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Issues and Challenges of Teaching ‘Difficult Knowledge’ for Elementary Social Studies Teachers in South Korea

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify which topics are challenging for Korean teachers to teach, the reasons behind these challenges, and their preferred teaching approaches. The investigation focused on the concept of difficult knowledge, which encompasses the emotional and affective aspects encountered by learners when tackling challenging subjects, as well as the practical knowledge possessed by teachers when instructing such topics. In-depth interviews were conducted with elementary school teachers majoring in social studies in Seoul and Gwangju, and a narrative case study was employed to qualitatively analyze the findings. The study revealed that the knowledge regarded as difficult for teachers to teach in South Korea is often intertwined with political ideology, including topics like the Gwangju Uprising, the history of sexual violence, and subjects related to sexuality, such as LGBTQ issues. Three primary characteristics of teachers who tackle these challenging topics were identified. Firstly, some teachers recognize the importance of these subjects but refrain from teaching them due to concerns about their students’ cognitive and emotional readiness. The second group of teachers chooses to address the “difficulty” by solely relying on textbook content. Last, there are teachers who actively seek to learn and expand their knowledge to effectively teach difficult topics. These findings shed light on the social context surrounding difficult knowledge, particularly in South Korea. The unique dynamics of South Korea’s relationship with North Korea make history topics linked to political ideology particularly challenging. Additionally, the culture of familism prevalent in South Korea significantly influences the education system. The common difficulty faced by teachers when teaching subjects related to sexuality and death is rooted in their own emotional experiences with difficult knowledge. These findings have implications for understanding the social and local contexts, considering appropriate student readiness levels, and enhancing teacher education for teaching difficult knowledge in the future.

Keywords: Difficult knowledge, Difficult history, Practical knowledge, Social studies teachers

Introduction

The changes in South Korea’s government and curriculum in 2022 have indeed had significant implications for

education in the country. The removal of certain content and the replacement of terms in the social studies curriculum reflect shifts in educational priorities and perspectives. One notable change is the omission of the 5·18 Gwangju Uprising from the revised curriculum. This was a military crackdown on the democracy movement in Gwangju that resulted in a large number of victims. 5·18 had been recognized as a crucial historical moment in South Korea's democratization process in the previous curriculum. Its exclusion may signify a change in how the government views and presents this particular event in the context of the nation's history.

The connection between the curriculum changes in South Korea and the regime change in 2022 reflects the complex and divisive nature of South Korean society. The differing political ideologies of conservative and progressive parties in South Korea have a profound influence on how the nation's history and identity are framed and presented in education. The distinction between a "Jayu" (liberal) democratic society and a "Minju" (democratic) society highlights the different interpretations of democracy within South Korean politics. These differences in political ideology can have a direct impact on the content and emphasis of the curriculum, including which historical events and perspectives are emphasized or omitted. The issue of South Korea's divided society, particularly in relation to North Korea, adds another layer of complexity to curriculum conflicts.

The curriculum debate in South Korea intersects with the academic discourse on emotions and difficult knowledge, particularly concerning how traumatic histories are taught and comprehended. This area of scholarship, there has been an augmented exploration into the dynamics of emotion and difficult knowledge, especially as it pertains to the complexities of teaching, learning, and teacher education in the context of traumatic historical events (Gross & Terra, 2018; Pitt & Britzman, 2003; Garrett, 2011; Simon, 2005, 2011; Zembylas, 2013, 2014). Korean scholars like Kang (2023) and Lee (2021) have contributed to this discussion, focusing specifically on the nation's context and its difficult histories. Additionally, Cha (2022, 2023) explores the intersection of difficult knowledge with schooling.

The lack of crystallized academic discussions on what social studies teachers find difficult to teach in the Korean context indicates a gap in the research landscape. This absence suggests that while there may be individual experiences and anecdotal evidence regarding the challenges faced by educators, there has not yet been a systematic study or comprehensive understanding of these issues in Korea. It points to the need for in-depth research that explores the specific reasons why teachers find certain topics difficult to teach, how they approach these difficulties in the classroom, and the strategies they employ to navigate sensitive or challenging content. This gap underscores the potential value of targeted studies that could inform educational practices and policy, particularly in addressing and overcoming barriers to teaching difficult topics in social studies classrooms in Korea.

In this study, teachers are curriculum planners (Connelly & Clandinin, 1997) not passive actors in the educational process. They have the agency to analyze, interpret, and reconstruct the curriculum to align it with their own teaching philosophy, values, and the needs of their students. This means that while some topics may be designated as "difficult" in the curriculum due to political reasons, teachers can approach these topics in ways that are meaningful and appropriate for their specific classroom contexts. The extent to which a topic is considered difficult or how it is approached can vary among teachers based on their individual experiences, social backgrounds, and cultural contexts.

