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Capturing Social Studies Teachers' Experience about "Difficult" Topics in the Emerging Multiculturalism in South Korea

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Abstract

This research investigates what South Korean social studies teachers feel are "difficult" topics in the era of multiculturalism. Topics such as Chinese and Japanese history and culture and Muslim culture that were previously not difficult but have become more difficult challenge teachers' conventional methods of teaching as the student demographic changes. Social studies teachers, in particular, have struggled to find a better way of teaching these newly difficult topics. While the struggle is ongoing, some teachers have transformed their teaching practice or vision of teaching by including Chinese and Japanese perspectives on territory issues, deconstructing the dichotomy of "us versus them," and centering critical global citizenship. Utilizing qualitative methods and the lenses of teacher agency and critical global citizenship education, this study explicates teachers' lived experiences and possibilities for change regarding teaching these newly difficult topics in a multicultural society.

Keywords: Difficult topics, Social studies, Multiculturalism, Teacher agency, Critical global citizenship

Introduction

Korean society has become more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and language due to an influx of foreign workers and international marriages since the late 1990s. Korea's changing demographic has influenced society in respect to educational policies and practices, starting with the government's first "Multicultural Family Support" act in 2006 (Lim, 2014).

Social studies curricula have adopted multiculturalism, developing related topics such as human rights, global education, and East and Southeast Asian studies—regions of the world where a majority of the multicultural students and families come from (Hwang, 2010). As a result, elementary-, middle-, and high-school teachers have adjusted their lesson topics, teaching materials, and strategies; and homeroom teachers have learned knowledge and skills to counsel students from diverse backgrounds. However, studies show that teachers still feel ill-prepared to teach topics related to multiculturalism, due mainly to the demands of high-stakes tests, allowing them little time to devote to developing lessons related to topics of multiculturalism (Chang, 2015; Kim, 2022; Watson et al., 2011). Additionally, social studies teachers face another challenge in

this era of multiculturalism: how to teach difficult topics.

Social studies in the Korean curriculum entails difficult, often controversial, issues such as unification, regional conflicts, import of foreign products, development and environment, gender inequality, and concentration of urban population (Ku, 2002). These topics are controversial because individuals or groups often hold tightly to their own stakes or interests, unwilling to consider other points of view; thus, when discussing controversial topics, people experience significant difficulty in solving problems (Misco, 2017). Therefore, teachers find it difficult to teach these controversial issues due to both the nature of the topics and their perceived unpreparedness to lead discussions (Ozturk & Kus, 2019; Lee & Jeong, 2020). As the number of people from diverse backgrounds has increased since the late 1990s, new controversial issues have risen, including foreign workers' status, human rights for minorities, and asylum for refugees, all of which have become difficult topics due mainly to prejudice, bias, and stereotypes (Lee & Jeong, 2020).

Furthermore, topics that were previously not difficult have become more difficult for social studies teachers to address in the emerging multiculturalism of Korea, namely the teaching of Chinese and Japanese history (Kang, 2020; Kim, 2019 ; Hong et al., 2023). Chinese and Japanese history comprise one of the main topics in the "East Asia History" section of the national social studies curriculum. These topics often provoke both students and teachers emotionally due to Korea's long and complex relationships with the two countries in relation to the invasion of Korea and Korean resistance, particularly inciting students and teachers of Korean heritage—hereafter referred to as mainstream Koreans—with strong nationally-centered emotions related to these events. In the past, teachers let students express their nationalism and sympathized with negative remarks about Chinese and Japanese history and cultures. Strong nationalism and/or animosity toward these two countries, regardless of whether such feelings were justified, were often accepted or were only passively interrupted by teachers, such as when students used derogatory terms for Japanese or Chinese people. Although the complex relations with these countries and students' reactions made teachers more cautious of students' strong nationalism, teachers used to teach the topics without hesitation. However, such topics already in the curriculum have become newly difficult to address with the presence of students from China and Japan in the Korean classrooms (Hong et al., 2023; Kim, 2022).

Another topic teachers find difficult to teach is related to Islam and Muslim culture and history. Teaching these topics used to be simple, a short segment in the classroom covering the history of Islam and Muslim food and clothing. However, a lack of in-depth knowledge about and limited exposure to the Muslim community, combined with recent protests in front of Mosque construction have made teachers more cautious about how to address Muslim culture in the classroom. The topic is still marginalized in teachers' practice, but this becomes harder given the presence of Muslim students (Kim, 2022; Lim et al., 2023).

While a small number of studies have mentioned the dilemma that social studies teachers face when teaching Chinese, Japanese, and Muslim history and culture, few have examined the specific contexts that teachers are placed in and how teachers respond to them. This study responds to the call for further examination of teachers' lived experiences regarding topics that were previously not difficult to address but have become more difficult with the increasing number of students from Chinese, Japanese, and Muslim cultural backgrounds in Korea's emerging multicultural society. This study attempts to describe in detail teachers' lived experiences across grades (1-12) and across geographical locations (urban and rural), while simultaneously capturing their explicit or subtle capacity to develop and enact new teaching methods—teacher agency—with respect to

difficult topics in a changing society.

