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Research Essay - Problems with Taiwan's education system

## Introduction

Throughout the course of Taiwan's history, its system of education has been through some drastic changes. In 1945, the KMT government took over Taiwan and launched a movement to get rid of Japanese influence and pushed for "Chinese education" in the country. They banned Japanese in schools and instead made Mandarin the official national language of Taiwan (Tu).

But then later on, Taiwan became a more free society with a western-style democracy, which led to the abandoning of the Chinese education system when more citizens started to identify themselves as Taiwanese instead of Chinese or other nationalities (Tu).

After this big change, there were also some huge improvements made to the education system. For instance, schools adopted a multiple-channel entrance system for admitting students. This makes it so that students do not have to rely on a single entrance examination to decide their future, they can instead apply with either academic achievements, as well as other talents (Tu).

Another change that had a major impact on Taiwanese education was allowing private presses to publish textbooks for school. This prevented the government from manipulating the students' thoughts using the content in textbooks, since before, the central government had full control over the publication of textbooks and what was in them (Tu). From this, readers can see the various different changes and improvements that were made throughout history to shape Taiwan's education into what it is today.

Even though education in Taiwan has come a long way, there are still a few serious problems the Taiwanese education system must address. These issues include too much homework and long school hours due to the large amount of materials teachers have to cover, as well as frequent testing and exams which are based on rote memorisation instead of critical thinking or intellectual application. Furthermore, the high expectations Taiwanese parents place on their kids to get good grades on all these tests makes these education issues even worse. Not only does this place a lot of pressure on students, it will also have some negative impacts on their health. These include anxiety, sleep deprivation, and physical and mental development.

However, there are ways to solve these problems such as reducing homework and tests, school hours, and taking student interests more into consideration. Some form of improvement or change needs to be implemented to the education system, because it is harming students by placing too much pressure on them.

## Literature Summary

The Taiwanese education system has a long history and it has gone through many changes over the years to become what it is today. However, even after all these changes, there are still some core problems with the traditional school system. The literature recognizes that issues including homework, tests, long hours at school, and lack of social skills from students, are all problems. That's not to say that Taiwanese education doesn't have its strengths, such as high test results and high college entrance rates by the students. But even though this may be the case, people can't ignore the fact that the Taiwanese education system still has issues that need to be fixed.

One source that explores one of the major issues of Taiwanese education was an article from Taipei Times discussing how Taiwanese students can become anxious and depressed and sometimes even take their own lives as a result. The author, Teng Hon-yuan, says that the Taiwanese education system is, "a system that is primarily concerned with pushing students to absorb and then regurgitate copious amounts of impractical, specialized information, but that neglects to teach them a deeper wisdom necessary to navigate the ups and downs of life". According to the author, schools in Taiwan only focus on getting students into top universities so that the school can earn a high rank and develop a strong reputation. This means that students will not be taught how to deal with stress, depression, or any other mental issues, causing some of them to make poor decisions due to their lack of emotional control (Teng).

Teng then makes the point that education is not just about learning facts and reading books, but also about learning important life skills, emotional intelligence, and how to be a well-rounded person in general. In summary, this article talks about how the education system in Taiwan is having a negative effect on the development of students' mental health, and the devastating impact poor mental health can have on students that struggle to cope with it.

An article from The News Lens discusses another major problem in the Taiwanese education system, which is the way that teachers teach in Taiwanese schools. The writer of the article, David Willson, talks about how a lot of schools in Taiwan still adopt old-fashioned methods of Confucian-based education, which is damaging to students' creativity. Willson starts by acknowledging the success that Taiwan has in math and science on an international level. But then he goes on and says, "these results are achieved by rote memorisation, and that the education system as a whole is systematically crushing creativity and independent thought out of students" (Wilson). Due to this issue, students in Taiwanese schools often show little initiative and only do exactly what the teacher requires and nothing more, which is one of the problems that need to be changed. Finally, the writer includes some ways to improve education in Taiwan, such as encouraging questions from students and using exams that test knowledge and application, instead of just facts and pure memorization (Wilson). While the lack of students' creativity and independent thinking is a major issue in Taiwanese education, there are still numerous other problems like ones regarding students' physical health.

