Issues of unity in diversity: the Korean history curriculum in South Korea

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Excerpts from interview (1)

- I am a Korean because I was born in Korea but my dad is from India. I always wanted to know about India in social studies or history class, but I have never learned about it in school. People say about India only when bad things happened mentioning rape crimes and Caste.
Excerpts from interview (2)

- My mom is a Japanese. I hate people asking "which country do you think Dokdo belongs?" I know people in Korea hate Japanese, because of the history of invasion, colonization, and all the wars that happened in the past. Sometimes I am afraid that I may not get married because my mom is a Japanese.
Excerpts from interview (3)

I was born in North Korea. I escaped when I was 15 years old. When I was a student there, we were taught the South waged the war against the North by attacking us suddenly on a peaceful weekend.
I went to a teachers’ college in North Korea, but escaped a few years ago. We were taught much more about Goguryeo and Balhae than here, and Unified Silla was a betrayer in alliance with Tang dynasty of China.
Purposes of the Study

- To analyze the content selection and organization of Korean history curriculum for elementary, middle, and high school
- To examine how the discourse on unity and diversity is reflected in the elementary, middle, and high school Korean history curriculum
- Explore possible ways to generate discourses about ‘us’ by including “others”
What is being contested is whether "little publics" or the diverse groups that comprise the society are a threat or a aid to the "big public." In many cases, we shy away from difference in the name of a defensive unity (Parker, 2003:30)
History and multiculturalism(1)

- Some people acknowledge that diverse cultures can be a strength, but fear that multicultural curriculum is a threat to national unity.

- Pluralism is a positive value, but it is also important that we preserve a sense of an American community - a society and a culture to which we all belong (Ravitch, 1989:6).
Their approach to history is to create a narrative history that would embrace differences, yet "subsume them within the larger story of a shared national identity"

They take a narrative approach and refer it as a "story well-told" they chose not to problematize the omniscient role of the narrator, and should not to ask the critical question of what history, or whose history should constitute the sotry well-told. (Symcox, 2002:76).
Critics say it is generalizing the white ethnic experience to encompass enslaved blacks, Native Americans, and more recent immigrant Koreans, Muslims from India and Pakistan, Nicaraguans, and political refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam-everyone (Symcox, 2002:78)
History and multiculturalism

- History can be a controversial subject because the serious investigation of it has the power to undermine cherished "common culture" heritage mythologies (VanSledright, 2002: 15).
History and social identity

- The role of history as an important factor in identity formation can be found in ‘social identity theory’

- The cognitive basis of social identity is the process of social categorization and intergroup comparisons, including knowledge about in-group history and historical relations with other groups.

- It is connected with emotions reflecting feelings about belonging to an in-group or relating to an out-group, which includes love, hate, amity, and enmity (Korostelina, 2008: 26)
Analysis of elementary Korean history curriculum(1)

- Korean history is taught from the 5th grade to the 6th grade at the elementary school level in the subject of social studies.
- On the document, it says that history teaching should help students acquire knowledge through the achievements of big figures, and identify changes of life and culture through artifacts.
The scope of content is from pre-history to the modern history of Korea.

Achievement standards include historical facts based on political events (mostly establishing a new nation) and major figures who participated in them.

Historical facts are listed in a chronological order. No big ideas or themes that provide an anchor to those facts.
Analysis of elementary Korean history curriculum(3)

- By presenting facts only, and portray them in “our” history, it does not include the perspectives of “others” who have participated in the historical events, and may have interpreted same events differently.

- Although history is resided in social studies, it is hard to see how it is connected or related to other areas of social studies.
Analysis of middle school Korean history curriculum(1)

 On the document, it says that history teaching should involve students in historical inquiry.
 Also, it suggests that students recognize that there are various interpretations and perspectives looking at the past by getting students to analyze and interpret historical evidence.
On the document, purposes of teaching history are to

- obtain major facts and concepts of Korean and the world history
- relate Korean history with the world history
- develop historical insights by visiting various historical and cultural sites of Korean and world history
- develop critical thinking through the process of analyzing and interpreting historical materials
- expand the understanding of the present world by exploring current social issues in historical contexts
- respect different culture and tradition based on the understanding of human life that changes in time and space
The scope of content is from the pre-history to modern Korea.

Content elements consist of historical facts describing political events, mostly establishing a new nation.

The historical facts are listed in a chronological order.
Those facts that were taught at the elementary school are recurring and become more complex as the facts-based Korean history is related to facts-based World history.

The intention of providing both Korean and world history might be to have students develop a more holistic view.

However, the purposes of having students develop an integrated viewpoint and a respect for different culture would be hardly achieved if students were supposed to just memorize all the facts, without a frame of reference such as big ideas or themes.
On the document, it says that the history teaching should help students develop historical thinking, including historical inquiry, historical imagination and historical judgment.

It is also said to promote historical awareness through inquiry-based teaching.
On the document, purposes of teaching history are to

- analyze the features of Korean history in various angles
- look at Korean history in relation to world history
- understand that historical identity remains although it assumed multicultural as we were interacting with the outer world
- develop historical thinking skills through an inquiry that involves critical analysis of artifacts and documents
- develop an attitude to contribute to the Korean society
The purposes imply that historical identity can not go with multiculturalism.

Those facts that were taught at the elementary and middle school level are recurring.

The historical facts are listed in a chronological order without reference to themes or big ideas.
Different Voices

- S: History educator who participated in developing both 2009 and 2015 revised national Korean history curriculum

- C: Sociologist who is interested in modern Korean history

- H: Historian who likes to travel around the country to uncover the past

- J: Social studies educator who participated in developing both 2009 and 2015 revised social studies curriculum and whose research interest is multicultural education
Excerpts from an interview with S

- Multiculturalism in Korean history? No way! You got to think about the legacy and who we are as a Korean. As a Korean, there should be something that we all share in common.

- Can you imagine a Muslim who believes in polygamy take a position in power, say a judge, in our society? We are not ready yet.

- In our situation, discourses on or opinion about history brings about ideology

- Before making an argument, we should talk about the purpose of teaching history first!
There is a reason why we emphasize that we are all descendants of one ancestor. It has something to do with the Japanese colonization.

One of the causes for the independence from the Japanese colonization was that we are one blood and one nation and we have our own legacy which we are very proud of. People say it nationalism.
I am interested in the history of noble people, but rather try to discover what the life of laypeople like. It is so much fun to find out that they were the same with us.

If we turn our eyes to the culture and life of people in history, why not include how we have been interacting with people in other countries? Actually, we are all mixed. There is no pure blood.
In Korean history, we say that Mongol invaded Korea. think about how those whose parents came from Mongol would feel? Mongolian were always bad and we are always nice people?

We should not focus on our political and national history. we should focus more on the general themes of interaction, conflicts, etc and how people lived in the past. Could you imagine the amount of pressure our students whose parents came from Japan should endure?

In my class, I asked my students what is wrong with Japanese colonization, and I was so shocked to hear that it is wrong that Japan did not apologize. They are just looking at the invasion. What is wrong is not that it was Japan that invaded and colonized us, but that it is bad to attack other country to expand power and use force and wage a war.
Implications

- Could organize content around themes (e.g. intercultural relationship) that can cut across history

- Reflect historical inquiry and historical thinking in the content

- Start rethinking “identity” or “who we are as a Korean”

- Could approach history teaching as, what Dewey said, an appreciation of social life

- More research is needed that examines the influence of history learning on the sense of belonging to Korean society for the children of immigrants
References


