

The Korean Education System

From the Beginning to the Present

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Abstract

The foundation of Korean society is based on close family and national unity. And this unity was preserved, among other things, by the work invested in learning. After the Japanese oppression and the Korean War, the country needed stability and rapid reconstruction. The development of the education system was among the first, and today it already holds a leading role in the OECD rankings. In recent decades, numerous curriculum modifications have been implemented, and textbooks have been made digitally available, sparing no financial resources. However, the main aspect of history education has always remained one: preserving identity. To preserve it from the oppressor, to keep national values open to multiculturalism.

The study aims to show how all this can be supported by history education. In the light of national curricula, can a conservative education be realized that serves the survival of nations in a globalizing world with modern methodology and tools?

Keywords: South Korea; education; school, tradition; globalization; history didactics

Introduction

South Korea's education system is an exciting research topic in many ways. It has leapt the biggest of the "little tigers", and in the meantime, its modernized education system is rooted in the past. History education itself is particularly interesting. Let us think that in elementary school, children become acquainted with the origin myth of his people (Samguk Sagi, Samguk Jusa¹) almost at the same time as learning to read, and by the end of his secondary school studies, they are familiar with their national past and can position themselves in the world of the 21st century.

¹ The 12th-century Samguk Sagi records the history of the Three Kingdoms in classical Chinese, and the 13th-century Samguk Jusa also contains early Korean legends written in classical Chinese.

It is not an easy task for history teaching to cope with the fact that the borders of a nation do not always coincide with its political borders. It is through understanding and accepting this that the concept of the nation, and the nation itself, can survive the boundaries set by politics.

Historical roots of the education system

Before presenting the education system of the Republic of Korea (hereinafter South Korea), it is necessary to mention the informal environment of education and its role in society, the family. The role of the family in the life of the nation is still unusually strong for European eyes (respect for tradition, passing on customs, preserving and passing on national values regardless of social division). Today, the so-called strong family has developed. Its basis is thrift, hard work and appreciation of learning (Csáki, 2022). In Korean families, upbringing was initially closely intertwined with education. Buddhism, then Confucianism, and Christianity had a strong influence on this family bond.

From the beginning to 1897

The oldest educational institution in Korea was the Confucian-inspired Tehak, established in the Goguryeo Kingdom. The purpose of education here was to train officials (Jong, Lee, 2018).

The education of boys and girls was separate from the beginning. Until the 16th century, girls were educated at home, and only those who studied to read sacred texts in Buddhist monasteries went to school. The most important curriculum for girls was household management and the management of servants. Thus, their curriculum primarily concerned cooking, making the family's clothing, and they also learned to play the musical instruments of the time. Naturally, they became obedient and loyal wives.

In noble yangban families, the father or the older brother was responsible for teaching girls to read and write in classical Chinese characters (hanja) until the 15th century, and then did so in the newly created Korean alphabet (hangul²) from the 15th century. The main purpose of their teaching was to teach them to read and apply religious texts in practice, as well as to learn correspondence and poetry (Deuchler, 1992).

² It The alphabet of the Korean language, the creation of which is attributed to King Sejong the Great in the 1440s.

Boys could study in a three-tiered school system during the Goryeo (918–1392) and Joseon periods (1392–1897). At the lowest level, all social classes could attend the village school (sodang) for free. Education took place in the teacher’s house or in a small local building. Here, students could acquire the basics of literacy, which, in addition to reading and writing, also included learning Chinese characters and basic Confucian works. They concluded their studies with a local preliminary examination, which was held annually, and most of them passed it. However, completing the school was not enough to take the civil service exam, the gwageo (Cho, 2014).

After passing the exam, they could continue their studies at the state-run Confucian-oriented schools, the hyanggyo. A teacher’s recommendation was also required for enrolment. Due to their social status, this school was primarily chosen by those of noble, yangban origin. Family support was essential for this, as tuition fee fell on them. Therefore, the talented, but poorer yangban did not receive an education appropriate to their social status.

These schools operated throughout the country, there were a total of 107 institutions. The main goal of students here was to pass the exam, which would allow them to enter the sahak.

The sahak was a private school in the capital, Hanseong later known as Seoul, where the most talented yangbans studied. The students prepared directly for the civic service exam.

This often meant that the family also moved to the capital, so only the wealthiest could afford it. The civil service exam was held in the royal palace, which was formally attended by the king himself. The exam consisted of two parts, an oral and a written part. The latter was a political essay, which still serves as an important source of Korean history today. The questions were related to political and social problems that concerned the leadership of the time. Importantly, the candidates were expected to propose solutions to the problems based on Confucian principles (Seth, 2010).³ This form of problem-solving has become a fundamental element of Korean education, and its success is still reflected in OECD surveys today (OECD, 2024).

³ The examination system, introduced in the 10th century, enjoyed its heyday in the 15th-17th centuries. The position of a civil servant was exclusively accessible through it. It then lost its power by the 18th-19th centuries, and was finally abolished in 1894 with the Gabo reforms.

