

Korea: Improving Human Rights Education in Schools

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The human rights struggle in Korea has had rough sailing since 1945, especially in the wake of the Korean War and the economic and political turmoil that followed. Yet Korea has not abandoned its efforts, begun even before 1945, to improve the human rights situation.¹ For one thing, it is trying to improve human rights education in the school system.

I show how and in what schools human rights are taught, and discuss human rights education curriculums and textbooks. I also propose changes in the law and in the school curriculum to enhance human rights education. I focus on moral education and social studies—the subjects most related to human rights education. Finally, I make a few suggestions on how to effectively implement human rights education in schools.

Laws Regulating Human Rights Education in Schools

As in most modern states, in Korea laws and government permission are necessary to conduct human rights education or to teach any other subject in schools. In Korea, the Education Law provides that all the basic rights of learners should be respected and protected during their school years and life-long education (Article 12 [1]), and that curriculums, methods, materials, and facilities should develop the learner's character and individuality (Article 12 [2]). Article 4 states that people should not be discriminated against on account of their sex, religion, belief, social and economic status, or physical condition, among other characteristics. Article 28 provides for flexible curriculums for the disabled.

The law, however, is silent on human rights education in schools. Thus, the government has proposed the Human Rights Law, which will include human rights education in schools in 2000 and provide for the creation of the National Human Rights Commission, which will protect human rights and educate the public about them. The proposed law also mandates that the Ministry of Education (MOE) shall include human rights education in the national curriculum and teach it in primary and secondary schools.

In response, MOE, together with the Korea National Commission for UNESCO (KNCU), plans to conduct a teachers' training program on human rights in order to implement human rights education in schools in 2000. MOE and KNCU will also have separate teachers' training programs for human rights education after 2000. The programs will be part of International Understanding Education in both institutions. The Korea Institute of Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE) also has a project to systematize the teaching of human rights education in schools in 2000.

Analysis of Primary-school Curriculums and Textbooks

Primary education in Korea has been free and compulsory since 1953. Current elementary enrollment rate is 99.9%, meaning that practically every child is enrolled and gets an elementary education.²

An accelerated grade advancement system was recently introduced to allow bright children to skip a grade. To expand and activate foreign language education, English has been taught two hours a week beginning in the third grade since 1997.

The incorporation of human rights education in the primary-level curriculum is still not satisfactory. But with MOE, KNCU, KICE, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)

passionately promoting it, improvements are expected in the future.

In order to have an idea of the status of human rights education, let us examine the national curriculum on moral education. Pupils in Grades 1 and 2 do not take up the subject, but do study a subject called righteous life. The sixth national curriculum (1992-1999) and the seventh revised national curriculum (to be implemented after 2000) in moral education from Grades 3 to 6 include human-rights-related topics such as respect for life, respect for parents and elders, fairness, democracy, peace, caring, responsibility, and so on. However, as Table 1 shows, moral education at the primary level does not emphasize natural rights, freedom, or ownership.

TABLE 1. Main Values and Virtues in the Sixth and Seventh Revised National Curriculum on Moral Education, Grades 3-6

Curriculum, subject, and grade	Main values and virtues	
	Sixth national curriculum (since 1992)	Seventh national curriculum (after 2000)
Personal ethics Grades 3-6	Respect for life Self-reliance Sincerity Thriftiness Will to practice*	Respect for life Self-reliance Sincerity Thriftiness Honesty*
Ethics in family, among neighbors, school Grades 3-6	Manner in the family* Manner at school* Love for country Tolerance Respect	Love for school and country Tolerance Respect Cooperation* Respect for parents*
Social ethics Grades 3-6	Public order* Cooperation* Public interest* Fairness* Democratic procedure*	Respect for the law* Caring* Environment* Justice* Community spirit*
Ethics in nation and state Grades 3-6	Love for the state Love for the nation Unification* International fellowship* Love for humanity	Love for the state Love for the nation Peace and unification* National security* Love for humanity

Source: MOE, *The National Curriculum of Primary and Secondary Schools*, 1997, pp. 119-41.

*Difference between the sixth and seventh revised curriculums.