Teacher Agency

Scholarship on teacher decision-making regarding controversial issues or difficult topics in social studies classrooms are well-documented (Hess, 2004; Kus & Ozturk, 2019; Lee & Jeong, 2020; Misco, 2012; Misco & Tseng, 2018). For example, Misco and Tseng (2018) examined how Taiwanese social studies teachers grapple with controversial issues in their classrooms through a lens of curricular-instructional gatekeeping. Their main findings suggest that preservice teachers' conceptualizations of controversial issues have multiple layers and are shaped by external forces such as the national curriculum, high-stakes tests, their views of social studies, and contextual factors. The study highlights the importance of understanding not only the role of teachers as gatekeepers who decide whether to address controversial issues, but also the social contexts that act as external factors, influencing teacher decision-making.

Recently, research on teacher decision-making has focused on teacher agency, which refers to "the capacity of teachers in making choices and implementing actions to realise changes" (Cong-Lem, 2021, p. 718). The notion of teacher agency is well-used but still murky in terms of its components and impacts on teaching practice (Cong-Lem, 2021; King & Nomikou, 2018). The meanings of teacher agency still need to be studied in terms of interpreting its implications for teacher education and, for in-service teachers, professional development. In fact, the conceptualization of agency varies widely, from stressing individual actors to ecological framing (Bandura, 2001; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). With respect to individual actors, most research uses a basis of psychology, including the perspective of social cognitive psychologist Albert Bandura (Poonchuay, 2021). Bandura's (2001) conceptualization of agency is defined as an individual's core characteristics, including intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflectiveness. However, this concept has limitations such as attributing agency to mere individual capacity and will, which ignores the context or society in which the individual exists (King & Nomikou, 2018).

On the other hand, ecological framing, which places agency within wider structural contexts such as social and material environments, conceptualizes "individual agency and social structures as being mutually constitutive and highly interdependent" (King & Nomikou, 2018, p. 4). Another interesting perspective on agency adds the flow of time to the relationship between individual agency and social structure (Emirbayer & Mishe, 1998). In this perspective, agency is understood to be "achieved with the contingencies of the moment and in context, rather than something which is possessed and immutable" (King & Nomikou, 2018, p. 5). Therefore, agency is seen as fluid through the interplay between "the individual and the wider temporal structures in which that individual exists" (King & Nomikou, 2018, p. 5).

Specifically, research into the enactment of agency in education has grown to examine the extent to which teachers can employ agency in their professional practices in terms of interpretations of teacher identity and purpose and negotiation of professional identities responding to policy reform, etc. However, it is still unclear how teacher agency works in a school setting. King and Nomikou (2018) and Panti□ (2015) suggested a useful framework for examining interview data in light of teacher agency in a systemic way: the components of teacher agency are approached through the dimensions of purpose, mastery, reflexivity, and autonomy. Purpose is about intentionality, and mastery is competency and confidence to achieve such a purpose. Autonomy

is concerned with action or decision-making, and reflexivity is the process of assessing, monitoring, and changing one's practice, combined with purpose, mastery, and autonomy.

These dimensions of teacher agency interdependently shape and are shaped by the structure of the classrooms, schools, and society where teachers are placed. Grounded in this perspective, I seek to analyze teacher experiences within their social and school contexts—contexts which facilitate or hinder teacher enactment of agency when teaching newly difficult topics.

Critical Global Citizenship Education to Disrupt Conventional Approach

Examining teachers' experiences regarding the topics in this study fundamentally aims to explore teachers' practices or vision of practices for promoting a just and democratic citizenship in a multicultural society for both mainstream Korean students and students from diverse backgrounds. As a multicultural society reflects a more globalized world, with a flow of people and resources across borders, understanding domestic changes and their subsequent issues requires teachers and students to have a perspective shift in order to avoid preserving the status quo (Bauman, 1998; Gaudelli, 2016). In this sense, critical global citizenship education (CGCE) provides a relevant framework in terms of transforming the teaching of topics to that of supporting all students, as well as examining issues and facilitating a just-oriented democratic citizenship to combat intensifying nationalism and rising bias or stereotypes (Gaudelli, 2016; Kim & Kwon, 2023). CGCE focuses on students' rights and responsibilities for interrelated issues of a local and global scale, and fosters students' criticality for power relations of societal issues across borders. For this, the main principles of CGCE are 1) to promote multiple perspectives, 2) to deconstruct "us versus them," 3) to reduce bias, prejudice, and stereotypes and examine assumptions, 4) to avoid essentialization of an individual based on a group characteristic, and 5) to understand the interconnectedness of the global issues to the local and national levels when engaging in learning about other countries (Andreotti, 2006; Gaudelli, 2016; Merryfield & Subedi, 2006; Said, 1994). Utilizing these principles will provide clear directions of analysis for teacher practice and vision of practice to pursue equitable and democratic citizenship regarding China, Japan, and Islam in multicultural Korea and the globalized world.

This study pays close attention to topics that teachers used to address easily, or by skipping details of, but have since become more "difficult" in Korea's emerging multiculturalism. Specifically, I seek to magnify teachers' experiences in addressing Chinese, Japanese, and Muslim history and culture. Then, utilizing the lenses of teacher agency and critical global citizenship education, this study captures teachers' decision-making for adapting their teaching.

