

# **The Status and Perspective of Moral Education in Korea\***

**Yong Lin Moon**

*Department of Education*

## **I. Introduction**

There seems to be no country like Korea, where moral education is so emphasized in the formal education system. Every student has to take moral education classes two hours a week during 12 years of his/her stay, from primary to senior high school. Moral education class is required for all students by the centralized curriculum of moral education. The textbooks are made and provided exclusively by the Ministry of Education.

In primary schools (6 years), pupils are offered two moral education textbooks (a main textbook and a story book) every semester for 6 years. In Middle (3 years) and High (3 years) schools, all the students are provided one or three moral education textbooks every year.

Until the late 1980s, moral education was also required as a test of qualification for selecting not only governmental officials but also private companies' employees. At that time all the students going abroad for study had to pass a test of national ethics.

Moral education in Korea is guided by the legal document of national curriculum enacted by the central government (the Ministry of Education). In the curriculum, every aspect of moral education is specified in detail: the aims, objectives, teaching methods, contents (lists of virtues), evaluation, and allocation of time for every grade level and school.

The year of 1945 is considered as a watershed for dividing traditional (Confucian) and modern (western) moral education in

---

\*This article was presented at the 2nd International Conference on Moral Education at Kashiwa-shi, Chiba, Japan in August, 1995.

Korea (Moon, 1990). It was after 1945 that a westernized compulsory school system was established and moral education was taught nationwide with a clear intention of inculcating democratic ways of life; this was thought of at that time as an imperative for building up a new nation of the Republic of Korea. Thereafter, the main orientation and dominant values of moral education in Korea were western individualism and democratic rationality, although traditional and Confucian ethics were included in the textbook and taught as a part of it. Over fifty years from 1945 up to now, the moral education curriculum has been changed five times:

- (1) The 1st moral education curriculum (September 22, 1945)
  - The first modernized curriculum enacted under the military administration of USA
  - Focusing on civics
- (2) The 2nd moral education curriculum (April 20, 1954)
  - Just after Korean war
  - Focusing on anti-communist ethics and economic rehabilitation
  - Attempt to return to traditional values
- (3) The 3rd moral education curriculum (February 14, 1973)
  - Bolstering economic development
  - Emphasis on virtues leading to modernization
  - Focusing on the settlement of Korean style democracy
- (4) The 4th moral education curriculum (December 31, 1981)
  - Focusing on teaching-method improvement from "Bag of virtues" approach to Cognitive-developmental approach
  - Change of instructional practice from indoctrination to reasoning and discussion
- (5) The 5th moral education curriculum (June 30, 1987)
  - Emphasis on pluralistic way of life
  - Shift from anti-communism to unification and defense-oriented education
- (6) The 6th moral education curriculum (June 30, 1992)
  - Emphasis on communitarian ethics
  - Focusing on integrated activity of moral education among school subjects
  - Emphasis on "For unification" and "After unification" education

The latest curriculum is the 6th one but it is not yet activated in practice because the textbooks are not yet prepared. Therefore, the moral education in Korea still proceeds in the frame of the 5th curriculum. So my discussion hereafter will stay within the boundary of the 5th curriculum.

## II. Overview of Moral Education in Korea

This chapter will overview every feature of moral education now practised in Korea. Courses and their weight will be introduced first and followed by objectives and contents, and teaching method and evaluation.

### 1. Courses and Their Weight

#### 1) Primary School

- Course title: "Ethics"  
 Grade : 3rd - 6th grade  
 Class : 2 hours per week during 4 years  
 Weight : 3rd grade: 7% ( moral education/total class hours)  
           4th grade: 6.7% ( " )  
           5th grade: 6.7% ( " )  
           6th grade: 6% ( " )  
 Textbook : 2 books per semester for 4 years  
 Virtue : 26 virtues in 5 life areas  
         -personal  
         -family & neighborhood  
         -citizenship  
         -national  
         -unification & defense  
 Teacher : class teacher

#### 2) Middle School

- Course title: "Ethics"  
 Grade : 1st - 3rd grade  
 Class : 2 hours per week during 3 years  
 Weight : 6% (moral education/total class hours)  
 Textbook : one textbook per year for 3 years  
 Virtue : 15 issues in 5 life areas  
 Teacher : teacher with licence in moral education

## 3) High School

- Course title: "National ethics"  
 Grade : 1st - 3rd grade  
 Class : 1 hour per week during 3 years  
 Weight : 2.9% (moral education/total class hours)  
 Textbook : one textbook for 3 years  
 Virtue : 18 issues in 6 discussion themes  
 Teacher : teacher with license in moral education

