty securing funding and compensating teachers. Meanwhile, in South Korea, homeroom teachers oversee their own classes and are also specialized teachers. Though it is a more demanding role, homeroom teachers are relatively well compensated for their work. In addition, homeroom teachers can be trained in counseling and can choose to be solely specialized teachers if they desire. Specialized teachers in the United States can be given a lighter role with fewer responsibilities than a homeroom teacher, but simply as mentors to designated students. In exchange, they could be provided with additional compensation and growth opportunities, creating a low-cost way to make students feel more psychologically secure.

"Currently, homeroom teachers in Korea have too many roles and responsibilities. There's even a phenomenon of young teachers avoiding homeroom duty. I don't think a homeroom system like Korea's could be applied to American high schools. It would be impossible to control the students. Instead, a loose homeroom system that only assigns a 1:1 communication role is acceptable. Just having a designated teacher that you can communicate with can give students a sense of psychological security. However, they need more compensation and support from the school than traditional specialized teachers." (11th Grade Homeroom Teacher, South Korea)

Another Way to Improve High School Students' Psychological Safety:

Many studies show that one-on-one mentoring has a positive impact on psychological safety.[9] During our interviews, we found that students preferred to have mentors who are alumni close to their age over teachers or parents. Alumni who attended the same school faced the same problems and went through the same hardships in high school, college, and adulthood can provide valuable advice for current students. However, basic mentorship qualities and knowledge are required. Mentors need to be trained in how to talk to and counsel high school students, who are often very impressionable. Mentors should also be provided with financial support to encourage them to take responsibility for advising students.

"There's a lot you can do when you have the opportunity to mentor a high school student. If you're an alumnus, you can be more compassionate, too. You can take them on a college tour to motivate them to go to college, or you can share your own high school struggles and tips on how to get into college. If mentees tell you about their problems at school or home, you can listen to them and help them with their problems." (Sophomore at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, United States)

■ Discussion

This study offers meaningful results on the relationship between the school system and psychological safety in the United States and Korea, but there are some limitations that affect the study's analytic value. The small sample size makes it difficult for the survey results to be generalized and applicable to the overall school systems of the United States and Korea. As such, it is difficult to determine whether the observed patterns are reflective of broader trends in both countries and if they were shaped by respondent-specific biases. Nevertheless, given the nature of exploratory research, this study remains valuable in setting the foundation for future research. In future studies, quantitative analysis based on a larger sample will be beneficial to further strengthen study results. It is expected that the external validity of the results will be improved by conducting surveys and interviews that include larger and less homogeneous groups to consider various demographic factors such as grade, race, and gender. Applying statistical techniques such as regression analysis based on expanded data will lead to more in-depth and quantitative insights into the relationship between the variables introduced in this study. Furthermore, comparing the psychological safety experiences of students from various backgrounds will establish the basis for a more elaborate analysis of how cultural and institutional factors interact to affect psychological safety.

In addition, students' psychological safety is formed through complex socio-cultural contexts that are critical to consider when analyzing psychological safety in the classroom. For example, Korean society is characterized by a strong focus on academic success and social comparison; the resulting stress from societal pressures may hinder students' psychological safety. Moreover, unlike the United States, where factors such as race and familial background may heavily impact interpersonal relationships within an educational setting, Korea has a relatively homogenous population, limiting the influence of these factors. These cultural and demographic characteristics can cause significant differences in how students perceive and experience psychological safety.20 Therefore, rather than identifying these differences as limitations of research, this study intends to propose a research project that will be characterized by a more in-depth comparative cultural approach in the future. Future research will promote a more nuanced understanding of the formation of psychological safety and its influencing factors by comprehensively reflecting the social norms, education systems, and demographic compositions of various countries and cultures

Conclusion

Psychological safety at school plays a critical role in allowing students to thrive and enjoy their schooling experience. The influence of a homeroom teacher and classroom boundaries can help students feel more psychologically safe, but given the current situation of American higher education, especially limited education budgets and teacher shortages, it is rather unrealistic to expect teachers to take on more responsibilities and completely the general public education system. Rather, this study suggests ways to motivate teachers and develop their capabilities, including counseling and mentoring, and the impact alumni can have as mentors to high school students. Finally, as it has been established that friendships have the greatest influence on psychological safety, it is also necessary to foster clubs and other school activities (ex., school-wide events and social activities) and provide time and space for more conversations and social interactions between students at school.

Acknowledgments

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