The emergence of private schools

A new phase of Korean education began in the 16th century with the emergence of private schools, the seowon. These schools provided ample opportunity for teaching ethics through Confucian readings. The institutions served a dual function, as they also served as memorial sites. These were dedicated to the spirit of a former scholar or a deeply respected official (Teekah, 2024). It follows that sacrifices were also regularly offered. Therefore, it is clear that the importance of expressing faith and respect, which is not only tested during studies, but also practiced, appears in this educational system. This was accompanied by a moral commitment, which meant an unspoken vow. They were loyal to their ruler and teacher, respectful of their parents and ancestors (the effect of this is still reflected in the teacher-student relationship, in mutual respect, see Tallis, 2018), and tried to live their lives during and after their studies according to the ideals of moderation, honesty, and strict self-discipline. To keep an example to follow in mind, these words were also posted on the school wall.⁴

The emergence of Christianity

A new stage in the development of Korean education lasted from the emergence of Christianity (from the second half of the 16th century) to the beginning of the Japanese occupation (1910). In 1614, the encyclopaedic work of the Korean diplomat Yi Su-gwang (1563-1628), the *Jibong Yuseol* was published, in which Christianity was first mentioned.

With the arrival of Christian missionaries, the spread of religion also led to the emergence of Christian education.⁵ Christianity, in advocating for equality, extended it to the realm of education, making it accessible to all. In contrast, according to Confucian views, learning was tied to rank, a privilege of the ruling class. As a result of the inevitable religious confrontations, the practice of Christianity was banned in 1795. Thus, the following century was characterized by the persecution of Christians, which claimed thousands of victims. The ban was only lifted in 1896 (Lee, 1999).

During the persecution and ban, missionaries risked their lives to establish secret Bible schools and hold Bible classes. In 1886, the ban was lifted, as a Protestant missionary nun, the American Mary. F. Scranton, founded a school for girls in Seoul, named Ewa

⁴ More information about the education system can be found on the UNESCO World Heritage Site. https://en.k-seowon.or.kr/?utm_.com last downloaded: 2025. 07. 29.

⁵ In his work, Yi Su-gwang also analyzed the works of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), a Jesuit missionary of Italian origin who served mainly in China.

Haktang.⁶ The institution was a modern girls' school in its time, because in addition to the traditionally taught Korean language, history, music, needlework and etiquette, two new and optional subjects were offered: mathematics and English. The school's ethos was based on Christian values, and the girls' school could operate without class distinctions. However, wider social acceptance was hampered by the fact that the acquisition of traditional female tasks were expanded to include so-called "boys'" subjects. The founder accepted that society still believed that the main task of girls was to marry and maintain a harmonious family home. However, she also insisted on modern education by introducing new subjects. This made it possible for this first educated generation to become qualified midwives, doctors, housekeepers, teachers and lecturers (Ewha Womens University Archives, 2005).

The Japanese occupation (1910-1945)

Ewa Haktang survived and expanded during the turbulent decade of history. From 1914, it also operated a kindergarten. It not only accepted more and more students, but also continuously modified and modernized its education. Thus, education during the Japanese occupation reached the level of a college. During the transitional period, in 1946, the college was granted university status. As a result, in the second half of the 20th century, under the changed political and economic circumstances, several elementary and high schools were founded in accordance with its spirit (Ewha Womens University, 2025).⁷

During the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), Korean education underwent a major change, which included the mandatory study of Japanese culture and language. Korean was initially allowed as a separate subject, but was then completely banned, as well as the use of the Korean flag and national symbols was also prohibited. The intention was to suppress Korean identity. This also applied to the use of the Japanese equivalent of personal names.

The colonial period also affected history education: the teaching of Korean history and literature was banned. Instead, the teaching of Japanese history and the imperial period, in which Korea was already part of Japan, was made mandatory (Muraközy, 2020).

⁶ The name Ewha, meaning pear blossom, was bestowed upon the school by King Gojong (1864-1897), recognizing the institution's work and symbolizing the purity and beauty of girls.

⁷ Ewha Womens University, Founding Spirit & History <https://www.ewha.ac.kr/ewhaen/intro/foundation.do#menu> last downloaded: 2025. 07. 29.

During the Japanese occupation, compulsory schooling for Koreans lasted until the age of 12. The main goal was industrial labour training. Therefore, the level of education in Korean schools was low. Only privileged Korean children could attend Japanese schools, so only they had the opportunity to complete secondary and higher education.

The Transitional Period (1945-1953)

During World War II, the role of education occupied a special place in the history of Korea, as its development did not stop even during the war. The so-called War Educational Needs Act allowed for certain curriculum reforms, and an attempt was made to standardize high school entrance exams (Csáki, 2022).

This practically laid the foundation for the tasks of the transitional period that led from the armistice to the founding of the Republic of South Korea (1948). After 1945, the modernization process was launched that went hand in hand with political, social, and economic transformation. This period of quantitative (increase in the number of schools) and qualitative (modernization of teacher training) expansion was stopped by the outbreak of the Korean War.

In summary, it can be stated that education in the Republic of South Korea grew out of Confucian principles and the principle of Christian equality. This is what the centralized educational management, school structure, mandatory curriculum, and related textbooks are based on. At the same time, the government, in addition to state education management, maintains the diversity of school providers (state, private, church, auxiliary private), and the possibility of multi-tiered financing (budgetary support, regional revenues, tuition fees).