## 2. Objectives and Contents

## 1) Primary School

## Objectives:

- formation of basic life habits
- internalization of basic virtues
- increasing moral reasoning ability

## Contents:

- area of personal life:  
joy & safety, faithfulness, respect for life, independence, thoughtfulness, temperance, will to practice
- area of family & neighborhood:  
etiquette, filial piety, tolerance, veneration, love of one's school & native land
- area of citizenship life:  
trust, law-abiding, respect for others, cooperation, public good, justice
- area of national life:  
love of nation & state, cooperation to national development, brotherly love and international friendship
- area of unification & defense:  
aspiration to unification, critical understanding of North Korea, awareness of division between south and north, spirit of national defense

## 2) Middle School

## Objectives:

- increasing moral judgement ability
- formation of autonomous morality

## Contents:

- area of personal life:
  - grade 1: What is moral?
  - grade 2: What is the value of life?
  - grade 3: How do we develop good character?
- area of family & neighborhood:
  - grade 1: What is the meaning of family to us?
  - grade 2: What is the meaning of neighborhood to us?
  - grade 3: What is the need of etiquette and manners?
- area of citizenship life:
  - grade 1: What are the desirable pictures of community life?
  - grade 2: What is a citizen like in a democratic society?
  - grade 3: What does it mean for a society to be just?
- area of national life:
  - grade 1: How am I related to our nation?
  - grade 2: What can we do for our country?
  - grade 3: How can we contribute to the well-being of mankind through making use of our national resources?
- area of unification and defense:
  - grade 1: What are the causes and effects of the nation's division into south and north?
  - grade 2: How and in what ways can we achieve the long-awaited unification?
  - grade 3: What are the problems and weaknesses of communist North Korea?

### 3) Senior High School

#### Objectives:

- formation of autonomous morality
- integration of personality

- formation of sound value system
- understanding of basic ethical theories

Contents:

- ethics in individual life
  - life and ethics
  - importance of adolescence
  - self-actualization
- stream of ethical thought
  - Oriental tradition
  - Western tradition
  - Korean tradition
- ethics in social setting
  - ethical situation in modern society
  - ethical practice in modern society
  - morality of personal and societal aspects
- ethics and national life
  - the nature of nations and states
  - ethics and national development
  - ethics and international relations
- Korea's unification and prosperity
  - process of nation's division
  - reality of communist North Korea
  - devotion to the unification

### 3. Teaching Method and Evaluation

Socratic method has been suggested and recommended for moral education classes in the textbook and the curriculum since the 4th curriculum of 1981. But there has been almost no change in practice. Direct teaching and memorization is still the popular method preferred by most teachers. Several explanations apply to this:

- 1) In Korean schools, the class size is comparatively big. Average classes are around 40 to 50 students. Therefore, most teachers have difficulties in discussing moral issues in class.
- 2) Less than half of moral education teachers have licenses specialized in the subject. Therefore, for the unlicensed teachers, moral discussion is not possible in reality.
- 3) The textbook is not relevant for facilitating moral

discussion. Although every effort has been made for textbooks to be easy for discussion, they are still irrelevant for discussion use.

- 4) The paper and pencil test is unavoidable because it is required to rank-order students for grading. Therefore, the best way for the students to get a higher score is to memorize the contents of the textbook rather than to get insight and internalize values through discussion and practical participation.

### **III. Problems of Moral Education in Korea**

Has moral education in Korea been successful over the last 50 years? Few people in Korea will answer the question affirmatively. In fact, many people complain that moral education through school has made no or very little contribution to the improvement of the moral situation in Korea.

This chapter will explore the reasons why the moral education has not been very successful.

#### **1. Problems within Moral Education**

##### **1) Problems in the Curriculum**

First, the curriculum of moral education generally lacks consistency. In some life areas, it emphasizes moral autonomy. But in some other life areas, it emphasizes the virtue of uniformity. Traditional Confucian values and western democratic values are mixed up and not balanced according to understandable principles. In a sense the curriculum is a hotchpotch. Some virtues are self-contradictory and incompatible. For example, filial piety is highly appreciated in the family life area but is also blamed for nepotism and ascriptiveness in the citizenship life area.

Second, the identity of moral education classes seems to be unclear. The content of moral education is also handled and taught in social studies and Korean language. For example, knowledge about North Korea, unification, citizenship and family ethics are the main topics and issues taught and discussed in social studies. It is ambiguous and unclear how the topics and issues are handled in a distinctive way compared with the

way in other subjects.