The social studies curriculum includes three main subjects: (i) autonomy in decentralized government; (ii) self-reliant citizenship; and (iii) life in a democratic state. However, Grades 1 and 2 do not study “social studies,” but rather “enlightened living.” The sixth national social studies curriculum for Grades 3-6 includes legislation, democratic constitutions, democratic procedures, and other topics related to the role, responsibility, and duty of an individual and of society as a whole. The seventh revised national social studies curriculum for Grades 3-6 includes the right to vote, protection of the environment (or right to an ecologically balanced environment), autonomy of local government, democracy, freedom to participate in public affairs, the importance of human rights, the political system and its function, duties of a citizen, and so on (Table 2).

Even though the Constitution stresses human rights education, the school curriculum does not directly reflect it. For example, moral

education does not directly teach the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Bill of Human Rights, and so on. Social studies has the same problem. Still, Korea has been trying to incorporate the spirit of these documents in its national curriculum since 1954, although with limited success.

Textbooks on moral education and social studies, where human rights education is mostly incorporated, include human rights concepts. Textbooks on moral education have chapters such as “Laws to Observe,” with topics such as “Why should I observe traffic laws?” and “Why should I observe public order?” (*Morals*, a textbook for Grade 3, 1998, pp. 46-55). “The Importance of Life,” for example, discusses why life is more important than anything else. It is the story of a yacht team that participated in the 1988 Summer Olympic Games in Seoul, which gave up the race to save

TABLE 2. Main Values and Concepts in the Sixth and Seventh Revised National Curriculum on Social Studies, Grades 3-6

Curriculum, subject, and grade	Main values and concepts	
	Sixth national curriculum (since 1992)	Seventh national curriculum (after 2000)
Autonomy of local government: Grade 4	Citizen's duties Social responsibility Improving private and public life	Voting for representatives Protection of the environment Preservation of cultural heritage Autonomous solution of local problems Autonomy of local government
Self-reliant citizenship	Laws relating to social order and freedom Rational and autonomous decision making Voting for representatives Citizen's rights and duties	Not applicable
Life in a democratic state: Grade 6	Life under a democracy Democratic constitution Check and balance in the political system Free-market economy Democratic procedure	Democracy in Korea Freedom to participate in political life Importance of human rights Political system and its function Citizen's duties

Source: MOE, *Introduction to Primary School National Curriculum*, 1994, pp. 190-205; MOE, *The Curriculum for Social Studies*, 1997, pp. 31-49.

other team members from drowning (*Morals*, a textbook for Grade 5, 1998, pp. 4-13).

Social studies textbooks have chapters such as "Local Government," which discusses what local residents want, how to build a consensus on local issues through autonomous village meetings, and what local governments do for citizens (*Social Studies*, a textbook for Grade 4, 1997, pp. 90-128). "What is Self-reliance?" discusses autonomous living, how to elect a representative, why people should follow rules, who makes the law, what policemen do, and what freedom is. "Democracy and Politics in Korea" discusses how to lobby for laws to preserve nature and how to achieve autonomy in local government. "The Individual and the State" discusses the function of law in democracy and how to achieve autonomy in local government (*Social Studies*, a textbook for Grade 5, 1997, pp. 95-143).

Primary-school textbooks are currently being written under the seventh revised national curriculum, which will be implemented after 2000. But the revised curriculum, as in the past, does not seem to have any comprehensive plan or intention to systematically implement human rights education in schools. Nevertheless, KICE and KNCU plan to conduct joint research on how to systematize and organize human rights education in the school curriculum in 2000. The research team will analyze human rights education in Korean schools and compare it with that of other countries. Then it will propose how to organize and implement human rights education in schools. It is hoped that it will help improve human rights education. It will collect some basic materials on human rights such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Bill of Human Rights, and so on for use by teachers in the classroom.

Analysis of Secondary-school Curriculum and Textbooks

Secondary education (Grades 7-9) is also free and compulsory.³ To maintain high-quality secondary education, the Elementary and Secondary Education Law provides that schools shall administer the curriculum. MOE is in charge of developing the national curriculum, which is supposed to be the standard for the school curriculum. However, the national curriculum allows individual schools to be flexible in applying it in pursuit of educational aims.⁴

Human rights education has been briefly mentioned in the secondary-school national curriculum since 1954 in moral education and social studies subjects. However, human rights education has not been systematically incorporated into textbooks.