Changes in national curricula

With the end of World War II, Japanese colonial rule ended, but until the peace negotiations, Soviet military occupation remained in the North and American in the South. Reestablishment made it possible to gradually remove pro-Japanese politicians, teachers, and textbooks. Politically, the way was clear for the redesign of national education. The goal was to build university undergraduate programs on modernized educational foundations. All this in a way that would make the opportunity to learn accessible to all Korean citizens.

The Ministry of Education, established in 1948, brought the first major change with the Education Act of 1951. This became the cornerstone of modern Korean education. The school system that is still in force today was finalized based on the Japanese model (Muraközy, 2020, 185), a 6-3-3-4 school structure (elementary school – lower secondary school – upper secondary school – university). The law made it mandatory to complete 6 grades, thus establishing the compulsory school age inherited from the Japanese. It also regulated teacher training and strengthened and further developed the operating framework of state, municipal and private schools. Although schooling was now free in principle, parents still had to provide the necessary equipment for learning. In 1945, only 22% of South Korean society could read and write, and only 2% of them studied further. During this period, distance learning and correspondence education were established at secondary and university levels in accordance with the need (Csáki, 2022).

In 1955, content regulation took place with the publication and mandatory nature of the first national curriculum (NCICESK, 2021). Secondary school history education was given a central place in the curriculum.

Development was already noticeable from the 1960s. The number of primary schools increased by one and a half times in 15 years, as a result of compulsory education, the number of students increased by more than two and a half times, and that of teachers tripled. However, the rapid growth resulted in high class sizes, a lack of well-equipped schools and well-trained teachers. Thus, strong competition developed for access to secondary school (Csáki, 2022). In 1960, the ‘two-year training’ for primary school teachers was established at university level, followed by the training of high school teachers in 1962 (Park, 2019). A regional school inspectorate system was organized. Its task was to supervise the content and methodology of teacher work (Choi-Park, 2016). In 1963, the second revision of the national curriculum resolved the control and supervision of experience-based education.

The mottos of the 1960s and 1970s, “*Education for economic development*” and “*Education that advances modernization*,” adequately reflected the idea what the government expected from education in the long term. Education was evaluated as a long-term investment for post-war construction and intellectual growth. The country needed well-educated people to advance economically and achieve technological progress (Cho, 2024). At that time, in 1974, the national curriculum was revised for the third time.

1963-1979 was a period during which the emphasis in the curriculum shifted towards preserving and maintaining national discipline and unity. Within this, history teaching itself was given a prominent role. Special attention was paid to state supervision of the content of textbooks.

At that time, universities still organized their own entrance exams, and history appeared as an elective subject. This was primarily the case for teacher training and humanities faculties (Choi-Park, 2013). Between 1971 and 1973, the “lottery system” applicable to all types of schools was gradually abolished (Seth, 2002).⁸

The 1980s were already marked by quality education. Modern technical equipment was introduced, and a separate TV network was built to serve the distance education system. To operate it and cover the costs of further planned reforms, they were forced to introduce an education tax. Thus, 17% of the national budget was spent on education. Coeducational education was introduced in early 1980 (Csáki, 2022).⁹ From 1981, university education was increased from two to four years (Park, 2019). In 1982, the Social Education Act was adopted, which strengthened lifelong learning.¹⁰ This made it possible to introduce continuous further training, which brought rapidly changing developments into the lives of all employees. This affected skilled workers, employees with secondary education, and university graduates. The goal was to educate responsible, conscious and useful citizens. In 1985, a law regulated that compulsory education is the completion of primary school (6 years) and lower secondary school (3 years), so the compulsory age is 15 years of age (Mani, 2018).

In 1987, the curriculum was revised again, paying special attention to emphasizing the national spirit, and scientific and artistic secondary schools were launched.

Several legislative amendments were made in the 1990s. In 1997, the seventh curriculum amendment was adopted. This is of particular importance. The comprehensive examination affected the kindergarten, primary, secondary and vocational secondary school curricula. In this version, they sought to partially break with the previous methodological aspects and tried to prioritize new challenges. The curriculum thus became competency-based. This was intended to emphasize the importance of a student-orient-

⁸ A provision introduced to reduce competition between schools, so students were randomly assigned to secondary schools, rather than based on their performance.

⁹ This was a departure from the established form of education. This explains why in 1996 only 5% of high school students attended such an educational institution.

¹⁰ „Lifelong education”.

ed education system that considers individual talent, aptitude and creativity. In the 11th and 12th grades, students could choose the subjects they saw as the foundation for the success of their future plans (NCICESK, 2021). This placed the emphasis on a competency-based methodology. During the 2009 curriculum review, there was a change in the distribution of hours, and history was now an independent, but still optional, subject. The structural framework was unified in terms of the number of hours and thematic units (KICE, 2011).

In the last two curriculum changes (2015, 2022), the subject of history was given a special role: knowledge-based education appeared, emphasizing creative and competence-oriented thinking (Cho - Huh 2015), and in addition to the importance of national identity, the need for a more factual representation of history also appeared.