Third, the sequence of contents is also a problem. Students generally take moral education classes every semester over 12 years. It is desirable that the students learn moral education geared to their developmental needs and levels of primary, middle and high school. But what supports the sequentiality? What theory do we have? The virtues, moral issues, and discussion themes are arranged arbitrarily without any principles.

## 2) Problems in Textbooks and Instruction

First, all of the moral education textbooks are government-made. Therefore, all the students throughout the nation use the same textbooks. What are the good and bad sides of this? All the students having common moral messages may be good side. But the diversity of needs and situations may not be well taken into account in drafting moral messages.

One more problem of the government-made textbook is the tendency to over-reflection of pro-governmental moral messages. For example, military governments in the past always tried to indoctrinate students into accepting their political legitimacy.

Second, it is no easy task to write a textbook so as to lead moral education classes to be full of discussion and participation. Many attempts have been made to write textbooks focusing on discussion and participation, but they have usually turned out traditional direct teaching textbooks.

Third, teachers are not well prepared for moral discussion as intended in the curriculum. Fewer than 50% of the moral education teachers have a specialized license. Large class size and the paper and pencil-oriented test are also factors hampering good moral instruction.

## 2. Problems within Schools: Hidden Curriculum

The latent or hidden curriculum has emerged as a powerful concept to understand students' moral life in classrooms and schools since Jackson's book (1968) of "Life in the Classroom." What he claims in the book is that students get to know what and how to do with their peers primarily through a hidden curriculum which is not intended by teachers, textbooks, and the formal curriculum. The nature of a hidden curriculum in a



specific school can either harmonize or not with the general orientation of the formal curriculum. When the hidden curriculum runs counter to the formal curriculum, the formal curriculum's learning effect will decrease very much.

It was frequently found that the general nature of the hidden curriculum in Korean schools is in some sort delinquent, immoral, violent, cynical and full of abusive language (Kim, 1976, 1987). There are many students who believe school regulations are enforced in unfair ways. Many students have the experience that honest behavior and faithfulness to teachers are ridiculed by the peers. Although many students believe cheating is bad, they nevertheless used to cheat in many tests. Why did they? Since cheaters are seldom checked out and punished, non-cheaters feel suffered they have a loss.

The negative impact of the hidden curriculum seems to override the teaching effects of the formal curriculum of moral education. It is therefore needed to give more attention to the nature of the hidden curriculum residing in the schools.

#### **IV. Outlook for the Future**

Since Korean people have long cherished moral values and aspired to build up a moral society, it is therefore expected that the stress on moral education will remain stable in the future. In the 6th curriculum, moral education is continuously given heavy importance and reinforced so as to teach in close connection with other subject matter.

As a conclusion, a few tasks will be discussed concerning the improvement of moral education in Korea in the future.

(1) The ambiguity surrounding the identity of moral education should be removed. The role confusion of moral education has so discouraged moral education teachers that they are always uncertain to what extent they can intervene in students' moral life. Can any teachers teach moral education? Is no specialized expertise needed for teaching moral education? Is there no difference between social studies (civics) and moral education. If such questions are not answered properly and clearly, moral education will be heavily damaged.

(2) Moral education can not be done successfully if it confines its role within classrooms and schools. Moral education can be most effective when it is being done in close connection with family and community efforts. It is true that moral education in Korea has traditionally been so isolated from the reality of students' life that it was perceived as a job of preaching or admonition. Moral education teachers not only teach the students in the classroom but can also make good use of the potentiality of the family and community in which students live their actual life. Moral education teachers should go beyond classroom and school. They have to make most parents, community members and the social system work for to help the students grow up moral.

(3) The hidden curriculum should be improved. School itself must be a just community. But unfortunately the reality is far from it. The school environment is full of acute competition and jealousy. What is in most students' mind is to get better scores and go ahead of other classmates. So called "competitive goal-structures" are wide-spread in schools. Since college entrance is highly competitive, students can not help but adapt themselves to the circumstances. For moral education to be successful, it is needed to renovate or reform negative hidden curriculums into positive ones.

### References

- Jackson, P., 1968, *Life in the Classroom*, N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Kim, J.S., 1976, *Hidden Curriculum in Korean Schools*, Seoul: Ikmoon-Sa.
- Kim, J.S., 1987, *Theory and Practice of Hidden Curriculum*, Seoul: Kyoyuk Gwahak-Sa.
- Moon, Y.L., 1990, *The History of Moral Thoughts and Review of Moral Education in Korea*, Seoul: KEDI (The Korean Education Development Institute).