Another article from the Taipei Times analyses and discusses the results of a survey conducted by the Child Welfare League Foundation. The survey collected data from both junior- and senior high-school students, looking at their sleeping habits and behaviour during the day. And after observing the data, some noticeable issues are clear. The author of the article, Sherry Hsiao, shows that on average, students go to bed at 11:15pm and wake up at around 6:12am. Among the students, the survey found that 88.9 percent of them said they sleep less than 8 hours a day, and 23.7 percent of them less than 6 hours (Hsiao). Afterwards, these students were asked why they got so little sleep, and 33.6 percent of respondents said it was to do homework or prepare for a test while 21 percent said they had trouble sleeping or were in a bad mood (Hsiao), feelings which are often related to academic troubles. Worst of all, the survey also recorded that more than 35 percent of students who sleep less than 7 hours often dozed off during class. This will heavily affect students' performance at school and how well they learn, which is why over 60 percent of respondents drink energy drinks or coffee to help them stay awake (Hsiao). Not only is this unhealthy, especially for non-adults, these beverages also make you have trouble sleeping, making the problem even worse. There are many different mental and physical problems that can come with lack of sleep, which can have major impacts on students' lives in general.

For instance, an article from Healthline listed out some negative effects of sleep deprivation, which is one of the most common health problems among Taiwanese students. According to the article, lack of sleep can have an impact on mental abilities and emotional state. This can make students more impatient, less creative, cause poor decision-making, and poor memory retention, which are all crucial skills needed for learning (Cherney). The author, Kristeen Cherney, also says that sleep deprivation can weaken the immune system, increasing the chances of respiratory infections and other diseases. Additionally, sleep deprivation can affect growth hormone production, which is especially important for teenagers that are still growing (Cherney). All this evidence clearly shows that sleep is an essential part of students' physical and mental development. Therefore, if students do not get enough sleep due to large amounts of schoolwork or tests, they will be prone to a number of long and short-term health issues that come with a lack of sleep.

Another article from Healthline gathered data to explain how too much homework can negatively affect students and create stress. The author of the article, Sandra Levy, states that research done by Stanford University found that students who spend a long time on homework experience more stress, health problems, and struggle with social interactions. This means that students who are forced to dedicate too much time to homework are not able to develop life skills like doing chores or other talents like art or sports (Levy). Not only that, researchers also found that lots of students regularly experience symptoms of stress like headaches, exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and stomach problems, because of homework (Levy). This shows how the school system is stressing out the students with assignments, rather than helping them. Homework should be a tool aimed at helping students learn and develop, instead of something that simply gives students stress without actually benefiting them.

The sources explored above highlight several important issues with the Taiwanese education system and its effects on the students. The different sources discussed problems such as the amount of homework and tests given to the students and also the negative effects these factors have on the level of students' stress, and aspects of their health and development. From this literature, readers can see the issues with the education system and some of the changes that need to be made to improve it.

## Findings

The literature presents all of the main problems with the Taiwanese education system. These are that students are getting too stressed out due to the amount of homework and tests that schools give, and, for related reasons, students are not getting enough sleep.

First of all, schools in Taiwan give students way too much homework, which is one of the main reasons why students feel so stressed. From the beginning, homework was supposed to be something that cultivated learning and development, and something that was able to benefit the students (Levy). However, in Taiwanese schools, teachers often give out a large amount of homework that is simply unbeneficial for students. Not only is this one of the main sources of students' pressure, students are also forced to prioritize this homework over more meaningful activities like socializing or exercising, in order to get good grades. This will result in more stress which over time is bad for students' mental health.

Second, school hours are too long in Taiwan. According to a report by SETN, students in Taiwanese schools normally go to school at 7:30 in the morning and finish class around 5:00 in the evening, which is almost ten hours at school, one of the longest school days in the world. And as mentioned before, many students also go to cram schools after that, which can sometimes last until 9 to 10 at night. This is simply too tiring for students. If students always study these long hours, they will eventually lose focus or doze off, which will heavily affect their learning (Huang). Especially since most Taiwanese schools like to cover a lot of material in a semester, students are simply not going to be able to absorb all this information if they have such a long day. This means that some students will have to study these materials at home, which only gives them more work after an already tiring day at school.