Therefore, it may be an important research question to examine what teachers actually find difficult to teach and how they approach to difficult topics. In the context of Korean social studies education, there may be

certain topics that a majority of teachers find challenging due to shared cultural, educational, or systemic factors. These challenges could stem from the subject's complexity, societal sensitivity, or lack of resources and training. Conversely, individual teachers might face difficulties with different topics based on their personal experiences, educational background, or teaching style.

The 'difficulties' Korean teachers face may align with or differ from those experienced by educators globally. Analyzing these difficulties offers insight into the realities of Korean society and education. Such an analysis can serve as a foundation for comparative discussions in broader Asian and global educational contexts, enabling a deeper understanding of regional and international educational challenges across different cultures and systems.

To guide this article, the following research questions were used.

- 1) What kind of topics are difficult to teach and what makes it difficult to teach in South Korea?
- 2) How Korean teachers approach these topics in the classroom and navigate difficult topics?

In my article, I draw on theories of difficult knowledge and teachers' practical knowledge to explore my research question.

Theoretical Framework

Difficult Knowledge and Difficult History

The fundamental question of this study is: what and how do teachers find difficult to teach in South Korea? There are various reasons why teachers find certain topics difficult to teach. In this study, I will use the concept of difficult knowledge to discuss the topics that teachers find 'difficult' to teach. In South Korea, controversial historical subjects within the curriculum are often categorized as "difficult histories." These topics are challenging due to their complexity and the emotional, societal, or political sensitivities they encompass.

According to Miles (2019), 'difficult history' and 'difficult knowledge' intersect yet remain distinct concepts. Some history education scholarship has explored psychoanalytic approach (Garrett, 2017; Di Paolantonio, 2019) but difficult history is also a broad term for teaching and learning about traumatic, sensitive, or violent pasts. Difficult history means historical narratives and other forms (learning standards, curricular frameworks) that incorporate contested, painful and/or violent events into regional, national or global accounts of the past (Epstein & Peck, 2018). The point made by Gross and Terra (2018), that not all difficult histories induce melancholia or trauma is an important one to consider. Difficult histories can indeed evoke a range of emotional responses and reactions, and these responses may vary among individuals and communities. 'Historical agnosia', as mentioned by Di Paolantonio (2019), can be one reason why some individuals may not react strongly to difficult histories. People may not be fully aware of the historical context, significance, or emotional impact of certain events, which can lead to a lack of emotional engagement with those histories. This can be addressed through education and raising awareness about historical events and their implications. My position aligns with Garrett's (2017) and Miles' (2019) views on difficult knowledge, which emphasize the importance of acknowledging individuals' emotions and the affect aspects with a psychoanalytic view on teaching and learning traumatic histories.

I would like to explore why difficult history is difficult to teach in South Korea, focusing more on the concept of difficult knowledge. The concept of difficult knowledge is instrumental in analyzing the range of

emotions, moods, and feelings that teachers experience in the context of teaching. It serves as a valuable framework to understand and interpret these emotional responses. Additionally, it acts as a tool for uncovering the pedagogical implications of teaching difficult history, providing insights into how educators can effectively navigate and address the emotional complexities involved in such subject matters.

Britzman (1998), who coined the term, invites us to consider the meaning of resistance or rejection of certain knowledge that arises during the human learning process. Knowledge that requires confrontation with trauma, such as the suffering and death of others, is more challenging, and thus triggers defense mechanisms such as denial and resistance. The goal of the concept of difficult knowledge is to discover the educational implications of knowledge that generates defense mechanisms during the learning process. Pitt and Britzman (2003) define difficult knowledge as follows.

a concept meant to signify both representations of social traumas in curriculum and the individual's encounters with them in pedagogy (p. 755).

Learning through or about difficult knowledge involves learning the remnants and experiences of genocide, ethnic hatred, histories of aggression, and nation-induced social violence and trauma (Britzman, 1998). The essence of this perspective is acknowledging the necessity of learning from others' painful experiences, balancing the desire for understanding with familiar beliefs and practices. It emphasizes the willingness to embrace the inner conflicts that learners might face through such learning, recognizing the emotional risks and complexities involved in engaging with difficult knowledge and histories.

Miles (2019) suggests that the challenge of difficult knowledge lies not just in its content but also in its potential to disrupt learners' identities and perspectives. This view, echoed by Pitt and Britzman (2003) and Simon (2011), asserts that the 'difficulty' of this knowledge is not an intrinsic property of the material itself. Instead, it arises from the interaction of learners with the content, where their pre-existing beliefs and understanding are confronted and possibly transformed. This perspective shifts the focus from the content's inherent complexity to its impact on the learner's cognitive and emotional landscape. For example, the emotions evoked by viewing exhibits, photographs, etc. in a museum are related to the individual's understanding and experience of the images, artefacts, texts, and sounds in the exhibition (Simon, 2011). This means that the 'difficulty' of difficult knowledge depends on the context of the individual's experience of encountering it.

