An Introduction of Integrated Studies (Tööölt ajil) in Mongolia

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The double reform including the extension of the education system from ten years to eleven years and the beginning of competency-based education from 2004, a new subject “Integrated Studies” was created as a component of Mongolia’s National standard of education. The purpose of this research is to reveal the factors and the process of the introduction of Integrated Studies in Mongolia. This paper provides an overview of curriculum reform since the transition of social change in the early 1990s. Mongolia has been trying to establish a new system of education that will meet the demands of the market economy and international standards. When Mongolia was looking for a subject that provides the students with the opportunity to learn independently as well as to investigate and find solutions to surrounding problems, educational experts discovered Integrated Studies in primary and secondary schools in Japan.

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I. Introduction

Even two decades after the collapse of Socialism, Mongolia is still on its way to construct a new education system to adapt to the democratic or market economy system. The first decade is said to be the decade of decline (1), and in the second decade educational reforms were under progress at both a school and country level. Responding to the domestic demands and receiving the international assistance from a number of sponsors, Mongolia is now in the process of reforming its educational system and curriculum. One notable reform is the competency-based education reform which began in 2004. Parallel with competency-based education, the educational system of general education schools was extended from ten years to eleven years in 2004, and then to a twelve year system in 2008. As competency-based education was introduced, the curriculum reform made major changes to school subjects. A new individual subject called “Integrated Studies” was added to general school education. Integrated Studies aims for students to investigate the solution-waiting issues within their schools, local communities, regions or country and solve the problems by collaborating with teachers and fellow students. With this subject, both student-centered education and competency-based education are expected to be performed in the most legitimate way. Student-centered education was first attempted in the early 1990s, however it has not been successful because teachers have been experiencing...
difficulties with its implementation. Previous research of Integrated Studies has shown that students and teachers feel that it is becoming a very practical and interesting subject. It can be suggested that the introduction of this subject was the result of many challenges for reform of both Mongolia itself and international institutions or countries. Hence, the aim of this research is to examine the factors and the process of the introduction of Integrated Studies.

Research was conducted by interviewing educational experts from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (MECS, but The Ministry has changed its name several times in last 20 years) and the Institute of Education, educational professors from the Mongolian National University of Education, two school principals from schools in Ulaanbaatar, and the visits to three general education schools located in Ulaanbaatar.

II. Curriculum reform

A. Double reforms: Curriculum formation and curriculum itself

In 2002 the Government of Mongolia established a new education law which extended the general school system from ten years to eleven years. With this new law the age for entering school was lowered from eight to seven years, and compulsory education was extended from eight to nine years. In 2004, as the new system began its pre-implementation in the schools, new curriculum was also experimented in model schools. Along with the reform of the general school system, competency-based education was introduced to school curriculum. Starting from 2001, the “Primary and Secondary School Standard” new project was conducted by a team of about 100 members including educational experts, researchers, school principals and teachers. The project team released twenty one standards and in December of 2004, these standards were validated by the National Center for Standardization and Metrology. The new National standard is for the competency based education and for the new eleven year system of general education schools. The first National Standard of 1998 sought to develop the students’ knowledge, whereas the 2004-year standard focused on the students’ abilities. As shown in the table below, the two standards differ in many aspects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1998</th>
<th>2004</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improve students’ knowledge</td>
<td>Improve students’ skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on academic structure</td>
<td>Based on competency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure knowledge specifically</td>
<td>Structure knowledge generally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach all content in the Core curriculum (not flexible)</td>
<td>Responds to knowledge and skills that are practical to students for learning, living and working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher teach the subjects</td>
<td>Teachers and students practice the activities in a collaborative way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate students based on acquisition of knowledge</td>
<td>Evaluate students based on competency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Includes contents that do not concern specialities or the needs of students, schools and local area</td>
<td>Practice selective contents concerning specialities and needs of the students, schools and local area</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The integration of subjects and the creation of non-subject fields were completely new features decided by the MECS. Non-subject fields included electives, integrated studies and activities decided by the schools, and from 2006 Integrated Studies officially became part of national curriculum when the eleven-year national standard finally settled.

It is important to note that when the Education Law was renewed in 2002, new phrases such as “to raise student’s ability to learn independently” were included in part of the primary education, basic education (primary and lower secondary education), and complete-secondary (basic education and upper secondary education) education laws.

