

National Identity in Korean Curriculum

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Abstract

The concept of national identity has evolved during the last half century within the Korean social studies curriculum. There have been seven curricular revisions since the first national curriculum was released in 1955. Each time the concept of national identity was changed with the biggest changes to this concept within the last two iterations of the social studies curriculum. After a review of the curricular revisions, a discussion of the implications of these changes indicates a much different view of national identity than just a short while ago.

Introduction

As a social studies teacher, my primary concern is based on the question 'what should I teach and why' rather than 'how should I teach?' This tendency began when I first realized that the subject matter that I taught in my class was quite different from what I had been taught as a schoolgirl. For example, I learned that the communists (especially, the North Koreans) were monstrous and extremely cruel. However, now I have to teach that the people in the North and in the South are actually brothers and we have to reunite. How can we create a family with monsters? Although I understand that the curriculum contents must be changed as the circumstances change, it has caused me to be suspicious about the correctness of what I am teaching. It also makes me ask why I teach what I teach, which is connected to the question about the purpose of education.

Thus, the question arises, what is the purpose of social studies education? Sears (1997, p.20) points out that "civic competence" — preparation for citizenship — is social studies' *raison d'être*. According to Ken Osborne (1997, p.39), to be a citizen is not only to be a member of a state and fulfill his rights and duties for the state but also to get involved in community affairs. Needless to say, to be a person who actively gets involved, one would need to have a sense of responsibility or solidarity toward the community he or she is attached to. I believe that this particular sense is developed on personal and national identity. The problem is that the identity, especially national identity, is not innate but must be developed. It is important to

note that the most effective means to raise this issue would be through education. Therefore, when we want to grasp the characteristics of national identity of one nation, the most effective way we can use would be the examination of a nation's curriculum.

In this context, I would like to review the Korean high school social studies curriculum regarding national identity. Korea has a long history as a nation and it has developed a unique national identity under the Confucius tradition seeing the nation as an extended form of "family." However, such a conception of national identity has been changing under rapidly changing circumstances such as globalization. Now, in various areas, Koreans are struggling viewing themselves somewhat differently from the past and trying to re-invent their new (national) identity. The educational realm is no exception to this tendency since the curriculum is directly related to social changes. To meet the demand of the new age, a new curriculum was established and implemented in 2000.

In this paper, first, I will briefly summarize the history of Korean national curriculum change focusing on the social studies. The second part of this paper will review the sixth and seventh periods of curriculum development regarding Korean national identity. A look at the implications of the changes within the curriculum will then be reviewed.

Part 1: A History of the Korean Social Studies curriculum

Generally, there is consensus that the purpose of the social studies as a subject is the "development of democratic citizenship" in Korea, since it first appeared in 1940's. However, since the concept of "democratic citizenship" is not a traditionally inherited notion in Korea, there has been constant dispute about the nature of so-called "democratic citizenship" and the proper way to realize it. Consequently, the Korean social studies curriculum has been a constant target of criticism from all kinds of people who thought educational reform was urgently needed, and it has been excessively and broadly influenced by some external conditions such as change of powers.

Since the new Korean government proclaimed the first national curriculum in 1955, it has been reformed six times, with its major theme characterized by centralism. In other words, curriculum changes were led mainly by the central government. Therefore, those changes have been intimately related to political changes. For example, the first national curriculum revision (that is, the second national curriculum) appeared after a military revolution in 1960. The second revision was accompanied by the amendment of the national constitution, which was needed in order to maintain the military dictator's long-term ruling. The third revision took place after the former military president was assassinated and another military officer came into power. The advent of new democratic government in 1992 made the fifth revision. In this way, the Korean national curriculum has been changed, according to the changes in the leadership of the government. Thus, there has been much confusion, conflicts as well as numerous mistakes in Korean curricular development.

On the other hand, the Korean social studies system has at least two characteristics, which are quite different from any in North America. Although there have been constant suggestions and efforts towards the development of an integrated curriculum, Korean social studies curriculum is still sectionalized in many different ways. Therefore, the social studies are divided into many subject matters such as *General Social Studies*, *Human Society and Environment*, *Korean History*, *World History*, *Korean Geography*, *World Geography*, *Economic Geography*, *Politics*, *Economics*, and so on.