Britzman (1998) explores the relationship between individuals and difficult knowledge through psychoanalytic and pedagogical lenses, highlighting three concepts: delayed action, transference, and symbolization. Britzman's argument centers on the psychological process learners undergo when encountering new knowledge. This process involves delaying the understanding of new information, integrating it with existing emotions, narratives, and cognitive structures, and then symbolically expressing its emotional significance. This framework is particularly useful for analyzing the resistance and rejection that teachers and students often face when confronting certain types of knowledge, providing insights into the complex interplay between new information and pre-existing beliefs or emotions. Felman (1982) figures out that resistance and denial as natural defense mechanisms in learning, leading to the creation of new meanings. and for learners, the creation of new meanings for existing knowledge is a process of knowledge reconstruction, as learners ask themselves, "Why didn't I know this before?" and then, "So what can I do with this knowledge?" (Garrett, 2017). In the end, as Lacan (1998) puts it, 'truth is what arises from the collapse of knowledge' and it is through

the experience of crisis that true learning occurs.

Difficult Knowledge and Teacher's Practical Knowledge

Difficult knowledge is crucial not only for student learning but also for teacher education. Garrett (2017) emphasizes that it offers teachers a chance to critically reflect on and reconsider existing discourses and knowledge. This engagement with difficult knowledge can lead to a transformative shift in teachers' practical knowledge, broadening their cognitive domains and enhancing their pedagogical approaches. Such experiences enable teachers to reevaluate and potentially reshape their teaching strategies and content choices.

The shift in understanding teacher knowledge began with Elbaz's (1981) challenge to the notion of teachers as mere passive transmitters of set knowledge. This led to a broader discussion on teacher professionalism, redefining the dynamic between theory and practice in teaching. This perspective emphasizes the active, reflective role of teachers in shaping and applying knowledge, marking a significant evolution in the conceptualization of their professional role and expertise.

Connelly and Clandinin (1997) propose that a teacher's knowledge is the culmination of their entire range of experiences, including those from personal life. They argue that to fully understand a teacher's approach to teaching, one must consider their experiences both within and outside the classroom, as well as in their personal lives. This holistic view acknowledges that a teacher's professional practice is deeply intertwined with their broader life experiences. Teachers' practical knowledge is shaped by their dynamic interaction with the external environment (Carter, 1990). This knowledge encompasses the practical conflicts and challenges teachers encounter while performing actions in the classroom and in specific educational contexts. It reflects the real-world application of teaching strategies and decision-making processes tailored to the nuances of different classroom situations.

Oakeshott (1962) views teachers' practical knowledge as informed by their values, beliefs, philosophies, and judgments about experiences. This perspective underscores the idea that teaching is not just about the transfer of information but is deeply influenced by the personal and philosophical convictions of the educator, shaping their approach to teaching and learning.

Therefore, teacher's practical knowledge should be comprehended all-encompassing perspective not just curriculum knowledge, but also an understanding of themselves, the educational environment, and their students (Elbaz, 1981). This definition acknowledges that teachers possess a wide array of knowledge, which may not always be clearly organized but is crucial for effectively performing their teaching roles.

Tupper and Mitchell's (2022) action research shows how difficult knowledge acts as teacher education. Their study in the field of teacher education focuses on a critical examination of history education in Canada, specifically exploring how it has played a role in marginalizing and erasing Indigenous histories. Through action research with settler white Canadian teachers, the study explores the impact of confronting difficult knowledge related to Indigenous discrimination, violence, and differing epistemological structures. It highlights a profound effect on teachers, with one participant describing a deep, visceral reaction to realizing the ongoing impact of past harms on Indigenous peoples. This experience, described as "kind of shook me to my core," suggests that such profound encounters can lead to a profound, albeit not always clearly articulated, renewal in teachers' practical knowledge.

Teachers have the potential to revitalize their practical knowledge through a diverse range of educational experiences, both theoretical and practical in nature (Wei, 2023). Encountering difficult knowledge can give

teachers the opportunity to poke holes in their convictions and renew their practical knowledge through a process of resistance, transference and integration.