Why did Mongolia begin competency-based education? According to Mongolian experts Mongolia is far behind the global level of education, but has the potential to catch up by
The Introduction of Integrated Studies \((Tosolt ajil)\) in Mongolia following international trends. Competency-based education is one of these trends. Around 2000, a MECS official introduced the four pillars of learning: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be which were featured in the Delors report (1996) from UNESCO. In 2001 Russia changed its educational curriculum as documented in the "Concept of modernization of Russian education until 2010" by the State Council of Russian Federation. Since then, four competencies: K1, K2, K3, K4 were defined for primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education level instead of academic knowledge for teachers to use as basis for constructing their lessons and evaluating students.\(^5\)

While MECS and the Institute of Education had completed the National standard for the eleven-year educational system, the Government of Mongolia again revised the Education Law in 2006. School entrance age was lowered to six years and general education system was extended to twelve years. Adapting to the new Education Law, MECS created a new Study Plan for general education schools. Issued in 2008, "Policy, Plan and Method to switch of the general education system to twelve years" is a document which outlines the extension of the schools' system and of the new curriculum formation. Here non-subject fields include Electives, Civic education and Integrated Studies. The New National Standard for all levels of school is in process of reform at the present.

Another new trend of global development "imported" to Mongolian education, followed the shift of education to a twelve-year system. This trend, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), was proposed by UNESCO in 2002 which declaring 2005-2014 as the "Decade of ESD". Curriculum reforms to include ESD in all levels of general education schools with twelve-year system are on-going.

B. The Path to reform: Domestic demand and international assistance

\textit{Historical background}

Following the historical event of the Mongolian People's Revolution victory in 1921, Mongolia became the world's second socialist country after the Soviet Union. During the age of socialism which lasted for about 70 years, Mongolian education developed based on the model of education in the Soviet Union. In the late 1980s, the democratic movement started in Mongolia under the influence of Perestroika in the Soviet Union, and the fall of the Berlin wall. Mongolia changed its political allies, and declared a new constitution in 1992. Educational reforms started around the same time as the change of the social system.

Opposing the educational law of the socialist era of which the purpose was to train pupils to respect and obey Socialism\(^6\), in 1991 a new educational law was enacted, containing words such as humanism, democracy, education for lifelong learning, children's needs and so on. This included eliminating ideological content and shifting from teacher-centered to student-centered curriculum. It was essential to reform the base of educational system and to revise the structure and content of education.

But the disintegration of the Soviet Union led to a cut in the economic and political aids from Russia which had covered a large amount of GDP in Mongolia stopped. This resulted in social disorder which also caused a number of problems such as the number of children out of school increasing to 20100 in 1991 from 3662 in 1990\(^5\), and large numbers of teachers leaving their jobs because of low income. During the socialist period even some textbooks were translations of Russian textbooks. Though the social system was already in process of transition to market economy, the old textbooks were still used in schools until the new textbooks were first published in the late 1990s.

In the socialist period one purpose of education of the People's Republic of Mongolia was to support socialism. Every detail of educational content and instructional methods were decided by the government, and the teachers' role was to convey this to the students. In contrast there has been a relaxation of state control over curriculum since 1990 and education became democratic. There was a need for education to meet the needs of the local community, and some decisions on the educational matters were left to the discretion of the schools and teachers.

In 1995, the Mongolian government prioritized the development of education and renewed the educational law. It was renewed again in 1998, and in the same year Standard-based education was introduced and the first National standards were established. The National standards were organized into core curriculum, which covered
75-80% of the curriculum, and curriculum decided by the schools. The teachers of the schools were given the responsibility to organize their own curriculum to suit the needs of their school and local community. Thus this new flexible educational system enabled schools to create their own curricula based on the needs of the local community, and demanded efforts from schools.

New instruction that came with international support

Although Mongolia started creating a new system of education to meet the demands of the market economy, new educational policies heavily relied on global standards and international assistance.

The Mongolian government sought for international assistance from 1991 to implement the reform of the primary and secondary school sector. The earliest foreign assistance for educational reform was from Denmark. Known as DANIDA project, Danish International Development Agency responded to the request of the Government of Mongolia and started their support by providing technical assistance for the school reform in 1992. Entirely different from the education before 1990s, student-centered education and the integration of subjects were introduced to Mongolian schools. Published by the Institution of Teaching Content and Method in 1994 “Tendency to integrate subjects in primary schools – Developing instruction content and methods 1992-1994” strongly encouraged the integration of subjects in primary schools. This was a report about the DANIDA project implementation. The project was extended for another few years and the project team published a monthly paper, “Training” (Surgalt). In this paper many examples and new instruction methods which encourage student-centered education were introduced by the experts from the Ministry of Education and the Institute who attended the project. Even though the project was not delivered at a country level, the new instruction method, especially project-based learning can be considered to be relevant to the present Integrated Studies. This relevance will be examined in the further research.

In 1999, the Ministry of Enlightenment (now MECS) published 3 series of guidelines for school principals and teachers. They are: Innovation on teaching technology, Relations between subject-cooperation and teachers, Teaching Methods. This is a report of teacher trainings and the presentations for the strategy called “Fostering innovation in schools” acted from 1997. Here again, integrated content of subjects and project-based learning are reported by the same experts who worked and attended for the DANIDA project.