General description of the education system

The public education system in South Korea consists of three main cycles. Primary education lasts for six years, followed by a three-year lower secondary school, and ends with a three-year upper secondary school (Molnár, 2014).

Children start primary school at the age of 6. Here they learn the most basic knowledge from the main subjects: moral education, Korean language, English language, social studies, mathematics, natural sciences, physical education, music, and art.¹¹ Private and international schools may also offer additional subjects.

In the first two years, a teacher, who is also the class teacher, teaches Korean and mathematics, as well as the three subjects (“Good Life”, “Wise Life”, “Happy Life”) that develop study skills, creativity and problem-solving (NCCE, 2022). From the third grade, specialized subjects are taught by specialized teachers (e.g. foreign languages, arts, and sciences).

In 2022, according to the ministry, there were 6,163 elementary schools, 73 of which were private elementary schools (Ministry of Education, 2023). Parents can choose between public and private schools (Ministry of Education, 2023). The minimum number of teaching days per year in middle school is 220.

In 2022, the enrolment rate in grades 7-9 was 98.2%. In this stage of life, the government placed greater emphasis on education, because identity formation is a signif-

¹¹ In this, traces of early teaching can be recognized.

icant part of education here. At that time, the number of main subjects expanded, and history also appeared independently in the curriculum. In the 9th grade, they have to decide what kind of secondary school they will continue their studies in (state or private, church-run or non-Korean-run; general, vocational, or special school) (Varga, 2014). This decision is helped by the fact that students have already discovered their own abilities, as they have learned to collect information, organize it, solve project tasks independently, not only to work in a community, to take responsibility for their decisions and to be able to choose, for example, to get to know a topic from history in more detail. In addition to the compulsory subjects, they also study elective subjects, in order to successfully continue their studies later (e.g. robotics, a second foreign language).

Students in lower secondary school have two exams per academic year, one at the end of the semester and one at the end of the year. The exam results are decisive for applying to upper secondary school.¹²

In 2022, 94.5% of students enrolled in upper secondary school. This is broken down by the number of students who chose which type of school to attend, such as regular high schools, vocational high schools, autonomous high schools, special-purpose high schools. This stage is no longer mandatory, but the government is trying to financially support students and their families so that as many people as possible can choose this level. From the second semester of the 2019/2020 academic year, the last year is free, and from 2021, the entire training period, the 3 years, is tuition-free (Ministry of Education, 2023). Despite making high school graduation free, South Korean parents still spend significant amounts on their children's education, at 15% of their gross national product (Dalporto, 2013). As a result of the tuition exemption, the higher education enrolment rate reached 73.3% in 2022, the highest in the world (Ministry of Education, 2023).

There are two types of preparatory schools, hagwons¹³ (4 p.m. to 10 p.m.) (Korea Times, 2009), one for catch-up and one for the CSAT (College Scholastic Ability Test). The school management often employs foreign teachers, especially language teachers, to ensure quality education. The prep schools are mostly private schools from the point of view of the maintainer, and a small number of them are state-owned. This means that

¹² Compulsory subjects: Korean language, mathematics, English language, science, history.

¹³ A South Korean private educational institution. After compulsory school, parents send their children to a private tutor. You can choose between individual and group lessons.

the financial situation of the students significantly influences the number of students.¹⁴ Yet, it has grown into an “industry,” so to speak (Gordon Győri, 2020).

This also affects the teaching of history, which is permeated by the curriculum in all grades with narratives about strengthening their sense of national identity. The events of Korean history are studied in chronological order, while world history is also learned chronologically, but grouped into topics (ancient civilizations, medieval society, events of the 20th century).

The inclusive attitude in the curriculum is reflected in the appearance of respect for diversity. This is a requirement both in theory and in practice. It is hoped that through history, different cultures can be learned, which can also have an impact on today’s events. Therefore, for example, knowledge of ancient civilizations is necessary (History Curriculum, 2022).

Funding, maintenance of schools

The Ministry of Education operates on the basis of centralized education management. The ministry is supported by a 100-member Policy Advisory Board. The board’s task is to analyse educational policy changes in the world and, through this, to help continuously improve the state of education. The ministry is responsible for operating the primary and secondary school system through the regional Education Office, developing national curricula, registering related textbooks, approving private textbooks, and publishing textbooks.¹⁵

17 regional Education Offices operate the school system. The offices are responsible for the budget and control of schools. This task can only be performed by an official who has 3 years of professional experience or has already worked in education administration. All schools under the authority have a school council, the operation of which is regulated by elaborate rules. 50% of the council members must have at least 10 years of teaching experience. Parents can also be members of the council and participate in decisions affecting the life of the school (NCCE, 2022).

¹⁴ Parents, if they can, prefer to take on extra jobs or the father goes abroad to work and then moves back home after the child finishes school. This also places a great emotional and physical burden on families (Lee, 2014).

¹⁵ The Ministry of Health and Welfare works with the Ministry of Education for children under 5 years of age.

In 2022, there were 2,625 secondary schools, of which 633 were private schools. The state finances 75% of the budget of public schools. The remaining 25% is made up of two parts: regional funds and non-compulsory upper secondary school tuition fees. At the same time, the government has set a goal of making all secondary education free (textbooks and tuition fees).