Research Methodology

Narrative Case Study

The study utilizes a narrative case study approach to examine the relationship of difficult knowledge among Korean elementary school teachers who specialized in social studies. A narrative case study integrates methodologies from both narrative research and case study approach (Etherington & Bridges, 2011). This hybrid research design combines the rich, contextual exploration of case studies with depth and personal dimension of narrative analysis, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of individual experiences within specific contexts. According to Creswell (2007), narrative research is a qualitative method where the researcher organizes and interprets participants' stories, memories, and experiences to derive new meanings within a social and cultural context. This approach facilitates understanding experiences at both micro and macro levels, offering insights into the sociocultural contexts that shape individuals' lives and experiences. This study also employs a case study method (Yin, 2013). The focus is on 'how' and 'why' questions, with clear boundaries set by the researcher.

In a narrative case study, data analysis focuses on the process of integrating all the narrative data collected to construct a single story (Bae, 2008). It helps to understand teachers' classroom experiences because it provides an in-depth description of a unique, bounded case in narrative form.

The analysis procedure for this study followed Rushton's (2001) analysis procedure for narrative case studies. First, the interviews were transcribed, reread, and key words were highlighted. Based on this, an outline was created to summarize the content, keywords were recorded, categorized, reread, and re-categorized. In addition, the analysis categories and results were validated with the research participants to increase the validity of the research.

Participants

The study targets elementary school teachers in Korea, specifically those pursuing master's or doctoral studies in social studies. In Korea, pre-service elementary teachers are mandated to study all subjects, which makes it difficult to assert that they possess a particular interest or extensive knowledge in social studies. However, those who specialized in social studies during their masters' or doctoral programs have deliberately chosen to focus on this discipline and will have different practical knowledge of social studies instruction than non-majors. To contextualize the experiences of teachers teaching social studies in different parts of the country in the landscape of their expertise and chose participants from Seoul and Gwangju due to the potential variation in life and teaching experiences influenced by their community. In particular, Gwangju is the centre of the 5-18 Gwangju Uprising, which has become an issue in curriculum revision. Therefore, teachers' experiences of implementing educational activities in the local context may be different. Therefore, in this study, teachers who are working as elementary school teachers in Seoul and Gwangju and striving to enhance their professional development as social studies teachers through graduate courses were selected as participants. The study involved six research participants, some introduced through personal contacts and others as graduate students of the researcher. Participants were individually contacted, briefed about the study's purpose, and scheduled for interviews. They

were pre-informed about the difficult knowledge and interview questions. Interviews, lasting 1 to 1.5 hours, were semi-structured and conducted face-to-face, online, or by phone, as suited to participants' schedules. Follow-up communications for additional questions were through email, text, or phone. Specific participant information is detailed in the study.

Table 1. The list of participants

	Career	Major, Interest	Area	Gender	Education
A teacher	15	History/Global Citizenship Education	Seoul	Female	Master
B teacher	13	Citizenship Education/ESD	Seoul	Female	Doctoral
C teacher	3	History/Multicultural Education	Gyeonggi	Female	Master
D teacher	15	Citizenship/ Place	Gyeonggi	Female	Doctoral
E teacher	13	Human Right/ Critical Issues	Gwangju	Female	Master
F teacher	18	Human Right	Gwangju	Male	Master

Findings

Teachers from multiple regions were interviewed to capture a diverse range of stories regarding the contextual challenges they face. However, due to the qualitative nature of narrative case studies, the findings are not intended for generalization. I captured the characteristic emerging from the context of Korean teachers' experiences intertwined with difficult knowledge, particularly those who majored in social studies.

Issues of Difficult Knowledge in the Context of Korea

'Ppalgaengi (the Red)', Challenging 'Difficult History' Related to Political Ideologies

When Korean primary school teachers were asked about difficult knowledge to teach, they commonly cited historical events like the Gwangju Uprising (May 18, 1980) and Jeju Uprising (April 3, 1948). These topics are considered challenging due to their deep connection with Korean political ideology, making them sensitive and complex subjects in the educational context.

5.18 had many victims. Special laws have been enacted, the truth is still being uncovered, and there is a lot of support for victims, including compensation. However, it not hard to see comments in the media saying, "Release the 518 victim list!", "You're too paranoid about 5.18," "This was ordered by North Korea," and so on. There is a lot of fake news that is not clear about the facts and another victimization to the victims. The thing is, kids see all those comments and ask me "Teacher, why do people call us Hong-eo(redfish), Why people hit by a tank? Anyway, it's very uncomfortable to hear, very uncomfortable to say, and it's very difficult to say.... (Interview with teacher F)

The Gwangju Uprising, also known as the Gwangju Democratic Uprising, occurred in May 1980 in Gwangju, Jeollanam-do. It was a public protest against the establishment of an autocratic government and a regression of democracy. The military government responded with a violent crackdown, involving airborne troops, leading to numerous civilian casualties. At the time, the government framed the uprising as an ideological movement involving North Korea and suppressed the people of Gwangju. These frames are still a factor in regional and political conflicts.