Methodology

Utilizing a qualitative research method (Merriam, 2009), this study explores social studies topics that have become difficult to teach in a country experiencing emerging multiculturalism. To that end, it maps out grade 1-12 teachers' lived experiences in detailed contexts as they navigate their practice.

The research questions are twofold: 1) What are teachers' experiences related to situations where addressing the topics of history and culture of China, Japan, and Islam have become difficult in the emerging multicultural society? 2) What are teachers' enactments or visions of new teaching approaches to overcome these topics? The study answers the research questions by 1) analyzing teachers' perceptions and experiences of

difficult topics and 2) doing so through a lens of teacher agency and critical global citizenship education, specifically in how teachers enact or envision new teaching methods in relation to difficult topics within specific contexts of student characteristics, social structure (current issues and dominant narratives), local features (low/high income area, area with more people from diverse backgrounds), and school settings.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research data comprised subset data from a larger study that recruited volunteer interview participants by distributing a survey to elementary and social studies teacher networks in Korea as well as through the nationwide Geography Teachers Association. Out of 53 volunteers, we chose 20 based on the fullness of their survey responses, grade level taught, location, and social studies subjects taught (general social studies, history, or geography). Due to scheduling availability, actual interviews were conducted with 13 teachers, 10 in person and three via Zoom calls. Five interviewees were male and eight female, and seven were elementary teachers, while six taught at the middle- or high-school levels. See detailed participant information in Appendix A. Semi-structured interview questions included 1) Have you felt that it is difficult to teach the history of China and Japan in the context of emerging multiculturalism? 2) Have you experienced any difficulties or changes when teaching about the Korean territory or do you think you will change your teaching given the presence of students from diverse backgrounds, especially from Chinese or Japanese heritage? 3) Have you had any difficulties or changes when teaching about Islam and Muslim culture and history? and 4) Have you employed and thought about a new teaching method?

In the interviews, teachers provided specific instances of difficult teaching moments and shared what they did in terms of continuing the lesson, withdrawing, or pausing. Each interview lasted about one hour, was conducted in Korean, and was audio-recorded and transcribed using the Korean app Clover Note. Comments of teachers in the study were manually translated into English.

Data analysis took place in several stages, from listening to audio files to reading transcripts to transferring initial key points and notes to NVivo software1 (Saldaña, 2015; Silver & Woolf, 2018). After creating initial codes, visual maps of codes were drawn to identify connections and teachers' remarks about what aspects of teaching Chinese, Japanese, and Muslim history and culture were difficult. Once a few topics were identified as main codes—such as "experiences with students (mainstream and students from diverse backgrounds), local features (low-income area, area with more immigrants), current issues, school settings (elementary or secondary, a boys' school, teaching subject)"—I selected quotations from the rest of the interviews using the codes as criteria. Eventually, teachers' perceptions of difficult topics were categorized as "with the mainstream Korean students" and "with students from China, Japan, and Muslim backgrounds." Then, I identified adaptations or visions of teaching methods.

Beyond simply describing what they did, I analyzed the process and outcome of decision-making for change in new teaching approaches, utilizing the four dimensions of teacher agency within a wide structure of aspects such as contemporary social issues, school settings, and other contextual elements; this includes grade level and lesson topics for elementary teachers or subjects for middle- and high-school teachers. To analyze the four dimensions of teacher agency—purpose, mastery, autonomy, and reflexivity—in the interview data, I borrowed from the synthesis of work of Pantić (2015) and Van Der Heijden et al. (2015). To identify purpose, I looked for cases of teacher commitment to goals of social studies education such as democratic citizenship, understanding of social life, and pursuit for social justice.

For mastery, I examined interview data related to teacher demonstration or aspiration of competence/confidence regarding the topics. For autonomy, I searched for any instances of employment or vision of new methods for teaching the topics. For reflexivity, I sought any cases that demonstrated teachers' monitoring of their practice, assumptions, and/or personal beliefs that either facilitated or hindered teacher decision-making for changing practice (King & Nomikou, 2018).

Positionality

I was a social studies teacher in a Korean middle and high school. Currently, I am a teacher educator in a social studies education program at a US institution of higher education, utilizing a critical lens for my teaching and research. I speak Korean as my main language. Since a researcher is a tool of data analysis, my multiple positions affect data selection and interpretation.

Analysis and Results

The study's analysis responds to the research questions by magnifying teachers' experiences regarding the topics of China, Japan, and Islam within the specific contexts of student characteristics (mainstream Koreans and students from diverse backgrounds), social structure (current issues and dominant narratives toward people from diverse backgrounds), local features (low/high income area, areas with more immigrants or foreign workers), and school settings (grade level and teaching subject). Then, teachers' enactment or vision of new teaching approaches were captured by intersecting the lenses of teacher agency and critical global citizenship education.

Description of Teacher Experience Regarding Topics of China, Japan, and Islam

The descriptions of teacher experience are divided into two sections, based on the teachers' experiences with students from diverse backgrounds.

Difficulties with Mainstream Korean Students

Due to Korea's long and complex relations with China and Japan, characterized by cultural exchanges and invasions, Koreans tend to have strong feelings of both intimacy and animosity toward the two countries. It is not uncommon to hear negative remarks about China and Japan while also witnessing their deep influences on Korean culture, language, and values. As the number of people from China and Japan living in Korea increases and more Chinese and Japanese become naturalized Koreans or permanent residents, mainstream Koreans and new Koreans from China and Japan mingle and live in the same areas.