Private schools are also financed in two parts: they receive state subsidies, so they cannot charge tuition fees for compulsory education, and in upper secondary school, tuition fees cannot exceed those of public schools (Ministry of Education, 2023).

There is a significant difference in the employment method between public and private schools in terms of teacher recruitment. Public school teachers are recruited by the ministry and are mandatorily transferred from one school to another every 4-6 years. In private schools, the institution concludes an employment contract with the teachers for an indefinite period. Thus, private school teachers are exempt from rotation, which means stability for both the teacher and the student (Law Viewer, 2019).

Private schools include church-run schools, so their budgets and teacher recruitment are similar. The national curriculum is mandatory in all school types, regardless of the maintainer. The only exception to this is foreign-founded schools. They may deviate from the national curriculum, charge higher tuition fees, but they do not receive any state support.

Dilemmas of Korean Education

In the Light of PISA Surveys

South Korea joined the OECD in 1996, and the first PISA survey was published in 2000. Based on this, it can be seen that South Korea produced outstanding results already in the first survey. Compared to the OECD average of 500 points, it was in 1st place in science with 552 points, in 3rd place in mathematics with 547 points, and in 6th place in reading with 525 points. (Figure 1).

690,000 students from 81 countries participated in the survey conducted in 2022. In South Korea, 100% of 15-year-olds, 428,000 people, were represented by 6,454 students selected from 186 schools (OECD-Korea, 2024, 9).

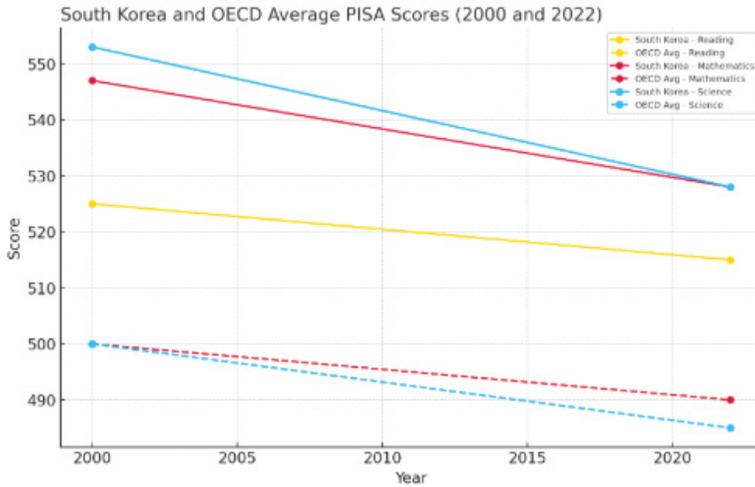


Figure 1: Average PISA scores between 2000 and 2022

For comparison, based on the OECD results known since 2000, a slow decline can be seen in the case of all three subjects, although the OECD shows above-average performance. The students finished 5th in science with 528 points, 6th in math with 527 points, and 4th in reading with 515 points.

Subject	OECD average scores	South Korean students score	Ranking
Science	485	528	5.
Mathematics	472	527	6.
Reading	476	515	4.

Table 1: South Korean students' performance in the PISA survey in 2022

One of the dilemmas is that students' reading skills are deteriorating, because in 2000 they finished in 6th place (with 525 points compared to the OECD average of 500 points), and in 2022 they finished in 4th place with 515 points. The big question is how to create a balance between traditional textbook use and creative thinking. From this perspective, it is worrying that while students' reading skills have deteriorated compared to themselves, they have still advanced in international comparison. In 2022, the creative thinking skills of 15-year-olds were measured for the first time, which helps

them navigate the rapidly changing world and adapt to the challenges of the age. These skills, in turn, require quick, logical and creative insights (for more see Table 1).

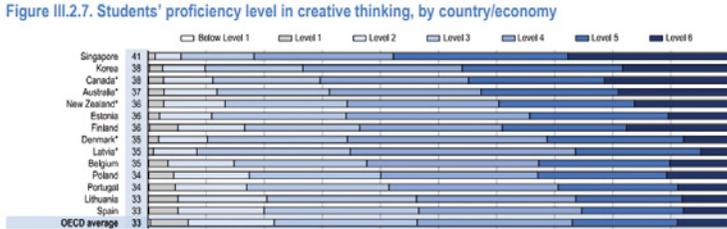


Table 2. Level of creative thinking proficiency among countries performing above the OECD average

The proportion of top-performing students in South Korea is exceptionally high, at 45%. This result has only been achieved by Canada, and only Singapore has surpassed it with 58%. Based on scientific problems and social issues, students are able to draw new conclusions from the data and sources they have learned, evaluate them and, if necessary, develop them further. They receive help from the education government by introducing the exam-free semester from 2016. This has allowed room for project work and the development of creative thinking (OECD, 2024, 91-93, table 2).

Changing composition of society

The emergence of multiculturalism in education is a serious problem. South Korea was a homogeneous nation-state for a long time. However, since 1980, this situation has changed, with more and more people settling in the country.¹⁶ This naturally results in mixed marriages becoming multicultural families, and children born in this way often encounter disadvantages that are difficult to overcome in many respects. This can even have an impact on later employment through social integration.