The second characteristic is the existence of *Moral* studies. *Morals* (or *Ethics*) appeared during the 1950's and attempted to establish the national spirit beyond the confused, degraded society (the Guidebook for *Morals* teachers, 2002. p.8). Since then, *Morals* has been preserved as an independent subject in the Korean educational system.

I will briefly portray the changes of the Korean national curriculum below. They illustrate how the subject of social studies subject also changed as the national curriculum changed.

#1. The syllabus period under the U.S. military administration (1946-1954)

This was a transitional period, which started right after independence from the Japanese imperial rule. Until the first national curriculum appeared, Korean education followed the educational system of the United States. The fact that Americans trained or influenced Korean educators had a strong impact on educational policy-making and administration, and it was quite natural for American democratic education to become the dominant model for the Koreans to follow. (Sin-il kim, <http://aped.snu.ac.kr/cyberedu/cyberedu1/eng/eng201.html>).

The primary goal of this period was to overcome the existing imperial education system so as to foster the democratic mind which was assimilated with the western mind at that time. For the first time, social studies appeared as the leading subject for this purpose. Social studies, as the main subject, was separated into *Civics*, *Geography*, and *History*. *Civics* was divided into *Politics*, *Economics*, and *Ethics-Philosophy*, and *Geography* into the *Introduction of Geography*, *Descriptive Geography* and *Economical Geography*, while *History* was divided into the *History of Human Culture*, *History of Korean Culture* and *Life and Literature*.

#2. The first national curriculum (1955-1962)

The Korean War (1950-1953) caused so social problems. The national economy had been broken, and this provoked excessive materialism. Besides, the influence of the ideological confusion between democracy and communism had not been disappeared. These called for a strong educational policy. The most important purpose of this curriculum was to infuse anti-communism into the people's mind and to train skilled workers. On the other hand, due to the perceived need for moral education, the *Morals* subject appeared as an independent subject. The social studies subjects were *General Social Studies*, *Morals*, *Korean History*, *World History*, and *Geography*.

#3. The second national curriculum (1963-1972)

The second national curriculum (that is, the first national curriculum revision) appeared after a military revolution in 1960. Sensing a need to justify its power, the new military administration designed a policy which emphasized the establishment of a national identity, the modernization of the state and the non-communist unification of the North and the South Korea. These were automatically accepted as educational objectives. To achieve those goals, *Korean History* was stressed, and a new subject called *Ethics* was created instead of *Moral* studies.¹

The social studies subjects during this period were *General Social Studies*, *Ethics*, *Korean History*, *World History*, *Politics and Economics*, and *Geography*.

#4. The third national curriculum (1973-1981)

The second revision was accompanied by the amendment of the national constitution, which was needed in order to maintain the military dictator's long-term ruling. Although, globally, there had been a turning from antagonism between ideological extremes towards a multipolarized utilitarian diplomacy, South and North Korea were still opposing each other. This meant that Korea was not free from the ideological dispute yet. Korea also faced various social problems caused by the rapid economic growth and the discord between government and people who longed for democracy.

This curriculum stressed the *Korean History* and *Ethics* with the goal to make people closely united based on the enhanced national identity and anticommunism. The objectives of this curriculum were to enhance national quality, humanity education and knowledge and technical education. The social studies subjects during this era were *Society and Culture*, *Ethics*, *Korean History*, *World History*, *Politics and Economics*, *National Geography* and *Descriptive Geography*.

#5. The fourth national curriculum (1982-1988)

The new administration, which resulted from a military coup, carried out two strong policies, as it needed to overcome a crucial weakness, that is, its lack of political justness. One of the policies was to oppress people who demanded democracy. The other one was to pacify people through the various social reform policies. The educational realm was also impacted because of this.