However, in combination with controversial issues—such as Japan's release of nuclear water or border disputes with China—and false narratives—such as Chinese taking advantage of the Korean economy to make money—animosity among mainstream Koreans has also grown. Negative remarks from students when topics related to the countries are brought up are both intensified and highly noticeable, which teachers noted as a big concern.

Suyoung Kim, a geography teacher, teaches high school boys. He commented on the growing intensity of anti-Chinese sentiment among mainstream Korean male students whenever topics related to China have arisen:

My school is in a low-income family area, which often affects limited students' experiences. Some

> students without rich [cultural] experiences tend to be conservativee. My class doesn't have any Chinese students, but there are some in neighbouring classrooms. Some mainstream Korean students use derogatory words for Chinese, which is noticeably aggressive compared to previous years. I really feel the strong animosity among students, especially against Chinese.

He added that when parents told their children that the Chinese took jobs from Koreans or took advantage of the Korean health insurance system, the children internalized these beliefs. Kim pointed out that one difficulty of teaching topics related to China is that students become easily emotional, causing the class to stray from the curriculum. The students' intensifying anti-Chinese sentiments stem from bias and false information of Chinese or Chinese Koreans combined with the local community's context of parental perceptions toward job loss and economic conditions as the society sees more people from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds in the job market.

Regarding issues with Japan, Youwon Lee, an elementary teacher in a metropolitan area, immediately brought up the release of nuclear water from the Fukushima power plant, which happened in the summer of 2023 when the interview took place. Given the accumulated emotions and negative attitudes toward Japan, issues related to Japan's actions—especially policies that affect Korean society—were the center of students' attentions. Lee's 6th grade students criticized the current Korean government's policy due to its lack of formal objection to Japan's release of the water. She felt she needed to be careful when starting the lesson unit on Japan's history and culture—a big part of the 6th grade curriculum—due to students' negative sentiment. Similarly, most teachers pointed out that mainstream Korean students become emotional when predominating nationalistic views are combined with current social issues. An elementary teacher, Hemee Cho, brought up her worry of her students' strong negativity related to Japan and connected it to the parents' influences and social narratives, saying, "My students repeat what they heard from their parents and social and political parties... I told them to think about how the students from the country feel."

The mainstream Korean students' sensitivity regarding current issues related to Japan is not new, but the degree of difficulty for teachers to address the lesson of Japanese history as part of the curriculum is new and a high priority since teachers see that the intense sensitivity may affect the emerging multicultural society negatively in both the present and future.

The cases in this section have so far focused on teachers' growing awareness of mainstream Koreans' negative feelings toward China and Japan. While the feelings themselves are not new, they are growing in intensity, as are teachers' concerns about how to teach in relation to this increasing multiculturalism. This awareness prompts teachers to reflect on their conventional, previously unquestioned, teaching methods. Heechul Kang, a boys' high school geography teacher, reflected on his approach for teaching about Japan and China, saying, "To draw students' attention to my class, I used to start by criticizing Japan and China to please students' need [for patriotism] and I taught Japanese and Chinese history and culture in an exclusive way [favouring Koreans' perspectives]." He said that high school boys tended to pay more attention to his teaching when he tapped into their patriotism, but remarked, "Looking back, the approach was a little cowardly."

His case confirmed a common practice among other social studies teachers—high tolerance for nationalism in the classroom. In fact, students' negative remarks toward the two countries have been common, and teachers would only interrupt students when derogatory terms about Chinese and Japanese were used (Kim, 2022). However, it is also noteworthy that Heechul Kang reflected on his past method of staging questions when

starting the lesson unit of Chinese and Japanese history, noting that it relied on the nationalistic ideology and then stemmed from the change to a multicultural society, regardless of his direct experience with having students from those countries in his class or not. The changes from homogenous to heterogeneous society facilitated his reflections of his teaching approach.

Not many teachers interviewed had direct difficulties stemming from mainstream students' negative sentiment toward Muslims in relation to mainstream Koreans. This was mainly due to the very low number of Muslim students in the areas where they teach, resulting in a lack of exposure. However, a few teachers mentioned that students were becoming more aware of issues related to the Muslim community, including protesting against Mosque construction, and some expressed their objections to accepting refugees from Somalia or Yemen a few years ago, and other anti-Islam sentiments. Students' objections mainly stemmed from Muslim bias in regard to women's rights and terrorist images. Hejoung Yoon, a middle school social studies teacher in a metropolitan area who taught Muslim culture in a general social studies classroom, shared her experience:

> I usually didn't have issues in teaching Islam when I taught "Culture and Religion" unit. Most of them got interested in learning about it. However, when the refugees from Yemen came to Korea a few years ago, I had a little hard time addressing the issue in my classroom when students expressed objections to accepting the refugees since I personally didn't have a good experience when I travelled to a Muslim country regarding how men treated women….

Her difficulty of addressing Muslim culture was specifically related to her personal experience but became combined with her mainstream Korean students' sentiment toward the specific issue of refugees from Muslim countries. Her good intention of teaching Islam in the lesson unit of Culture and Religion was thwarted by the social issue rooted heavily in stereotypes and bias.