Examining the demographic data of Korean society, it is clear that the society is aging. Every third teacher is 50 years old or older, and therefore Korea may face a shortage of teaching careers. At the same time, due to the decreasing number of children, fewer

¹⁶ By 2019, before the pandemic, nearly 5% of the population, that is, 2.5 million people, were foreigners. The settlement process accelerated after the pandemic: according to the latest figures for this year (June 2025), 2.73 million, or 5.28% of the population, are foreigners (Choi, 2025). Based on this, every twentieth person in the country is a foreigner. The most common settlement permit can be obtained for two reasons: through marriage and through investments by high-income earners (HanGuk Visa, 2025). Another important condition is an official language exam certificate from the TOPIK language exam center.

teachers may be needed in education. However, the change in the number of children born in mixed marriages is fundamentally influenced by the fact that children born in mixed marriages reach compulsory school age. Therefore, it is important to assess the social status of teachers.¹⁷ The emergence of multiculturalism therefore also poses a new challenge in teacher training.

In teacher training, the quantity and quality of the curriculum, and its structure, special attention should be paid to social studies and history teaching. This is already evident, as “respect for diversity and inclusiveness” has been included in the curriculum. This is why in 2006, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD) announced the Educational Support Plan for Children from Multicultural Backgrounds (ESP) (Lee, 2013). In recent years, there has been a continuous need for measures that consider both teachers and students from mixed families.¹⁸

Overcrowding is a serious dilemma for public education as a whole. Private after-school tutoring and exam preparation schools, known as hagwons, play a prominent role in this. International surveys prove that the number of hours spent studying is far higher than average.

Dilemmas of History Teaching

In South Korea, history is one of the most important subjects. From the beginning of the Korean history, great emphasis was placed on introducing the events of the past for students. Through this, it gives the individual a compass to find his place in the world, to form a group, to develop a sense of belonging to the community,¹⁹ and a national consciousness. It is therefore necessary for the student to know the language, culture, and civilization of his country well, and thus to be able to contribute to its rational development as an adult.

¹⁷ However, it is encouraging that 67% of teachers agree or strongly agree with the statement that changes are needed and that society values their work. Therefore, the number of teachers leaving the profession is very low (Talis, 2018), which also contributes to the attractiveness of the teaching profession for young people.

¹⁸ The curriculum was then revised to take this into account. In recent years, the number of students from mixed families has continued to increase, from 46,000 in 2012 to 160,000 in 2021. Since immigrant children are subject to the same expectations as Korean children, they have more difficulty meeting them (Van den Broeck–Demanet k–Van Houtte, 2015), and their chances of continuing their education are also lower. The role of teachers is important in how they can involve students in the classroom community and provide support in learning, primarily in learning the Korean language (Kim, E., 2024, 1-14).

¹⁹ Jörg Rüsen (Kaposi, 2014, 13)

History teaching indirectly provides a curriculum for civic education, and therefore serves to educate for civic responsibility. This also justifies its being taught together with the teaching of natural sciences, arts, and mathematics (Tate, 2023). This gives it its “usefulness”, which is often questioned by society and sometimes even politics itself these days.

History teaching is actually a special dialogue with the past. It follows from the nature of this dialogue that the importance of contact lessons cannot be reduced by the emergence of digital teaching tools. However, in addition to the continuous renewal of teacher training, it is necessary to preserve and apply traditional and well-established didactic elements so that the need to learn about “the beautiful, the good and the truth” (Tate, 2023) becomes a lifelong need for all students.

One of the pillars of modern history teaching is the transformation of the results of historical science into teaching materials and textbook sections, which is also a serious moral challenge. This is where the dilemmas that are rooted in the specific geopolitical situation of the Korean nation arise (the relationship between China and Korea in the early Middle Ages, Japanese colonization and its consequences – the situation of comfort women and compensation, the Japanese Shinto shrine–) (Lyu, 2017).

Another dilemma is the teaching of the life and development of a nation in two states (ancient origin stories, the Korean War). A special and unique problem of this is the specific situation of dissident children, who have already learned about national history, but not from a South Korean perspective. An example of the search for a solution in educational guidance is the program developed for the education of children of dissidents, which is implemented at Hangyeore High School within the framework of a special curriculum program (Chai, Hyun Jin (Hangyeore High School)).

Another dilemma in history teaching has emerged from the nation-state becoming a host state in the education of immigrant children. For this conscious education of citizens, it is essential to develop a position/curriculum that is acceptable to both parties between national identity and multiculturalism. This was helped by the adoption of the Educational Support Plan for Children with Multicultural Backgrounds (ESP).

In Korean history education, precisely in the interests of the above solutions, a new challenge is to establish the proportions of national and world history in a way that simultaneously educates children of native and immigrant parents to have a strong national consciousness and civic responsibility (national history, world history; multicultur-

alism, ethnopluralism). All of this leads to an ever-current question: is a mandatory final exam necessary for history teaching? Under the current circumstances, it seems that politics, education management, and society have reached an agreement, because they have gone from not being necessary through optionality to accepting a mandatory final exam (Shin, 2018).