Unlike the former three periods of curricular development, this curriculum put various ideas together. Moreover, this was produced by a special research institute, [Korean Educational Development Institute], and not by the central government. This reflected a public demand to stop following foreign curriculum models and to produce its own curriculum, which would be appropriate for the Korean context. Thus, this curriculum contained some fresh ideas. For example, the idea of curriculum integration appeared for the first time in this curriculum document. Private companies could produce textbooks and localization of the curriculum was discussed by this curriculum. The purpose of this curriculum was to establish a well-organized educational program emphasizing national spirit, science and technology education; and education for the whole person. The social studies subjects during this period were *Social Studies I*, *Social Studies II*, *Ethics*, *Korean History*, *World History*, *Geography I* and *Geography II*.

#6. The fifth national curriculum (1989-1994)

The curriculum during this era was not significantly different than the fourth. The new president was a former four-star general. Actually, Koreans despised him for his incompetence, but since he had showed his loyalty to the former president, he became the president. Thus, he ordered a ceremonial reform of national curriculum, but wanted to maintain the framework of the fourth-national curriculum, which had been made by his predecessor.

The goals of this curriculum were to help educate people, attain subjectivity, autonomy, creativity, and morality. The names of the social studies subject courses were returned to those used during the third curriculum: *Politics and Economics*, *Korean Geography*, *Ethics*, *Korean History*, *World History*, and *Society and Culture*.

#7. The sixth national curriculum (1995-1999)

In 1993, a new democratic government came to power. This government aimed at the total reformation of the Korean school system. In this period, the metaphor of a corporation appeared in educational discourses for the first time. According to governmental policy, which was characterized by introducing the idea of globalization and free-market system, the epitome of school reforms has been focused on strengthening competitive power. Parents or students were treated as consumers. The official objective of this curriculum was to cultivate morality and creativity. The social studies were *Common Social Studies (General Social Studies and Korean Geography), Korean History, Politics, Economics, Society and Culture, World History, World Geography and Ethics*.

#8. The seventh national curriculum (2000-)

This curriculum has been being implemented gradually since 2000. In its development, the Presidential Commission on Education Reform advised that, in preparation for the 21st Century, the development of creativity in elementary school, junior high school and high school children should be given high priority. Responding to the Commission's advice, the number of compulsory subjects was decreased, and the importance of the optional subjects was stressed. Also, the curriculum was diversified according to different achievement levels. Consequently, this curriculum consists of two parts: a national compulsory curriculum for grade 1 to 10 students, and optional courses for students in grade 11 and 12. The national compulsory curriculum is also being organized according to the different levels of difficulty rather than by grade and year.

The well-educated Korean citizen promoted by this curriculum is defined as a person who seeks to develop his/her own individuality on the basis of well-rounded and wholesome development; a person who demonstrates creative ability on the basis of a solid grounding in basic knowledge and skills; a person who explores career paths on the basis of broad intellectual knowledge and skills in diverse academic disciplines; a person who creates new values on the basis of understanding the national culture; and a person who contributes to the development of the community where he/she lives, on the basis of democratic citizenship.

The social studies curriculum consists of two parts: the national compulsory subjects — *Social Studies, Korean History and Morals*; and elective subjects — *Civic Ethics, Ethics and Thought, Traditional Ethics, Human Society and Environment, Korean Geography, World Geography, Economic Geography, Korean Modern and Contemporary History, World History, Law and Society, Politics, Economics, and Society and Culture*.

Part 2: National identity in the Korean curriculum

"Korean." When I hear this word, it usually reminds me of Korean national flag and map. It also brings up the image of a people who are relatively slim and have yellowish skin, round face and black hair. On the other hand, when a Canadian thinks of "Canadian", I guess, the image of it would be quite different from mine as a Korean, since these two countries have absolutely different histories in shaping the nation and state. Actually, among Koreans, it is proudly said that Korea is one of the few nations in which single-blooded people have dwelt on the same land, and kept their own culture for a long time. This allows Korean people to have a unique national identity.

