

# "Study Group" Reflects On the Importance of Education in South Korea

Ga-min's desire to learn transcends his lack of academic ability in this highly bingeable K-drama

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☆☆☆½ (out of ☆☆☆)

Yoon Ga-min (played by Hwang Min-hyun)

Kim Se-hyeon (played by Lee Jong-hyun)

Lee Han-kyung (played by Han Ji-eun)

↑*Note: Korean names denote the surname followed by the given name.*

"Study Group" was one of my favorite K-dramas of last year, which is why I included it in my annual roundup of the [Best K-dramas of 2025](#) list for Teen Vogue:

*Ga-min's love for academics is as strong as his grades are weak. Even as a middle school student, none of his classmates would cram with him. They feared they might do worse on exams just by being in his proximity. In high school, the studious but grade-challenged teen (played by Hwang Min-hyun) hopes to better his chances to get into a good university by transferring to a less prestigious and academically easier high school, but his grades are still at the bottom.*

*So he puts that effort into forming a study group and finding classmates who will join him, in a testament to his determination to better himself. "Study Group" also is a fast-moving action series where teenagers fight nonstop and rank each other by who can beat up everyone else. Like Clark Kent, who turns into Superman when he removes his glasses, Ga-min proves to be a skilled martial artist who can take down anyone when he removes his. Shout out to Ga-min's mother, who doesn't push academic excellence above all else. "Who cares if you don't do well on tests," she tells him. "That's not the important thing." (Viki)*

In that short blurb, I wasn't able to get across all the pertinent points that I wanted to include, so I'm doing a deeper dive here.

In South Korea, students attend hagwons <sup>1</sup> — or cram schools — after their regular school day has finished. Technically, hagwons are optional. But realistically, if your child isn't enrolled in one by the time they're in kindergarten, their classmates will have a jump on them academically. I've written about this previously in reviews of K-dramas like ["SKY Castle"](#) and ["Crash Course in Romance."](#) In fact, in Episode 2 of "Study Group," they reference the names of highly sought-after tutors. One of them is Choi Chi-yeol, the fictional character portrayed by Jung Kyung-ho, in "Crash Course in Romance."

The end goal for all of this is that in their final year of high school, the students will excel on the College Scholastic Ability Test (대학수학능력시험) — known in Korean as Suneung (수능) — and be admitted to one of the three most prestigious schools in the country: Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University. During the nine-hour exam, students will be tested on subjects like math, history, Korean, and ... fluency in English.

On the day of the national test, flights, military training and construction — anything that causes excessive noise — are often canceled. Is that all a bit over-the-top? Maybe?

But it also acknowledges the years of work that students have devoted to intensive studying. According to the Korean Ministry of Education, universities report that while **27 percent of students** are admitted to college based solely on their Suneung scores, the majority of admissions are based on *holistic* factors<sup>2</sup>. I am side-eyeing this, which is why I included a footnote with more details.

So with this information in mind, where does our “Study Group” protagonist Ga-min (Hwang Min-hyun of “Alchemy of Souls”) fit on the academic ladder? He knows he will never be at the top, but he also refuses to resign himself to being on the bottom rung. In a refreshing change of pace, no one is pushing him to excel academically. It’s something he wants for himself. And as I stated in my *Teen Vogue* blurb, he has his mother’s full support *not* to excel, as long as he’s doing his best and is happy.



After transferring to a lower-tier high school, where he hopes he will do comparatively better than the other students, Ga-min tries to befriend Se-hyeon (Lee Jong-hyun) — the No. 2 student in his grade. Ga-min gets it into his head that if he can be part of a study group, he would fare better at school. And if he could get Se-hyeon interested, that would attract other smart students to join, too. But the latter initially has no interest in taking part in any of this. Of course, you aren’t wrong to think that he will change his mind.

Pi Han-wool (Cha Woo-min of “[Melo Movie](#)” and “[Weak Hero Class 1](#)”) is the top dog in a school where the students rank each other by their fighting skills. But in his case, he’s also an academic ace. In a nice bit of meta casting, his gangster father is portrayed by Lee Jong-hyuk, who portrayed the alpha high school bully in the superb Korean film [Once Upon a Time in High School](#).

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But I would say that my favorite elements of the show dealt with how Ga-min persevered not only to help himself, but to bolster the other academic misfits who the school doesn’t view as *worth the effort* to teach. They aren’t from highly-connected families and they have no money. In other words, they are disposable teens. Who cares about them, right?

One of the things that “Study Group” got so right is that few people — especially teenagers — want to be associated with losers, even if they themselves are at the bottom of the rung. In Episode 5, Ga-min attends a study group exchange at a more prestigious and affluent school. There, he saves another student from being bullied.