Myeongchul Lee, a boys' high school geography teacher, pointed out that students in his school expressed bias toward Islam, connecting it to terrorism. He stated, "I taught World Geography and students had strong bias toward certain regions, especially the Middle East. I saw students think Islam was a terrorist group and showed their anti-Muslim sentiment."

These two cases provide examples of difficulties that teachers face in specific contexts—how the common topic of Islam became more difficult to address when social issues arose or when teachers taught certain topics in World Geography. Most teachers acknowledged that, if the number of Muslim students were to increase, there would be a need for more knowledge and teaching strategies about Muslim culture and history as well as greater investigation into anti-Muslim issues. Meanwhile, teachers who have Muslim students have had different experiences, making them more aware that teaching about Muslim culture can be difficult and that new teaching approaches are imminent. I provide a case in the next section.

Difficulties in the Presence of Students from Diverse Backgrounds

Most teachers in the study have had students with one or both parents from Chinese or Japanese cultural backgrounds, and a few have had students from Muslim families. However, it must be noted that having students from these backgrounds is still uncommon in Korea.2 Also, teachers may not readily recognize that students have different cultural backgrounds due to their mainstream Korean appearance unless they have Chinese or Japanese accents.

Additionally, teachers are not allowed to ask about students' personal information, especially regarding their backgrounds, economic status, and other similar information, which can hinder teachers' ability to support

their students (Kim, 2022). The reality is that social studies teachers may indirectly ask head teachers, administrators, or homeroom teachers for information unless students or parents are willing to share their family information. The interviewed teachers mentioned that they had even met with students' previous teachers to collect information that might help them to better support their students.

In this section, I examine teachers' experiences with topics that became difficult to teach in the presence of students from China, Japan, or Muslim countries.

Teachers with students from these diverse backgrounds consistently expressed concern about students' feelings. Jihee Cha, an elementary teacher who had a student from a Japanese cultural background, described the dilemma she experienced in relation to invasions of Korea, including Japanese colonization. She said her school has relatively more students with one parent from Japan since the area has a Family Federation for World Peace and Unification church. Cha noted:

> I need to teach historical facts about Japan since 6th graders start learning about it. But I was careful when I talked about it because I was worried about how Korean students would think about their peer whose mother is Japanese. I can't skip the content, but detailed information might hurt my student from Japan. So, I had a dilemma of how much I should introduce details of the history.

Cha's concerns were layered, as they encompassed not only the impact on the Japanese student's feelings but also the relationships between Korean students and the Japanese student. Specifically, her dilemma worsened when the student brought up the Japanese history that he had learned in Japan. She noted her Korean students' changing attitudes when the Japanese student said, "We lost World War II and became victims…."

As such, the topic of Japanese history in the presence of Japanese students became difficult to teach due to students' emotions and the ways that scope of content would affect students' learning.

Teachers may also face situations in which they discover they have students from China or Japan only after teaching the countries' histories. Heechul Kang, a high school geography teacher in a Seoul suburb, reflected:

> I sometimes started to criticize China related to current issues to bring students' attention to a Korean geography lesson related to territory. However, I found out there was a student from China, and I became more careful about how to teach the topic.

His reflection on his teaching method was directly triggered by his awareness of the student's presence, demonstrating the difficulty and impact that context can have on a teacher's perceptions of a topic.

Only two teachers—Youwon Lee and Hankyu Ko—had experience teaching students who were Muslim. Their experiences were not directly related to the difficulty of teaching social studies content. Rather, they mentioned the difficulty of fulfilling their duties as homeroom teachers. For example, Hankyu Ko, a 4th grade elementary teacher in a metropolitan city close to Seoul, had students from Syria and Iraq in 2022. His experience with a student from Syria took up most of his interview time due to its uniqueness. The difficulty was mainly due to his concern for the student's emotional well-being tied to his lack of communication with his classmates and teacher, and the challenge the teacher faced communicating with the student's parents. He shared his experience:

> The student didn't know how to write even in Arabic, let alone speaking in Korean. So, he was usually quiet and did nothing in class. But, I found that he can draw well. If I asked him to draw things he wanted to express, he responded well and drew Korean and Syrian national flags. Frequently, I had to

> communicate with his parents. Since his mother didn't speak Korean, I had to talk to his father in English or translated Korean to English, but he was often out of town due to his work. I wished I could understand the student better as his homeroom teacher.

In fact, he had no idea about the family's situation, whether they were refugees or not. The limited information and communication constrained his ability to meet the student's educational and social needs. He also shared a case in which there was a minor conflict between a Syrian and an Iraqi student during Ramadan: the Syrian student gave the Iraqi student a hard time when he ate food during Ramadan. Since these students' parents had different principles for fasting during Ramadan, Hankyu Ko faced difficulty in resolving the conflict and developed differentiated understandings of Muslim culture. His experience has a significant implication for teachers' future readiness to teach students from diverse backgrounds (Lim et al., 2023).

Teacher Enactment or Vision of New Approaches to Teaching Difficult Topics

In this section, I examine through the lens of teacher agency, examples of what teachers did or envision doing to overcome the challenges of teaching difficult topics. Using the four dimensions of teacher agency—reflexivity, purpose, mastery, autonomy—I examine teachers' decision-making and/or actions within social contexts such as their interactions with students, current social issues, school settings and geographical features.