Then, what does it mean to be a Korean? It must mean not only the Korean nationality one holds but also the sense of attachment he/she feels to the Korean people. In this sense, when we talk about the Korean national identity, we unconsciously assume that it includes not only

the national identity but also the ethnic identity. So for Koreans, national identity is the same as the ethnic identity.²

A review of the sixth and seventh curriculum periods

In this part, I will review the Korean high school *Ethics* textbook (1997) and the *Guidebook for the Teachers* (1997) from the sixth national curriculum and the *Moral and Social Studies* textbooks and the *Guidebook for Teachers* from the seventh national curriculum. My primary focus is on the Korean national identity those curriculums describe. In general, since the philosophical, psychological elements such as national identity have been mainly dealt with in *Ethics* and *Moral* subjects, my review would be carried out with those subjects as the central topic.

The *Ethics* of the sixth curriculum shows a long description of national identity. According to the textbook (1997, p. 127), the ideally developed form of Korea needs at least three conditions; to be a democratic society; to be a welfare state; and being a nation in which its people feel a strong coherence to each other. To establish the ideally developed nation, each Korean has to internalize the strong national identity and the sense of liberty, equality and responsibility.

This textbook makes a definition of national identity as "a sense of belonging to one's nation and people" and as an essential element in preserving the state's system (p.127). It describes the formation of national identity as follows:

One's national identity is formed when he/she is aware of him/herself as a member of the nation and feels a bond to it no matter what kind of national system it has. One's lack of national identity could create difficulties in national administration, since it causes the weakening of his royalty and patriotism. This kind of people could not devote himself/herself to the public union or solidarity.

The textbook also asserts the role of national identity:

Positive national identity makes one feel pride toward his/her state and people. It also provokes his/her voluntary devotion for the society and the state he/she belongs to. On the contrary, the wrongly formed national identity could muster one's aggressive and exclusive attitude toward other states or peoples.

The textbook ends the explanation on national identity with this comment:

The right national identity is formed based on the state's successful politics and the people's sense of pride and devotion toward the state. Therefore, the state and each member of it should cooperate each other for the formation of the positive national identity.

Unlike *Ethics* of the sixth national curriculum, I cannot find the term "national identity" in the seventh curriculum textbooks. However, it doesn't mean that the new curriculum has no

interest in it. In view of *Moral* subject's property, identity education is still importantly dealt with on all sides. For example, *The Guidebook for the Moral Teachers* presents that: [In order to achieve the objectives of *Moral* subject] in the new curriculum, the practice-centered goal was set to help students to establish a desirable national identity and ethnic identity (2002, p.8).

The general goal of the *Morals* subject is to make students not only learn the core moral norms and various etiquettes but also build civil consciousness and nation consciousness needed for a desirable life as a Korean. It is also intended to make students develop moral judgments that are needed for a rational solution of moral problems in daily lives and cultivate moral dispositions that can systematize and practice the ideals and principles of human life.

Instead, the term "ethnic identity" frequently appears. The new *Moral* textbooks which are used from the seventh to the tenth grades consists of four sections: 1) Personal life, 2) Life in family, neighborhood, and school, 3) Social life, and 4) National and community life. Although the exact term 'national identity' doesn't appear in those textbooks, we can easily trace its conception in the last section "national and community life" which is presented in 8th and 10th grade textbooks. For example, the 8th grade *Moral* has four chapters under the title of "National and community life". They include:

1. Korean national development and cultural fluency
2. The importance of the state and national development
3. Correct love of the state and nation
4. Unification and strong will for the reunification of North and South (Korea)

They generally deal with the state-nation relation and reunification issues. Especially, the third chapter (that is, "3. Correct love of the state and nation") begins with a sub-chapter "the Awakening as a Korean" (2002, p.243). Even though it doesn't use the term national identity, the textbook seems to have a clear intention to plant the spirit and notion of it into the students.

On the other hand, the 10th grade textbook, the same section "National and community life", is divided into three chapters:

1. The causes and processes of the partition of North and South
2. Unification policies of North and South & tasks for the reunification
3. The development of the national community and the future of a reunified Korea

They deal mostly with Korean reunification problem and Korean future based on Korean people's national awareness. In connection to this, *The Guidebook for the 10th Grade Morals Teacher* asks this interesting question: "Discuss the right way to be Korean who cherishes Korean ethnic identity at the same time to be a world citizen who has a wide outlook" (2002, p.209).