I'm a teacher in Gwangju, so 518 is very important in Gwangju, and it's something that I'm very interested in personally, and I did a month-long project on it at my previous school, so I have no

resistance to it because all of my kids grew up on it, and they're local kids, and if you ask their relatives or their grandparents, there's no one who hasn't witnessed it, and they've all lived here, and their grandparents are in their 30s or so, so even if they didn't go through it themselves, they've seen and heard it from their neighbors. So I don't have any resistance to accepting this, but I always think about whether I could do it this easily or whether I could convey all the values that I want to deliver if I were to do it in Seoul or in a more conservative region, would I be able to do it as freely as I do now?

(Interview with teacher E)

Teacher in Gwangju, where the democratic uprising occurred, doesn't find the history of May 18 difficult to teach or difficult for local students. However, the challenge lies in teaching this history outside of Gwangju, where perspectives on the uprising are often seen through political and ideological lenses. This difference in views creates a challenge for educators in regions like Gyeongsang-do, where the historical event is perceived differently, often leading to regional conflicts and biases. Lee (2021), who taught a May 18 class to university students in Gyeongsang-do faced difficulty in teaching in such contexts stems from these political and ideological conflicts and the resultant exclusion and animosity towards certain regions.

They are exposed to that knowledge in school through history education and textbooks, but they also bring home a lot of information about North Korea and their perceptions of North Korea beforehand. There are a lot of different ways that students get information about North Korea outside of the school curriculum.... (Interview with teacher F)

Teacher F finds teaching the Korean War challenging due to students' perceptions of North Korea. He aims to present history from diverse perspectives, but faces difficulty because of students' preconceived negative views about North Korea, often associated with the term "Ppalsaengi (The Reds)." In South Korea, the term is currently used to refer to communists, and it is a term that highlights the ideological divide between left and right. In a divided society like South Korea, history intertwined with political ideology presents significant teaching challenges for educators. The history between South Korea and North Korea is complex and charged with deep-seated political and ideological conflicts. This 'difficult history' significantly influences contemporary societal values and identity perceptions in South Korea as discussed by Gross and Terra (2019). The resulting value clashes exacerbate political and ideological conflicts within South Korean society, posing challenges for educators in addressing these sensitive topics within the educational framework.

Sexuality, Uncomfortable Difficult Knowledge One Seeks to Avoid

Comfort Women

The topic of 'comfort women' is notably challenging for teachers in South Korea. The difficulty lies in educating students about the violent and horrific history of sex slavery, rape, and sexual exploitation during the Japanese occupation, while also being mindful of the potential for causing student trauma. This makes it a particularly sensitive and complex subject to approach in the classroom (Cha, 2023; Ahn, 2021).

They don't even understand why there should be women who have to be subjected to any kind of sexual exploitation like that, so it's really hard to explain to them why military camps need women in the army, they do not understand why do army need women when they're not fighting and they're not cooking, so you have to start with the meaning of sexual slavery. (Interview with teacher E)

Because they're elementary school students, I'm worried that they're going to be traumatized or something like that, especially with the comfort women, you have to explain how those people were victimized in some way, and you have to explain these things, and it's a little bit difficult to explain to children, especially because it's sexualized, and I'm a little bit worried about how they're going to take it. (Interview with teacher B)

Teachers E and B, who teach about 'comfort women', find the sexual aspect of the topic particularly challenging to convey to students. For the post-memory generation (Hirsch, 2012), which has facilitated the transmission of memory and social engagement in ways that empathize with the painful trauma of victims. Within this framework, sexualized histories are particularly challenging and distressing to conceptualize, presenting significant obstacles in both personal understanding and educational discourse. The difficulty is amplified due to the nature of the topic involving sexualized violence. These challenges are shaped by the socio-cultural context in South Korea, Grandmother Kim Hak-soon's testimony in 1991 played a pivotal role in bringing the issue of Japanese military "comfort women" into public awareness and the national curriculum. The term "comfort women" was first introduced in secondary school "national history" textbooks under the sixth curriculum revision, marking a significant inclusion in historical education (Moon, 2022). Grandmother Kim Hak-soon's decision to speak out in 1991 was influenced by the long-standing discrimination faced by women under a patriarchal paradigm in South Korea and denials about history of comfort women from Japanese government. Women, often marginalized, faced systemic discrimination. In narratives by former Japanese army men, comfort women were diminished to terms like 'hostesses' an 'hooker' reflecting androcentric perspectives that dominated historical accounts (Kim, 2017) and historical detail of their forced recruitment into comfort station and the severe abuse upon them are overshadowed.