While the number of teachers who took actions or envision trying to overcome the challenges of teaching difficult topics is low, those who did so demonstrated a capacity for critical reflection on their teaching. Their reflexivity was mainly triggered by students' responses to specific topics and the teachers' interactions with the students. Even though reflexivity and other dimensions of teacher agency are overlapping and mutually influential, teachers' reflections on conventional teaching methods were pivotal when devising new approaches to teaching—an act that manifests teacher autonomy. Enacting or envisioning new approaches to teaching difficult topics are summarized in three categories: integrating Chinese and Japanese perspectives into lessons, distinguishing between a state's policies and its peoples, and centering critical global perspectives to overcome "us vs. them" attitudes.

Integrating Chinese and Japanese Perspectives

Integrating Chinese and Japanese perspectives into lessons on difficult topics—versus dismissing them as non-legitimate—has not been seriously considered in Korean social studies classrooms. The presence of students from China and Japan and questions from mainstream Korean students, however, have made teachers like Heechul Kang reflect on and change his former teaching practices. Kang noted:

> One of my students asked me if Goguryeo3 was really part of Korea, and if the people who lived in Goguryeo were really ethnic Koreans. The student questioned whether we could claim that Korea has an exclusive ownership for the old kingdom if the people lived in the Northern region—between Korea and China—and were nomads. That question was very new to me and refreshed my view of teaching the topic. Now, I want to provide an opportunity for my students to discuss different perspectives [rather than exposing them to a one-sided view].

Having a Korean student who questioned the social studies curriculum regarding Goguryeo, combined with the earlier description of finding out he had a Chinese student after criticizing China in class, triggered reflexivity in Heechul Kang, leading to deliberate change in how he taught difficult topics. Reflexivity, then, was in this case strongly associated with teachers' interactions with students—a student's national background and a student's response to a lesson. These critical reflective moments also spurred Heechul Kang's aspiration to

further his learning and recalibrate his teaching goals for social studies—mastery and purpose, respectively of teacher agency. He continued:

> I need to learn more history to provide different views on Goguryeo's origins in terms of its authentic link to Korea or China. I want to know more. The same goes for the territorial dispute about Dokdo4 between Korea and Japan. I realize if I provide only a one-sided perspective, students have [false] impressions about other countries; that is, they don't have any legitimate rationale regarding the issues. That causes conflicts, so I thought my teaching approach was not right.

His reflections facilitated his plan to learn more about the topic, especially given his re-evaluation of conventional methods by revisiting the purpose of social studies education—giving students the capacity to make informed decisions through the evaluation of different opinions and the promotion of critical thinking for democratic citizenship education.

Differentiation of a State's Policy and Its People

The difficulties of teaching Japanese and Chinese history and culture lie in teachers' concerns about the feelings of students from diverse backgrounds and mainstream Korean students' negative perspectives on people from China and Japan. As mentioned earlier, most teachers stated that teaching about invasions of Korea and Japanese colonization are particularly difficult and are further complicated by negative sentiment of Korean students toward people from (and in) China and Japan.

Teachers' concerns sometimes prompt them to find new approaches. Hankyu Ko, who had a student whose mother was Japanese and was aware of the majority of mainstream Korean students' negative attitudes toward Japan, uncovered deliberate teachable moments when he started the unit on Japanese history. Ko stated:

> In the National Curriculum, it is necessary to address historical relations between Korea and Japan. As soon as I started the unit, mainstream students immediately brought up their views, saying "Japan is bad" due to current issues. Since I knew I have a student from Japanese background in the class, I intentionally clarified that the Japanese military government [during invasions and the colonization] are not equal to people in Japan and from Japan.

Ko's keen awareness of students' ongoing sentiments, historical fact, and current issues such as Fukushima's nuclear water release prompted his intentional differentiation as a starting point for the Japan unit—purpose, in terms of teacher agency. His intentional clarification to avoid any misconception among the mainstream students and provide support for the student of Japanese background changed his previous teaching methods of not differentiating between government policy and people, demonstrating his autonomy in teacher agency.

Another similar case is found with Sangyeon Kim. She taught geography in a vocational high school in a metropolitan area. Her school had relatively more students from diverse backgrounds because the pathway provided more opportunities for jobs and academic advancement to college for non-mainstream Koreans. She had students from Japan and shared her perspectives toward sensitive issues related to Japan in terms of how she approached it with her student whose father was Japanese:

> I had a student. Her father was Japanese and her mother was Korean. Her classmates had no idea that she had Japanese father, but I was careful to address things related to Japan since I worried about her feeling.... I visited Japan for a while, which made me understand better about how my student feels. So, I intentionally clarified that people in Japan should not be treated the same way that the Japanese

government is treated.

Projecting the impact of differentiation on students' perspectives was mainly stimulated by class dynamics, including students' emotions. Thus, these teachers took advantage of teachable moments and made the differentiation, even though it is not in the curriculum. This subtle but clear teaching enactment is significant in terms of capturing dimensions of teacher agency and its long-term impact on students' shifting perspectives.