Part 3: Implications

Generally speaking, the seventh social studies curriculum emphasizes three elements: the Korean ethnic identity, the Korean reunification and globalization. Although these concepts have been appeared (like a package) in Korean curriculum for a long time, it seems to me that nowadays they are considered to be more important than ever. I think this tendency is quite

natural at this particular present time.

While the *National Ethics* subject of the sixth national curriculum describes national identity in detail, the seventh social studies curriculum does not use that term. Rather, "ethnic identity" frequently appears. At first sight, it seems that its concern has been moved from national identity to ethnic identity. Is this so?

As I mentioned before, based on its unique characteristics in shaping the state and nation, the Korean national identity has been created differently from that of other countries. That is, national identity and ethnic identity are regarded as identical. If this is so, the transformation from national identity to ethnic identity is just an ostensible change, since no matter which term we choose, the nature of national and ethnic identity remains the same.

To more fully understand the Korean national identity, it would be helpful to examine the Korean traditional view of a state. Historically, Korea has developed a distinct and unique conception of what a state is, which tends to distance itself from that of Western tradition and culture. For Koreans, the family is the ideal type of a complete community, hence it, symbolizes a typical form of a well-ordered society.

The family is viewed as the ideal model of political community, but not vice versa. In other words, the explicit prototype of the state for the Koreans has been the family and, hence, it is not surprising that Korean public life is often analogous to family life (Hyo-chong Park).

This unique view of state is deeply connected to Korean nationalism. Due to its geo-political location, Korea had constantly been a target of invasion by neighboring countries. In the process of self-defense against the numerous foreign aggressors, Koreans has formed a solid nationalism, and still exists. This nationalism has automatically influenced the Korean education throughout its history.

The appearance of democratic citizenship education did not arise until Korea achieved its independence from Japanese rule in 1945. According to Korean democratic educator Sin-il Kim, however, its predominance over nationalism ended as a nationalist, Ho-sang An was appointed as the first Minister of Education in 1948. His educational policy, which was named as "Nationalistic-Democracy Education", is well represented below:

With the Military Governments of the U.S. and the Soviet Union after the oppressive Japanese colony, our national ideas and spirits are totally scattered, and our national identity is almost in danger of vanishing. Since we have instituted our own Government, the first thing we should do is to regain our national identity in order to construct the foundation for the unified independence.... Therefore, our education should be directed with the universal ideas, aiming to regain our national identity, to understand human self and nature, and to be applicable to all the people in the world. (Oh Chun-suk, in Sin-il Kim)

On the other hand, although there are continuous disputes over whether the "nationalistic democracy education" has been successful or not, it seems that at least Ahn's will has been

successfully taken over so far. For example, the *Ethics* of the sixth curriculum asserts that Koreans pursue the nationalism, democracy, and capitalism to form the ideally developed Korea (1997. p.128). It also presents the possible/desirable roles of Korean nationalism for the further study of history, for example,

- in fostering social unification based on healthy national consciousness;
- in encouraging people to devote themselves to developing Korea as a culturally advanced country;
- in motivating the national passion and energy for the reunification of North and South;
- and, in fostering national will for the worldly peace and happiness.

Emphasizing nationalism or the national (ethnic) identity is connected to emphasizing the national (ethnic) community. We can find that, although the names of the related chapters are different, "Korean national community" is accentuated in both curriculum (the sixth and seventh). In the Korean situation, this conception naturally calls for the reunification.

The 10th grade *Morals* curriculum makes a definition of national (ethnic) community as a community which has strongly combined the objective elements such as biological, cultural, historical homogeneity and the subjective element, that is, the national consciousness (2002. p.163). It also asserts that Korea has preserved a good community throughout its history (p.164). If so, the present situation (the two Koreas) is not right. In this respect, the following section which is named "the present questions of Korean national community" is relevant. According to this section, the urgent problems of Korean society are:

1. to overcome the partition and establish one community which would guarantee the qualitative life
2. to confirm the ethnic identity, so as to adjust to the globalization tendency at the same time (pp.166-167).