One of the major international donors from mid 1990s to present is the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The first comprehensive review of the Mongolian education system “Mongolia Human Resource Development and Educational Reform Project”, also called “Master Plan for 1993-1994”, was sponsored by the ADB and developed by experts from developed countries. This also resulted in the influence of American education on Mongolia. These influences can especially be seen in education policy reforms such as decentralization of educational finance (7). Unfortunately, there is insufficient information available on the curriculum reform of general schools.

The “School-2001” programme was also conducted by the Mongolian Foundation for Open Society (8) during 1998-2001. This programme aimed to introduce and support the implementation of the education standard and curriculum reform in primary and secondary schools at school and classroom levels. Integration of the subjects was strongly encouraged in the “School 2001” programme.

Recently, another project that aims to develop teachers’ instruction of Integrated Studies began in 2006, and was extended for another three years. This project is funded by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA). However, the information on the effects of the project at a school level is known only available in the model schools at present.

Starting from early the 1990s a number of projects and programmes were implemented with advice from international donor countries and organizations. It is reasonable to suggest that these various reforms and continuous challenges resulted in the creation of the new subject, Integrated Studies.

III. Creation of Integrated Studies
The Introduction of Integrated Studies (Tasolts ajil) in Mongolia

A. Process to the new subject

Why was the new non-subject field established in 2004 when the National standard and curriculum changed, and how were Integrated Studies added to that field?

Student-centered education has been attempted since 1990s but has not had any success. One of the reasons for this is that teachers had limited knowledge about student-centered education or no potential to implement student-centered learning. Another reason is that there were no conditions for children to learn and work independently. The inclusion of the new non-subject field was necessary to provide students with a chance to learn and work independently and to participate in learning.

Social disorder has continued since 1990, Mongolia has been facing a number of social problems such as poverty, security, crime and so on. There was a need for the ability to solve the problems faced in daily life. Mongolian education experts attempted to introduce new curriculum that contained factors to raise students' ability to solve these problems on their own.

The experts sought a subject that

- Allows students to learn or study independently
- Allows students to recognize the problems that they face in their daily lives and work out how to solve them through group work
- Promotes further development of knowledge
- Is practical
- Is not a standard subject

Interestingly, during this research it was found that Mongolian educational experts imported Integrated Studies from Japan. They discovered Integrated Studies (Sougoutekina gakushuu no jikan) in Japanese schools during training in Japan and realized that it was exactly what they were seeking, as mentioned by GBatbold in the interview below, who was the chief of the Primary and Secondary Education Department at that time.

“We found that the Integrated Studies in Japanese school is the class activity that we were looking for. Students learn independently and creatively, and solve problems through group activities. We couldn’t find such an activity in other country’s schools.” (Telephone interview on 2009.11.4)

But why from Japan? As Mongolian experts say they were doing a comparison of education of several countries to use as a reference. An expert of the Primary and Secondary Education Department in MECS was interviewed twice. Before MECS, Ch.Gantsetseg worked for the Institute of Education during period in which the eleven-year school curriculum was developed.

“We did a comparison between the education of many countries such as Germany, Russia, Korea, Japan, Turkey and Denmark. We were able to obtain a greater amount of and more specific information about Japanese schools’ Integrated Studies. And also we had many advisors from Japan in MECS as well as in the Mongolian-Japanese Center. We read and analyzed Japanese national curriculum standards in English on the internet.” (Interviewed on 2009.10.26)

One interesting point can be seen in the process of the deciding the name of the subject. During this process, more focus was upon on the learning process of the subject than its instruction or the meaning of the name. Although it is a very unfamiliar name as subject name, its direct translation to Mongolian is Project-based learning (Tasolts ajil). This shows that it was expected that the process of the subject is to be run through a project like method. Moreover Ch.Gantsetseg says as below.

“In Japanese schools it is called Integrated Studies. But when we translated the name to Mongolian, it was not very natural. In our school there is no class hour “Special Activities”, so there was a suggestion to name it Special Activities too. Discussion after discussion we decided to name it Project-based learning because the method used is project-based learning. The chief of the department GBatbold and expert D.Luvsandorj named it as we proposed.” (Interviewed on 2009.10.26)

But in this paper we call it Integrated Studies as it is
originally called in Japanese schools.

It must also be mentioned that in the pre-implementation year of the eleven-year education curriculum the name was Period for Integrated Studies (Gakushuin shidou youryou) exactly as in the Course of Study (Gakushuin shidou youryou) in Japan.