Disrupting the Binary of Us vs. Them Attitudes

Teachers in the study worried about mainstream students' negative attitudes toward China and Japan. They also recognized a pervasive ignorance about Muslim culture and growing Islamophobia. Teachers who shared new approaches to difficult topics emphasized the harm of divisiveness with "us versus them" attitudes (Said, 1994) in contrast to shifting perspectives on citizenship to a more global outlook.

For example, Heyou Choi's reflections and new ideas were prominent. He teaches middle school history in a Seoul suburb where the population has diversified in terms of race and ethnicity. His students' parents included Koreans who had immigrated to China and then returned, defectors from North Korea, and Russians. He frequently hears people speaking Chinese in his neighborhood and often talks to one of his daughter's close friends whose mother is Chinese. His experience in school and at home facilitated his reflections on his methods and new approaches to teaching history. He said:

> Nowadays, I have intentionally tried not to use "uri" [meaning "us," a Korean pronoun that captures collective consciousness] and corrected students' common use of terms such as "us versus them" by reminding them that we [Koreans] are not pure-blooded but have had people from different races and ethnicities for a long time.

His intentionality of avoiding binary terms illustrates the aspect of purpose in teacher agency. He sees the importance of changing students' mindset in the emerging multicultural society and has tried to provide more accurate representations of Korean history.

Further, his reflections on the divisive term "uri" also caused him to recognize his limited knowledge about Muslim culture. He said, "I am now educating myself about Muslim history since I realized that I was narrow-minded and ignorant about it. I have read a lot of books regarding the topic." In terms of teacher agency, he demonstrated simultaneously autonomy by enacting new methods and mastery by educating himself about Muslim culture beyond the curriculum requirement.

Choi's efforts to deconstruct the dichotomy of "us vs. them" also made him shift his definition of Korean identity to a wider geographic scale, saying that "rather than what it means to be Korean, I would prefer to teach that we are [all] included in this vast Eurasia."

Jihee Cha, an elementary teacher in a rural area, tried to avoid othering Muslims by decentering Western views of Muslim culture, saying:

> I want to introduce more Muslim perspectives on world history, like the British influence on Muslim countries, which caused political conflicts among Arabic countries, especially if I have students from Muslim families.

Cha has had various experiences with students from diverse backgrounds. Her town was close to a city where Koreans protested the construction of a Mosque. Her experiences with students and the local context are closely associated with her critical reflections on the Korean social studies curriculum, which is mainly infused with Eurocentric views. These combined factors spurred her vision of new approaches to teaching Muslim

history and culture rather than accepting the dominant curriculum narratives, which is the evidence of activating her agency.

As such, this study argues that multiple aspects of teacher agency within the decision-making process and outcome can be fully understood in the specific context of teachers' experiences in the local situation within the social change.

Discussion and Conclusion

While some studies have addressed teachers' experiences of difficulties in addressing the topics related to Chinese, Japanese, and Muslim cultures, as well as history in the social studies curriculum, few studies have detailed the contexts. As difficult topics that teachers face need to be examined under socio-historical contexts to avoid any facile applications of policies and ideas, this study provides detailed and specific configurations of teacher experiences with difficult topics in the context of Korea's emerging multiculturalism (Gay, 2015; Misco, 2012).

Specifically, I argue that teachers' detailed lived experience around China, Japan, and Islam sheds light on topics that were previously not difficult to teach in the social studies curriculum, but which have become difficult with the presence of people from these backgrounds in the classrooms or in society, in general. This is in contrast to other new controversial topics such as foreign workers' treatment and human rights for minority groups that arise in a multicultural society.

First of all, the analysis illustrates the dynamics at play in classrooms with mainstream Korean students and students from diverse backgrounds, combined with specific contexts such as current social issues, dominant narratives toward diverse groups, low-income areas, areas with more immigrants or foreigners, and different grade levels and teaching subjects. Teachers with mainstream students primarily find it difficult to address the topics of China and Japan due to students' bias and stereotypes toward people from the cultural heritage, and nationalistic views as the number of diverse people increases in the society. This study confirms the urgency of examining Koreans' own biases and deeply rooted nationalism that educational researchers and educators have studied, and calls for more rigorous endeavors, especially in relation to these two neighboring countries (Chang, 2015; Kang, 2020; Kim & Choi, 2020) within the consideration of detailed contexts.

Teachers who had students from these countries' heritage expressed their concern about the students' feelings when addressing Korean history related to invasion by China and Japan, and when witnessing the mainstream students' negative sentiments regarding social issues of territory conflicts or the water release of the Fukushima nuclear plant. In both cases, teachers' conventional methods of teaching such topics, and allowing nationalistic views, are seen as a new challenge. Furthermore, teachers who used to have a similar nationalistic view realize they need to change, but still do not have a clear direction for teaching such topics.

Teachers' difficult experiences of teaching Muslim culture and history with mainstream Korean students are few but still significant in terms of recognizing their limited knowledge and beliefs (Hejeong Lee's case) and identifying the danger of the Muslim stereotype that students hold (Myeongchul Lee's case). As teachers see more people from Muslim culture in Korea, teachers become more aware of their own lack of knowledge and understanding toward the group, especially when faced with the mainstream Koreans' growing anti-Muslim sentiment in relation to current issues such as protests at Mosque construction sites.