That boy asks if Ga-min remembers him. They had both attended the same middle school, and he had prevented Ga-min from joining their study group because he felt

that including a “stupid” kid would reflect badly on himself — as if Ga-min’s lack of academic skills would rub off on him.

The irony is that if Ga-min had been a better student in his youth, he most likely wouldn’t have been so strong physically with his Superman x Bruce Lee powers. His physical prowess is the result of his having been a poor student. He believed that if he had a healthy body, it would help him attain a healthy mind.

“Study Group” sets up the multiple villain arcs clever ways that enable viewers to understand how they got to be the way they are, but without excusing their atrocious behavior. Abuse begets abuse. And when you’re a teen who desperately needs money, you can rationalize why what you’re doing is only *kinda sorta* illegal and immoral.

For instance, Sun-chul (Joo Yeon-woo) learns the hard way that doing the wrong thing for a good cause isn’t the way to go about life. The high school hoodlums are the junior members of a large-scale gang headed by Han-wool’s father. Like the rest of the high school gang members, Sun-chol’s job is to take the fall for murders committed by the adults, since underage children won’t be punished nearly as severely as adults.

For Sun-chol, being a school bully and taking the fall for gang members is the only way he can earn enough money to pay for his dying grandfather’s hospital bills. The grandfather loves Sun-chol, but isn’t clueless. He believes education is the best way to elevate Sun-chul’s life and tells the boy, “When a person stops studying, that’s when their life stops.” This is why he himself studies even while bed-ridden.

I am positive that the 할아버지<sup>3</sup> could not give two hoots if Sun-chul was in the top 10 percent of his class or was admitted to a SKY school. His point is that the process of learning is as important as life itself, because without it, life would be stagnant and repetitive.

I thought about this as I watched Ga-min go up by 10 points in the class ranking, from 219th to 209th place. Granted, that was out of a class of 220 students. But it’s these small victories that are worth celebrating. Being No. 1 certainly is an achievement. But on a bigger scale, it’s not *the* achievement that will be a miracle cure for all that is ailing in your life.

As Ga-min's mother had told him, she didn't care if he aced every single test. What she wanted most for him was to be happy and kind.

It's this kindness and desire to help his friends (and even foes) that makes Ga-min a true winner, something that the school's No. 1 isn't on track to understand.

**Meta moment:** Hwang's "Alchemy of Souls" co-star Yoo In-soo ("[All of Us Are Dead](#)," "[Uncanny Counter 2](#)") makes an appearance as a thug who fights Sun-chul.

**Airdates:** Ten 45-minute episodes aired on TVING from January 23 to February 20, 2025. Directed by Lee Jang-hoon and Yoo Beom-sang, the script was co-written by Eom Seon-ho and Oh Bo-hyun. "Study Group" is based on Shin Hyung-wook's webtoon of the same name.

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On March 20, BTS will make their long-awaited comeback with an album called Arirang. Since it was announced, fans and media have been speculating about the cultural significance of the title, the

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According to the Nobel Prize-winning economist Claudia Goldin, one of the reasons why South Korea has the second lowest birth rate in the world is because of the imbalance of household chores between married couples. In her research paper *Babies and the Macroeconomy*

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- 1 Bestselling author Min Jin Lee will release her latest novel, *American Hagwon*, on September 29, 2026.
  - 2 Pardon me for being dubious about this so-called holistic admission. Even within the U.S., I sideeye the claims of *holistic admission*, especially when the U.S. equivalent of SKY schools are involved. Here, there is a university (or community college) for everyone, regardless of grades. But I don't trust the majority of "elite" schools (including my own alma maters) that pretend to be fair. They most certainly are looking at SAT or ACT scores, as well as the students' GPA, or whether they can make money off of student athletes. The holistic aspect

is a bonus, but I would argue that the parents' ability to pay for four years of college *without* needing financial assistance ranks high as to whether schools will admit students.

And don't even get me started on how criminal it is to charge students (and their parents) the fees that U.S. schools are charging. Some of my views here are based on conversations I've had with people who work in higher education and who have been involved in evaluating high school candidates. And some of this is because I'm a cranky Maudlin Crone  who's tired of all the b.s.

3 할아버지 is *grandfather* in Korean.



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**Nora Brosseau**  Nora Brosseau 2h



 Liked by Jae-Ha Kim

I loved this series too. His perseverance was everything for me. Thanks for the reminder. I'm going to watch it again.

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1 reply by Jae-Ha Kim



**Gert** 2h



 Liked by Jae-Ha Kim

I noticed some of the actors playing 'high school' kids are in their 30s; aren't there any teenage actors to play these parts?