Teaching about 'comfort women' involves addressing the history of violence against women. This history is intertwined with denied female subjectivity and sexual human rights violations, viewed under the lens of patriarchal conflict and national shame (Cha, 2023). Thus, educating on this topic requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges these complex and painful dimensions. Teaching topics related to sexuality, is complex due to their sensitive nature and the value-laden context.

Hatred Toward 'LGBTQ' and Defense Mechanism

All the teachers in the study identified the social discourse and hatred surrounding 'LGBTQ' as a difficult topic, aligning it with 'difficult knowledge' in Korea. This difficulty stems from their own limited understanding and the resistance and confusion they encounter about the topic, which is also related to sexuality, similar to the lessons on Japanese comfort women.

It's also very difficult to teach LGBTQ classes because kids are not aware of it, they don't really know what it is, and even if they do, it's very common now to be like, "Ugh", "That's a bit ridiculous," And it's not for the teacher to say this is right or wrong. I just want to say that there are a lot of minority viewpoints that need to be respected. But, in fact, me, I want to avoid this topic. Because even though I say I'm not a prejudiced person, in my mind, I feel like I'm biased to bring it up to the table. (Interview with teacher F)

As a teacher, F recognizes that LGBTQ lessons need to be 'taught' from the perspective of respecting the human rights of minorities, but as an individual, F shows a strong defense mechanism. LGBTQ is a topic he wants to 'avoid' and one that he still has many 'questions.' He expressed that it can be a discussion that clashes

quite a bit with his values and pre-existing ideas, and that he still doesn't feel the need to teach it because it is a minority opinion, not a majority. On the other hand, teachers also felt that this was an area where the values of the student's family had a strong influence.

Teaching about LGBTQ is very controversial among parents, one day, when one of my child's friend's mom found out I was teacher, the first thing she asked to me was 'Is it true that there is LGBTQ content in the textbooks?' (Interview with teacher B)

Students used the word to tease each other, saying 'Are you a gay?' made fun of someone. So, I needed to teach them that emotion of hatred is based on the sentence. But the parents behind them might have different opinion. It was really hard to teach about that topic. (Interview with teacher D)

Teacher D is concerned about 'family' when attempting to teach this topic, indicating a desire to avoid conflicts with parents. When it comes to teaching sexuality, teachers often aim for neutrality to avoid conflict, as noted by Helleveet et al. (2011). Moreover, many educators lack training in human sexuality and tend to follow mainstream norms and values in their teaching (Calisandemir et al., 2008). In some cases, like in South Korea, teachers addressing LGBTQ rights have faced protests from certain parent organizations, highlighting the societal challenges in teaching these topics (Kim, 2022). The 'family' holds significant importance yet presents challenges for teachers in Korea. This current situation regarding teaching sexuality make teachers difficult to teach those issues.

Teachers' Challenges and Toward Difficult Knowledge

'Thinking' But Not 'Teaching'

All of the teachers in the study said that teaching difficult knowledge was meaningful to their students, but some teachers did not actually teach difficult knowledge. Their reasons for not teaching difficult knowledge varied.

I really wanted to teach and I know it's important but... I don't have any chance to teach those topics, because level of my students is too low for them to understand.... (Interview with teacher C)

Teacher C believed that difficult knowledge was not at the "level" of the students she was currently teaching. In particular, teachers in lower grades, in multicultural classes with many students who had difficulty with Korean, and in areas with lower overall academic performance described difficult knowledge as "difficult" for their students. The difficulty here is that they believe that talking about and understanding difficult knowledge with students requires a high level of linguistic and intellectual sophistication. Some teachers describe difficult knowledge as 'emotionally difficult' for younger students.

Anyway, once you know about death, it can be scary even in everyday life and I'm afraid that I could die, my parents could die, and I'm afraid that the student will be scared of this, so I'm afraid that they will be scared of death and traumatized. When I talked about this in terms of what is death and what happens when you die, I don't have the confidence to talk about this properly...so in a similar vein to that, when I talk to primary school children about Japan did this massacre or about the Jeju 4-3, it's about that aspect of brutality of human being... (Interview with teacher B)

Teacher B shares her concerns about teaching the history of death, recognizing that it can be emotionally challenging for her students and potentially lead to fear or trauma. Death is a fundamental aspect of life, and

children often have questions about it (Löfdahl, 2005). However, addressing this topic in schools is complex, and there is uncertainty about how to effectively educate children about death. This aligns with research by Puskás et al. (2021), which indicates that teachers often feel unprepared and lacking in training and knowledge to address issues related to death.