The goal of history teaching is to prepare students (conservative)/help them prepare (competence-based) for civic responsibility. I find the formulation of the purpose of history teaching, and within and apart from this, Korean history teaching, best captured by a quote from a renowned Hungarian historian József Kaposi: “Studying history delights the senses, excites the imagination, embellishes and expands culture, enriches the language, sharpens judgment about things, and imperceptibly develops intelligence.” (Kaposi, 2022, 5). Jörn Rüsen, a well-known German historian adds: “The purpose of history education is not only to explain the world, but also to give individuals and groups a framework to find their place in this world.” According to Rüsen (Kaposi, 2014, 13)

Curricular Position of history teaching

The teaching and learning of history is practically as old as the establishment of school. It has retained its role in identity formation. This role has sometimes been strengthened, sometimes weakened, and largely depended on its relationship to political power (Muraközy, 2020). Therefore, it is understandable that during the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), the role of Korean history teaching increased – it would have if the colonialist had allowed it. It banned it or shaped it according to its own interests. In the so-called transitional period (1945-1953), history teaching had to be freed from all these problems and placed on new foundations. From 1953 by 2022, the Korean society reached the point where the current situation of history teaching was formed through multiple curriculum changes. The continuous monitoring and development of curricula has made it possible to align the challenges of the age with the knowledge to be acquired, thus reflecting the most modern spirit (Csáki, 2022).

History is a state-mandated subject, and is therefore mandatory in all types of schools and subject to examinations according to age.

In the first six years of primary school, history is not an independent subject, but appears integrated into social studies. Through the most basic concepts – family,

old and new stories – through simple historical personal names and processes, they reach the chronology and the basic elements of history. In grades 5-6, they learn from ancient times (e.g. the Three Kingdoms) to the events of the 20th century (e.g. the Japanese occupation, the Korean War) and then about the changes in economic (industrialization alongside agriculture) and social processes of the 20th century.

Various teaching methods are implemented. Storytelling is used through the lives of famous historical figures, events are systematized by creating a timeline, and teaching is made lifelike with the use of external history lessons. In parallel, the role of the use of images, diagrams, and animations increases. By combining these with movies, the emphasis is placed on visuality. In accordance with age, the development of family, community, and national self-awareness is emphasized, as well as the introduction of culture, thus developing problem-solving skills. The first six years do not end with an oral exam, but with a written assessment based on teacher observation.

In lower secondary school, the national core curriculum groups the main topics as follows.

1st diagram - topics and themes of history education in Korean lower secondary schools

World History	Korean History
The emergence of civilization and the formation of the ancient world	The formation and development of a nation-state
The spread of world religions and the development of local cultures	Unified Silla and Baekje
Interaction and change in the regional world	The formation and development of Korjo
Imperialism and the movement to build the nation-state	The founding and development of Joseon
World Wars and Social Changes	Changes in Joseon society
Developments and challenges of the modern world	Transition to modern society

The curriculum then provides guidance for each sub-topic, highlighting their main units, but does not list concepts, names, or dates separately (Korean History Curriculum,

2022). This regulation is centralized by the state, which cannot be deviated from at the local level.

In lower secondary school (grades 7-9), history is taught in chronological order from the beginning to the 20th century. The emphasis of the cycle is on identity building to introduce, understand, and master what it means to be Korean. Who, when, and how people fought for the nation's independence, how the Korean nation-state is built and developed.

Based on the curriculum structure, Korean history in grade 7 covers the curriculum from the formation of the nation-state, then from the Three Kingdoms (18 BC) to the end of the Koryo period (1392). In world history, ancient civilizations (Egypt, China, India) are presented.

In 8th grade, Korean history begins with the Joseon Dynasty, with a special focus on the relationship between King Sejong and science and culture. This is presented in a separate lesson. This period ends with the threat of Japanese conquest (1897). World history begins with an introduction to ancient Greece and Rome, which is concluded by an introduction to medieval societies and trade routes.

In 9th grade, Japanese colonization is the first unit, followed by independence movements, then the Korean War and modern South Korean development are included as units of national history. World history is built up from the major events of the modern world, the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War, the North-South conflict and the units of globalization.

In upper middle school (grades 10-12, the last 3 years of middle school), events are studied in more detail from the Korean War until the establishment of modern Korean statehood. The curriculum consists of 6 major units: Japanese colonization, the Korean War, the Lee Sin-man regime, learning about the concept of "liberal democracy", and the Jeju 4.3 uprising, which presents the events most accurately since the last curriculum amendment, is also included. Thus, the material concludes with the history of the Modern Republic, the problem of comfort women, and an account of Japanese war crimes (Kim, H, 2024).

World history is optional and not offered in all schools. At this time, the emphasis is on World War II, including Japan's participation in the Pacific arena, while European events are included as a general overview.

In addition to patriotic education, the curriculum also provides opportunities to learn about international relations. The greatest emphasis is placed on the 19th-20th centu-

ries. Competency-based education appears in the form of tasks such as debates, project assignments, and source analysis. The processing of the curriculum is also facilitated by ready-made lesson plans (Korea Society, 2025). In this way, public education aims to ensure that Koreans become healthy, independent, creative and moral individuals (Csáki, 2022).