The last cause of students' stress is too many tests. Other than mid-term and final exams, teachers at school often give small quizzes every week, so students are seemingly always preparing for tests as part of their homework. Not to mention that Taiwanese parents often care a lot about their kids' academic performance and place pressure on their kids to get good grades on tests. Another problem with the amount of tests Taiwanese students have to take is that student scores are ranked. When students have to compete in this way, they feel even more stress. All these expectations and studying put an overwhelming amount of pressure on the students, and it only makes it worse that tests are so frequent.

Piles of homework, long hours, and stress from exams are harming students in a few ways. The first reason is that these problems are harmful to the students' mental health. Stress from homework and tests can make students anxious and sometimes even depressed if they are performing poorly at school. Furthermore, with long school hours, students have less time to work and study, resulting in lots of them going to sleep very late. In fact, according to a survey conducted by the Child Welfare League Foundation, 88.9 percent of students sleep less than eight hours a day, and 23.7 percent of them less than six hours (Hsiao). However, students should sleep at least eight hours a day, and when students are tired, it can stunt their growth and learning. Not only can sleep deprivation impact students' mental abilities and emotional state, it can also affect their growth hormone production, which is very important for teenagers' physical development. Furthermore, lack of sleep can also cause the students to doze off during class and not be able to stay focused. This then causes some students to drink coffee or energy drinks to stay awake, which long-term is very unhealthy. The evidence shown proves that too much homework and tests not only puts too much pressure on students, but it can also deprive them of sleep, which creates serious health issues.

When there are too many tests and exams, it kills students' creativity and independent thought. This is because all the students need to know and study for are the exact answers for the tests, and that's it. However, the students do this and achieve good grades by only using rote memorisation, which is basically crushing the students' creative minds and also their own thoughts. Tests do not actually require the students to think on their own and come up with ideas. Instead, all the information is just in their textbooks

and their job is to absorb all of that material. As such, rather than rewarding students for their critical thinking and creative ideas, the system rewards the ones that have the best memorisation and have read their books for the most amount of time. Furthermore, being able to come up with ideas and critical thinking to solve problems is arguably more important for businesses and jobs, which the students will have in the future. This shows that if Taiwanese schools want the students to be better prepared for their future, the way Taiwanese schools handle education needs to change.

## **Conclusion**

Issues like large amounts of homework, tests, and long school hours all have negative effects on students, but that's not to say that there aren't any solutions that can be implemented to improve these situations. First of all, schools should have fewer mandatory classes so students can choose some of their own classes that they are interested in. This way students will become more motivated to attend classes, and there will also be a more engaging atmosphere. Not only that, students that chose the same class most likely share the same interests, which creates more opportunities for student interaction. Using this system, students are also able to drop some classes that they dislike, which would be beneficial, since they would get more out of a class that they are actually interested in anyway. This solution will help to reduce some of the stress students face by letting them choose subjects that they would enjoy the most.

Another way to improve Taiwanese education is to limit the amount of exams and homework given to the students. Exams should be limited to two times per semester, and there should only be around one to two hours of homework every day, not including weekends. By doing so, students can have more free time to relax, exercise, and most importantly, to sleep. This would have numerous positive effects on the students' overall health, since they would not have to be buried in books all day. Students would also not have to stress about all the homework and tests to study for. These changes would have a major impact not only on students' mental and physical health, but also their overall development and motivation to learn.

Last but not least, school hours should be reduced. Taiwan can follow western countries such as the United States and Australia where schools usually finish at 3 to 3:30 and start later as well. If Taiwanese schools were able to pull that off, students would basically get two more hours of sleep every day. More sleep will improve students' growth and increase their performance at school. This is because students will be better rested the night before, so they can better concentrate and focus during classes. Longer sleep time will also prevent students from dozing off in class, which is a common issue among Taiwanese students. Therefore, the Taiwanese education system should reduce school hours so that students can gain more sleep, which will better equip their bodies for learning and increase overall performance.

Education has always been a hot topic in Taiwan. In the past two decades, there have been so many changes in the education system aiming to reduce stress and pressure on the students. However, due to the traditional culture and unfair expectations from parents, schools and Taiwan's education system still have a lot of room for improvement. Schools, parents, and students must change their mindsets about learning and education, so that Taiwan can have a better education system.

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