Teachers are concerned about their students' readiness and their uncertainty teaching 'death' are big factors in avoiding teaching difficult knowledge. The limiting of the students' readiness and comprehension of such topics represent the teachers' original practical knowledge, leading them to opt for a more familiar or comfortable approach within the boundaries of their existing knowledge and pedagogical practices.

Teach Text Book 'Only'

A common way for teachers to teach difficult knowledge is to teach based on the 'text book'

I don't think I've gone beyond textbook description. That kind of thing happened, and Japanese this this... something like this... I don't describe the concepts accurately; I just teach what's written in the textbook. (Interview with teacher B)

Many teachers resort to a common method when teaching difficult knowledge, which is textbook-based instruction. They believe that by reading the textbook and confirming the presence of certain terms or concepts, they are teaching difficult knowledge. However, when textbooks use terms like 'genocide' or 'atrocities,' they do not provide in-depth discussion. It is essential to consider whether merely reading and comprehending textbook narratives can be considered as 'teaching' difficult knowledge.

Di Paolantonio (2018) offers a critique of the situation where students are not exposed to difficult knowledge at all. In such cases, students remain emotionally disengaged and lack motivation. The encounter with difficult knowledge does not impact the individual or pose any challenges. It is akin to a person with 'visual aphasia', possessing the ability to see but failing to comprehend what they observe. This condition has been described as living in 'historical agnosia'. This prompts us to question the factors that contribute to this phenomenon in teachers. It is very necessary to contemplate whether the deliberate use of textbook narratives alone to teach difficult history is essentially a strategy that predisposes students to experience 'visual aphasia', and if it is, we should explore the underlying reasons for this approach.

Learning for Teaching

Two of the teachers in the study were convinced that teaching difficult knowledge is very important and meaningful. They believe that teachers need to learn in order to teach difficult knowledge, and in fact, that is why they go to masters or doctoral programs.

I applied for the PhD because I was teaching a difficult history course and I realized that I didn't know enough about it, how to teach it, if it was the right way to teach it, so I thought I should study more. (Interview with teacher A)

Teacher A says that learning about the massacre of civilians during the Korean War was a difficult knowledge for her. This war was triggered by North Korea's armed invasion of South Korea on 25 June 1950, which led to the horrific experience of war for the people of both sides. The Korean War is usually portrayed as a dichotomy, with North Korea as the perpetrator and South Korea as the victim. However, the civilian massacres that Teacher A encountered were horrific memories of South Korean soldiers slaughtering South Korean civilians during the Korean War. Faced with the dark history of nation-induced violence, Teacher A realizes that

there is much she does not know, which leads her to pursue a PhD. She said that she is constantly struggle with how to teach difficult history. On the other hand, teacher B tried to know different perspective and different point of view of certain history or issue.

I think teachers need to know different perspectives because if you don't study it, you don't know it, and you can't teach it, especially when it comes to difficult history or difficult knowledge.

(Interview with teacher B)

Teacher B, based in Gwangju, emphasized that being a teacher entails a commitment to understanding diverse perspectives. She shared her experience of pursuing a master's program to deepen her knowledge and actively engaging with the educational community and teachers' organizations. Her efforts reflect a determination to gain a multifaceted understanding of history. The enthusiasm for learning observed in teachers can be understood as an 'affect' particularly evident among educators who have dealt with 'difficult knowledge' (Cha, 2022). This affect, indicative of a deep engagement with challenging content, marks a significant trait in teachers who navigate complex educational scenarios.

Discussion

This study raises the question of what teachers find difficult to teach in Korea and how this knowledge can be taught.

Firstly, we should consider 'Family' as a catalyst for difficult knowledge in South Korea. The first thing that South Korean teachers find difficult to teach is difficult history, which is closely related to the country's political ideology, especially its relationship with North Korea. However, teachers had a clear stance on the history itself, and believed that it was right to teach a variety of perspectives beyond ideology. However, it was the 'families' of students with a particular political ideology, who made it 'difficult' for teachers to teach. Teacher C also concerned about bumping into her students' parents and teacher F hesitate due to potential complaints from parents. In recent years, South Korea has seen a lot of parental influence on schooling, often infringing on teachers' right to teach.

The concept of 'family' plays a significant role in the context of education, further complicating the teaching of difficult knowledge. This complexity arises not only from families potentially interrupting teachers' lessons but also from the deeply ingrained cultural value of familism. Familism is a value system that prioritizes the interests and survival of the family above individual and societal interests (Kulp, 1966). It has long been recognized as a fundamental component of Korean culture (Cho, 1985; Park, 2011). Familism's roots can be traced to historical experiences, including the colonial modernization period and the Korean War, which reinforced the collectivistic and exclusionary nature of family ties. Teachers in South Korea also share this understanding of the family based on familism. As a result, they are concerned about their values influencing students and the potential for conflicts or clashes between the common goals of the students' families. Teaching difficult knowledge goes beyond educating the individual student; it involves navigating the dynamics within the student's family in the context of South Korea. Therefore, family can be a big factor in making difficult knowledge 'visual aphasia' for some teachers. Overcoming these challenges and achieving meaningful educational outcomes while respecting the values associated with familism remains a significant challenge moving forward.