The sixth and seventh national curriculums on moral education for Grades 7-10 take up the following human-rights-related topics: respect for individuality; right to happiness; personality development; respect for parents; love for family and siblings; social responsibility; fairness; equality; democracy; individualism; liberalism; volunteerism; community spirit; social duty; and so on. As at the primary level, however, moral education at the secondary level does not systematically develop human rights concepts such as human dignity, ownership, and so on. Moral education as a whole does not directly teach the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the International Bill of Human Rights. Still, it does try to incorporate the spirit of these documents in the national curriculum.

Social studies in secondary-school curriculum includes some human rights concepts such as natural rights, right to life, civil and political rights (equality before the law, freedom to participate in public affairs, etc.), economic and social rights, cultural rights, and right to a clean environment. However, it does not deal with

them in terms of human rights education. The concepts are unsystematically discussed in social studies textbooks for Grades 7-10. As in primary school, the subject of human rights is not dealt with separately from other subjects.

Human rights concepts in moral education textbooks include such chapters as “Democratic Society and Respect for People,” “What is a Welfare Society?” and “What are Economic Ethics?” (*Morals*, a textbook for Grade 9, pp. 142-215).

Social Studies textbooks (1997) for Grades 8 and 9 briefly mention the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Amnesty International, the French Revolution of 1789, and so on, but not in detail and not systematically. For example, the fact that promotion of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a function of the United Nations is discussed in four sentences. Three sentences are allotted to explaining that Amnesty International is an NGO that promotes human rights. Other concepts are enumerated without explanation, such as democracy, inalienable rights, right to happiness, respect for human rights, right to social security, justice, right to property, freedom of expression, liberty, and security of person.

Textbooks for secondary schools are also being written under the seventh revised national curriculum, which, however, like the sixth national curriculum, does not have any comprehensive system or intention to implement human rights education.

Conclusion

People all over the world recognize human rights as paramount. Human rights are at the center of people’s daily life. To secure human rights is to secure happiness. In other words, respect for human rights is the minimum condition for people’s happiness. Human rights are universal. They may differ in application from culture to culture and from place to place, but the principle behind them is the same. Hu-

man rights education should show students how to secure their own rights, how to respond to duties and responsibilities, how to harmonize conflicting rights, and so on.

To improve human rights education in schools, the following are suggested:

- Human rights education must be taught as an independent subject, whether elective or not.
- It is necessary to develop as soon as possible many human rights education programs and materials for discretionary and extracurricular activities, especially since discretionary activities are introduced into the seventh national curriculum.
- Teachers must be prepared to teach human rights education. MOE and local governments should provide them with learning opportunities.

Notes

1. Beer (1991: 266) describes the history of human rights in Korea as follows. In the late 1800s, human rights ideas began to emerge as the country came under foreign control. Japan passed a series of laws in its effort to absorb Korea politically. These laws formed part of the development of a modern legal system in Korea. Militant human rights movements such as the Equalization Society of the 1920s were not easily accepted by nationalists, who had different visions of achieving independence.

After Liberation in 1945, concerns for human rights and democracy, which were part of the politics of the March First Movement of 1919 and other pre-Liberation groups, intensified internal conflict, leading to division, poverty, war, and repression. Savage civil conflict in 1945-1953 widened the division between South and North and heightened the tension in the South, weakening the foundations of democracy and liberty. No constitution in independent South Korea lasted longer than the ruler behind its inception. Widespread clamor for democracy was met with torture and repression by successive governments. The uncompromising stand and rigidity of some elements in the opposition invited this kind of state reaction.

2. *Elementary School Statistics in Korea (1999).*

Classification	Schools			Classes and departments	Students	Teachers
	Total	(national and public)	Private			
Elementary schools	5,544 (17)	5,468 (17)	76	111,184	3,935,469	137,576

MOE, *Education in Korea, 1998-1999*, p. 11.

3. *Secondary School Statistics in Korea (1999).*

Classification	Schools			Classes and departments	Students	Teachers
	Total	(national and public)	Private			
Elementary schools	3,119 (27)	2,051 (27)	1,644	49,259	4,177,547	199,273

MOE, *Education in Korea, 1998-1999*, p. 11.

4. “The new [seventh] revised national curriculum was developed in 1997. It will gradually come into effect for the first and second grades of elementary school in 2000 and for high school seniors in 2004. The seventh revised curriculum introduces a basic common curriculum that covers the ten years from the first year of primary school to the first year of high school (Grades 1 to 10), and elective curriculum for the final two years of high school.” MOE, *Korean Education for the New Millennium, 1999-2000*, p. 6.

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