The first one explains the need for the Korean reunification. If a state is a big family, people who live in a divided nation cannot develop a whole, sound national identity. In other words, reunification is the right way to regain the Korean homogeneity (*Ethics*, 1997 p.257), and this homogeneity becomes the foundation for the ideal Korean national identity.

On the other hand, perhaps "globalization" would be the best word to express the present world. It seems that the seventh national curriculum deals with this phenomenon very seriously. For example, the grade 10th *Moral* (2002. pp.12-15) and *Senior high school Social Studies* (2002. pp.147-153) present the general characteristics of globalization and the desirable attitudes toward it. It is naturally related to the recognition of world citizenship over the national one and, hence, the narrow nationalist concept of national identity seems losing its position. Nevertheless, it is interesting that both textbooks emphasize keeping our own Korean identity in fitting to the globalization trend. In other words, the seventh national curriculum seems to insist people should have strong national/ethnic identity and world citizenship at the same time. It is understood as an effort to remake citizens with a broad outlook beyond the narrow nationalist identity.

Conclusion

Based on their own nationalism, Korean people have had a unique national identity which is regarded the same as their ethnic identity. It seems that Korean nationalism is transforming itself into a new stage. For example, the 10th grade *Moral* insists that the unified Korea

should pursue the "open nationalism" (2002. pp.175-176). Open nationalism does not exclude other nations or peoples. Rather, it is one that fosters world peace and happiness outwardly as it enhances the (Korean) national solidarity and prosperity inward at the same time (p.176).

I think the concept of this open nationalism gives an important implication to the Korean identity education in that it encourages people to see the national identity problems with their open eyes. In this context, I would like to close this paper introducing an interesting example. Perhaps the following are not exactly about the national identity in that there is no clear mention about how Susan and Robert feel about Korea or America. Nevertheless, I believe, they provide us an opportunity to deeply speculate about national identity issue and our attitude on it more than anything.

Who is the real Korean?

Example 1) Susan Lee is a third generation Korean living in the United States. Her grandfather was a sugar cane farm worker who immigrated to Hawaii, and her parents were born in there. Even though she has a Korean face, she lives with American ways of thinking and living.

Example 2) Robert is the second generation American in Korea. His parents came to Korea as missionaries work and he was born there. Although he has golden hair and blue eyes, he speaks with a Kyung-sang-do accent. He follows the Korean life- style. However, other people still regard him as a foreigner. They are surprised at his fluency in Korean.

Question 1) Do you think Susan Lee is a Korean or an American? What makes you think so?

Question 2) Is Robert a Korean or an American? What makes you think so?

(*Social Studies*, 2002, p.253)

Notes

¹ *Morals and Ethics*: According to *The Guidebook for Morals Teachers* of the seventh national curriculum, these two subjects do not show any critical differences in their goals and framework (2002, p.19). In general, from the first to the ninth grade, subjects had been called *Morals*, while the tenth through the twelfth grades were called (*National*) *Ethics* until the sixth national curriculum. In the seventh national curriculum, however, *Morals* is a national compulsory subject which is taught from grades 1-10. *The Teachers' Guidebook* also indicates that in the tenth grade, *Morals* stresses the practical morality while the former *National Ethics* were concerned with cognitive morality and ideological education (2002, p.19).

² It should be noted here that I have difficulty in understanding the concept of the English word "national identity". The English term "nation" could be translated as a state, or a people, or a race (ethnicity). On the contrary, in the Korean language, they hold different connotations; a state is called 'kuk-ga'; a people 'kuk-min'; and a race(ethnicity) 'min-jok'. 'min-jok' is also called 'gyu-lei', which means a people who have the same ancestor, community, language and culture. For this reason, I will use the term national identity separately. That is, when it is related to the state, I will call it "national identity" and to people "ethnic identity" ..

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