Second, teaching topics related to sexuality and death raises essential questions and challenges for

educators. Japanese ‘comfort women’ and LGBTQ issues are inherently linked to sexuality, while the May 18th uprising involves themes of death. Both sexuality and death are fundamental aspects of human existence and are closely tied to personal values. In South Korea, as well as in many other countries, teachers often grapple with uncertainty when it comes to addressing these sensitive topics. However, it’s important to recognize that questions about sex and death are natural aspects of children’s developmental curiosity. Instead of avoiding these subjects, educators should view them as opportunities to consider how best to teach and navigate these complex and essential aspects of human life. By approaching these topics with care, sensitivity, and age-appropriate educational methods, teachers can create a safe and constructive learning environment where students can explore and understand these fundamental aspects of human existence.

Third, teaching difficult history is not particularly challenging when it is shared or taught within an inner group. For example, the history of the 5·19 Gwangju massacre is not a difficult topic for a teacher in Gwangju to teach. However, when this history is taught outside of Gwangju, especially in areas where people hold different perspectives on the topic, it becomes a highly challenging subject. Similarly, histories like colonialism and the Korean War are not considered difficult when taught within the community that shares these collective memories. But the difficulty arises when one attempts to convey these histories to individuals with different collective memories and narratives.

When we encounter others who have distinct perspectives and narratives, difficult history becomes even more challenging to teach. Ultimately, difficult histories gain deeper significance when educators are emotionally charged by the experience of engaging with the conflicting and diverse perspectives surrounding them. It should also not be overlooked that difficult history can become ‘lovely knowledge’ when the traumatic history become representations of community as righteous victims (Goldberg, 2017; Britzman, 2000), or when institutionalized education becomes intimately connected to regional identity (Kang, 2023).

Fourth, the concept of difficult knowledge holds significant meaning in teacher education, particularly for educators who specialize in social studies. While all teachers recognized the importance of teaching difficult knowledge, there were distinctions between who are emotionally charged by encountering difficult knowledge and are not in how they approached this concept. Emotionally charged teachers demonstrated a sense of “confidence” when dealing with difficult knowledge, while inexperienced teachers tended to express “uncertainty.” These differences, although not always overt, highlight the impact of direct experiences with difficult knowledge on teachers’ perspectives. In line with Garrett’s (2017) perspective on the pedagogical meaning of difficult knowledge, confronting such knowledge actively within teaching content serves the purpose of understanding the universal vulnerability of humanity when facing crises in the world. The discomfort and insecurity that arise when dealing with difficult knowledge can lead to questions like “Why didn’t I know this before?” This questioning opens the door to new ways of thinking and renewing practical knowledge.

In essence, difficult knowledge provides a powerful experiential opportunity for teachers to refresh their practical knowledge. Given these insights, difficult knowledge takes on added importance in teacher education, especially in a globalized world where individuals must coexist and engage with diverse perspectives. It encourages teachers to confront their own limitations, question their prior knowledge, and ultimately develop a deeper understanding of complex and sensitive topics, contributing to their ability to educate and engage with students in a more informed and meaningful way.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of teaching difficult knowledge is highly contextual and varies based on local circumstances and teachers' experiences. While teaching and learning difficult knowledge hold intrinsic value, there is no one-size-fits-all approach, and the methods and processes are not rigidly defined. The local context plays a significant role in determining which historical or social topics are considered difficult knowledge. For example, in South Korea, a divided nation with ideological conflicts, certain historical topics become particularly challenging for teachers to address effectively. Additionally, the importance of the family as a social group in Korean culture can create hesitancy among teachers when discussing topics that may conflict with their own values or those of their students' families. Some teachers are highly motivated to teach difficult knowledge, while others grapple with uncertainty. To navigate these complexities, further research and thoughtful consideration are necessary to develop effective approaches for teaching difficult knowledge within the social and cultural context of Korea.

The study focused on teachers from Seoul and Gwangju in South Korea and noted a limitation due to the absence of direct observation of teaching practices. This limitation is significant given the relational nature of difficult knowledge, suggesting that varied interpretations could emerge in different regional contexts. The research emphasizes the need for further studies that delve into the complexities and challenges associated with difficult knowledge across diverse settings, highlighting the importance of contextual factors in educational experiences.

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