History has been mandatory for all students in upper secondary school since 2013 and 2017²⁰, respectively, and has become also part of the College Academic Aptitude Test, CSAT. Successful completion of this exam is the basic requirement for university studies. Students can gain admission to university after successful completion of this exam.

Special schools are attended by students with special needs who do not plan to pursue higher education, thus preparing them for the labour market. The basic events of history (e.g. early Korean state formations, the Goryeo and Joseon periods, the Japanese occupation period, the history of modern Korea) are still taught, only in a simpler formulation, and in fewer lessons. In vocational schools, the “Reform Plan for the Vocational Education System Vision 2020: Vocational Education for All” adopted in 2005 set the goal of having a better educated workforce than before. It adjusted the curriculum to this end, making world history optional. Therefore, in addition to the vocational subjects, general subjects remained compulsory, including history (Varga 2014). Here too, the emphasis was on 20th-century Korean history (Japanese occupation, Korean War, modern development, democratization).

Examination in History

The Centrally Organized High School Diploma Examination (CSAT, Korean: 수능, Suneung) is a written exam for all subjects.²¹ The exam duration for history is 30 minutes. During this time, 20 questions must be answered. A maximum of 50 exam points can be achieved (KICE–Suneung, 2025). Due to the type of exam, open-ended questions and essays are not included.

In terms of content, 10% of the exam concerns ancient civilizations, 30% covers the Goryeo (10th–14th century) and Joseon periods (15th–20th century) along with Confucianism, 20% is about the period of Japanese occupation, 30% is about the Korean War,

²⁰ The first draft of the introduction of history as a compulsory exam subject was published during the administration of Park Geun-hye, which was confirmed by Moon Jae-in in 2017.

²¹ The exam subjects are: Korean language, mathematics, English, history, second foreign language.

in which it examines the Cold War context, and 10% presents and analyses the last decades of the 20th century and modern democratization.

In recent decades, the esteem of the history subject has decreased. In 1994, history was still an optional subject in the high school leaving exam, and then in 2006, due to low interest fewer people chose it, the subject disappeared from the compulsory elective list. This step meant a rapid decline in students' awareness of history, which also affected their national identity. Therefore, in 2009, as a first step, it was made optional again, and then, when the 2015 national curriculum was revised, it was made a compulsory subject again, and it was introduced as such from 2017 (Ministry of Education, 2013). This was an attempt to change the low level of historical knowledge and the weakened sense of identity. In addition, the possibility remained that history could be studied at a higher level within the framework of the faculty.

Civic Education

Civic education belongs to the social studies subject field in terms of content and methodology. Accordingly, it appears as a separate, non-compulsory, freely elective exam subject in the CSAT. Separated from history, but building on what has been learned from history, forming 9 different blocks (Everyday Life and Ethics, Ethics and Philosophy, Korean Geography, World Geography, East Asian History, World History, Law and Politics, Economics, Society and Culture).

In South Korea, citizenship education is taught in elementary school, in ethics, history and social studies, but it does not appear as a separate subject, nor does it in middle school. It is taught only in high school, where the curriculum is based on these elements for 3 years. There is overlap between history and geography, the latter of which is also part of citizenship education, but they form a unit in the curriculum.

The most important goal is to develop students' active interest in social issues. In this way, they should strengthen their sense of belonging to the community, nation and world, and "cultivate" their sense of citizenship. They should know and understand the concepts of politics, democracy and forms of government. To do this, they need to get to know political actors, the meaning and authority of the political statuses they hold. The aim of this is to participate responsibly in elections as citizens. At the same time, it is also necessary to get to know international networks. Students get to know the actors

in the countries involved in certain conflicts. With their knowledge, they can conduct research in the process of deepening their knowledge, analyse the materials they find, and, evaluating these together, ask each other questions. The value of the curriculum is that subtopics are also listed. This makes it visible what previous materials the new knowledge is based on (Social Studies Curriculum, 2022). The conscious use of media also appears as a requirement in the curriculum. However, this does not apply to the development of digital technology or digital skills, because their conscious use is included in the IT curriculum.

Conclusion

In summary, the South Korean education system has deep historical roots. Starting from the family, through public, private, and then church schools, education has become accessible to everyone over the centuries. The first centralised national curriculum published in 1955 standardized expectations in all school types. Then, a law passed in 1985 established the mandatory completion of 9 grades, thus encouraging families to complete as much schooling as possible in order to become useful citizens of the country.

The most recent history curriculum amendment, adopted in 2022, introduced the importance of strengthening national identity, as well as a multicultural aspect. The primary goal of competency-based education is to acquire skills that can be used in practice.

The very existence of the subject itself has become questionable in the past 50 years. Since 2017, it has been a compulsory subject and part of the examination in public education, and in the final exam. Its aim is to foster national identity and responsible citizenship through a more thorough and deeper understanding of the Korean past, thereby contributing to the preservation of their national unity. As historian Pak Un Sik (1859-1925) puts it: *“The ancients said that a country can be destroyed, but not its history. It exists physically, but history exists in the consciousness of the people. [...] The preservation of consciousness will result in the country itself being resurrected.”* (Csoma, 2021, 21-22.)

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