In addition, when the experiment of new curriculum was implemented in model schools in the school year of 2004-2005, Integrated Studies (or Period for Integrated Studies) was practiced in all grades from one to ten. But when evaluated the pre-implementation, it was considered as inappropriate from grades one to two due to the young age of students. Therefore in the final enactment of the new curriculum began in the school year of 2006-2007, Integrated Studies officially became a component of the national curriculum and was implemented for one hour per week from grades three to nine of general education schools.

B. Content of Integrated Studies

With the new national standard, schools were given a certain amount of discretion to determine the content of the subject to suit the needs of the school and local communities. The government issued no textbooks or instructions for Integrated Studies, and instead teachers and students were encouraged to seek out resources and methods relevant to students’ interests.

A document “Content and method guideline for Kindergarten preparatory grade or General school “0” grade” issued in 2004, was the first to inform school teachers about Integrated Studies. The method guideline include: what is Integrated Studies, how to define problems, how to plan, how to implement and how to evaluate. Here, Integrated Studies is defined as an investigation of solution-seeking issues around the school, local community, region or country and look for the solution by the collaboration of teachers and students to research the problem from various angles. In the process of defining the problem students are to be divided into groups according to their interests and discuss the problems.

In the following year some sample contents were introduced in the “General School Plan of Study in transition year of 2005-2006” issued by MECS and the Institute of Education.

**Content**

**Level: Primary**
- Self-discovery
- Respecting parents and elders
- Dressing suitably for the season
- Self hygiene

**Level: Lower secondary**
- Self-development
- School environment
- Dormitory environment
- Neighbor community
- Development in the local area
- Nature, climate phenomena, drought, dzud (extremely harsh winter), desertification
- Social and cultural problems of the local area

**Level: Upper secondary**
- Preparation for vocational education
- Local government system
- Industrial and service issues
- Society and economy of the local area or province
- Mechanism of political and public organization

Furthermore, in 2008 a document issued by MECS and ADB, “Policy, Plan and Method to transit the general education system to twelve-years” it is written that “With the Integrated Studies contents of civic education and education for sustainable development are to be learned and schools will organize it through class-time social-work or short-term study”. But the national standards for the twelve-year system are still on-reform and the final enactments are incomplete. There is a possibility that the content of Integrated Studies might change from now on.

Here, it is important to mention the “Teaching Methods Improvement Project towards Children's Development in Mongolia” project. Working in nine model schools from two provinces and the capital city Ulaanbaatar, numbers of practices have been developed by the teachers of the model schools and advisors from both Japan and Mongolia, specifically professors from Tokyo Gakugei University and National University of Education. It can be said that the implementation of Integrated Studies at a school level is being encouraged by this project and there is a possibility that Mongolia’s Integrated Studies will be influenced by the
practices of Japan’s Integrated Studies.

IV. Conclusion

Education in Mongolia has become democratic, flexible and competency-based. And as a result of those reforms the new subject Integrated Studies was added to the National curriculum. However, the reforms are still in transition and more observations are necessary to see how the reforms might change direction. Asanuma (2008) emphasizes that when practicing Integrated Studies it is important to include Mongolian traditional factors as well.

It is possible that Mongolia has been focusing more on importing education policies from sponsors than keeping the demands of the time. Japan is reducing the time spent on Integrated Studies from the new Course of Study that is to start in 2 years in all levels of primary and secondary education. It is uncertain if Mongolia will also reduce the time spent on Integrated Studies, or if any other further changes will be made.

This research will continue to examine the future of the Integrated Studies, its spread and the practice, and how it is taking root in Mongolia’s educational field.

Note

(1) Steiner-Khamsi 2006 and Slagdjar 2003
(2) Shidohou kaizen project [Teaching Methods Improvement Project] Newsletter, MECS and JICA 2006-2007
(3) Friendly conversation with D. Munkhjargal on 2010.12.16. He was the chief of Primary and Secondary Education Department of the Ministry of Education from 1996 to 2000
(4) Education Law of People’s Republic of Mongolia, Article 3 Item 21-2
(6) Instruction Method (Surgaltin arga zui) p54.1999. Ministry of Enlightenment, Ulaanbaatar
(7) Steiner-Khamsi 2006, Weidman 2001
(8) Mongolian Foundation for Open Society is an NGO that has been actively promoting and implementing education sector reform since 1998
(9) Institute of Education works next to MECS, mainly on the curriculum development.
(11) He is a Japanese advisor for the project “Teaching Methods Improvement Project towards Children’s Development in Mongolia” supported by JICA from 2006 to 2009.

Reference


Begs, N. Bolovsroiin hogjiiin onol, argazuin asuulhau [Theoretical and methodological issues about education development], Ulaanbaatar, 2005.

Begs, N. Bolovsroiin hogjiiin onol, argazuin asuulhau [Theoretical and methodological issues about education development], Ulaanbaatar, 2007.