There were not many teachers who had students from Muslim culture, but the case of Hankyu Ko sheds light on the importance of building teachers' cultural competence in communication with students and parents, as well as differentiating knowledge about Islam and Muslim culture, especially for elementary teachers who take care of the whole lives of students. This finding enhances the previous studies on teachers' perspectives and experiences of Muslim students and culture mainly from Central Asia (Lim et al., 2023) by identifying more nuanced and various practices within Muslim cultures and challenges of teaching and caring for students from Middle East countries where domestic conflicts forced them to leave their country unexpectedly.

As such, the detailed illustration provides insightful contexts for understanding how teachers view difficult topics in current Korean society. In previous studies (Kang, 2020; Kim, 2022; Hong, et al., 2023) of topics difficult to teach in a multicultural society, no detailed contexts were examined, so this study has provided more concrete contexts; the detailed contexts are critical to understanding difficult topics in social studies, which is grounded in specific society (Hess, 2004; Misco, 2012). The social-historical contexts inform 1) the scopes and degrees of difficulties that teachers face or feel, 2) how the fluidity of difficulties are seen, and 3) how the complex phases of agency are understood. The degree and variety of teachers' experiences with the topics of China, Japan, and Islam differ depending on teachers' past or current experience with students from these cultural backgrounds. It is evident that teachers with direct contact with such students had richer experiences and more insightful reflections.

Then, knowing the teachers' detailed lived experiences regarding the topics called for another task: What needs to be done as social studies teachers to overcome these difficult topics? This question prompted this study to move further, seeking cases of new methods that teachers employed or envisioned through the lens of critical global citizenship education (CGCE).

Simultaneously, analysis was made to identify processes and outcomes of teachers' decision-making for change through the concept of teacher agency (King & Nomikou, 2018; Pantic, 2015). The framework is a useful tool to capture multiple aspects such as teachers' reflections/monitoring of their teaching methods (reflexivity), revisiting the intent of teaching social studies (purpose), building knowledge of topics (mastery/competence), and making decisions and taking actions for a new teaching approach (autonomy), leading to significant results regarding the new employment of methods and ideas. However, regarding the practice of new methods, considering temporality is also important. Emirbayer and Mishe (1998) provided the temporal aspect of agency, which implies a flexible and fluid agency rather than fixed individual disposition/capacity. Capturing agency of individual teachers at a particular moment is a way of understanding the complexity of individual agency and social structures with regard to the flow of time instead of measuring teacher agency as an immutable individual disposition (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Emirbayer & Mishe, 1998). This perspective provides that nothing is fixed and there will be possible changes in demonstrating agency in the future due to different issues, grade levels, student dynamics, and topics in social studies. This study did not examine teachers' intention for change, including their orientation of decision-making for future teaching; teachers' experiences, especially reflections on their past teaching, such as Heechul Kang's case shed light on teacher agency of changing practices, though Kang didn't mention his vision of different methods. Further studies on the relationship of teacher agency and teacher future orientation need to be investigated (Varpanen et al., 2022).

Thus, through intersecting CGCE and teacher agency framework, teachers' employment or visions of new approaches are explicated into three themes: integrating Chinese and Japanese perspectives in the history

units, differentiating between a state's policy and its people, and deconstructing the binary "us versus them." The teachers interviewed demonstrated critical reflection of disrupting the fixed concept of states/borders and intensifying nationalism and transformed their views and practices accordingly (Gaudelli, 2016; Andreotti, 2006). Critical reflections on teaching and employment of methods—manifestation of teacher agency—are a platform for advancing justice and equity education when facing difficulties in social studies classroom rather than avoiding them.

In sum, this study has illuminated the importance of considering multifaced components of teacher experiences and decision-making processes when approaching difficult topics in the social studies classroom in an emerging multicultural society. Recognizing the mutual relationship of individual capacity and reflection within contexts of specific experiences with students, school settings, and local features provides a deeper understanding of current teacher experiences regarding these newly difficult topics.

Further, the study sheds light on aspects of new practices that teachers employ and envision. In doing so, the study can help teachers and teacher educators advance the configuration of theory and practice in the arena of newly difficult topics and help create more equitable practices in the context of emerging multiculturalism.

Lastly, the study did not observe teachers in practice, which would have allowed researchers to capture actual enactments and the ways student dynamics affect teachers' manifestations of agency when teaching difficult topics. Teacher educators and scholars need to further investigate these phenomena through the triangulation of teacher interviews, actual teaching, and teaching artifacts (e.g., lesson plans, teaching materials), which would provide more detailed and solid evidence as teachers address difficult topics in an emerging multicultural society.

Notes

1. NVivo is used to organize codes and facilitate retrieval of interview data effectively. The visualization of codes using NVivo is provided in Appendix B. The codes in the visual images are more comprehensive since this study is a subset of a bigger study. For instance, the code "culturally responsive teaching" is included since it was one of topics that participants were asked.
2. The rate of students from diverse backgrounds (Damunhwa student in Korean term) comprise 3.4% of the total students (Korea Damunhwa news, https://www.kmcn.kr/news/article.html?no=4570).
3. Goguryeo was a Korean kingdom located in Northeastern China, and central parts of the Korean Peninsula.
4. Dokdo is an island located between Korea and Japan. Both countries have claimed its ownership since post-Japanese colonization. Currently, Korea governs the area, but the controversy is ongoing.

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