

A survey on adolescents' patriotic cognition—a case study of students at D Middle School in Dongsheng District

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Abstract. Patriotic education among adolescents is widely regarded as a top priority. Based on a survey conducted at D Middle School in Dongsheng District, it is found that junior secondary school students exhibit a distinctive cognitive pattern in their understanding of patriotism, characterized by "knowing the nation but not their hometown". At the level of content and conceptual hierarchy, students often lack a clear understanding of the relationship between loving the people and loving the country, and are unable to fully grasp the connections among patriotism, support for the Party, and commitment to socialism. Moreover, in terms of how patriotism is expressed, most students show a lack of "patriotic imagination"; they do not possess concrete directions or plans for practicing patriotism, and tend to respond in a formulaic manner, such as "studying hard to serve the country". Accordingly, school-based curricula should strengthen the integration of local knowledge with national knowledge, while helping students understand the unity between loving one's parents, loving one's hometown, and loving one's country, as well as the unity among patriotism, support for the Party, and commitment to socialism. In addition, practical activities beyond the classroom should be enriched to deepen students' patriotic cognition.

Keywords: D Middle School, adolescents, patriotic cognition, patriotic imagination

1. Introduction

Patriotism, as the core of the national spirit of the Chinese nation, permeates the very soul of the Chinese people and runs throughout the entire process of the nation's formation and development [1]. Consequently, patriotic education has become a powerful means of fostering a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation. Research by Piaget indicates that children are generally unable to form an appropriate emotional and value-based understanding of the concept of the "motherland" until after the age of twelve [2]. This age coincides with the period of junior secondary education. For this reason, students at D Middle School were selected as the subjects of this study.

2. Data description

D Middle School has a total of 46 classes across three grade levels, with approximately 1,850 students, averaging about 40 students per class. As all grades adopt a "sunshine class assignment" policy based on

random allocation, intra-class differences within the same grade are greater than inter-class differences. In cases where within-group variance exceeds between-group variance, cluster sampling is appropriate. Accordingly, 6 classes were sampled from Grade 7, and 7 classes each from Grades 8 and 9, yielding a total of 20 classes and 803 students. A total of 803 questionnaires were distributed and all were returned. Among them, 667 were valid, resulting in an effective response rate of 83%. Of the 667 respondents, 213 were Grade 7 students, 264 were Grade 8 students, and 190 were Grade 9 students. The youngest respondent was 13 years old and the oldest 17, with an average age of 14.48. The sample included 341 male and 326 female students.

3. Data analysis

3.1. Analysis of patriotic knowledge cognition

The questionnaire examined junior secondary school students' understanding of patriotic knowledge across three levels. The first is the national level, assessed through three indicators: China's territorial area, population size, and number of ethnic groups. The second is the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region level, assessed through its territorial area, population size, and east–west length. The third is the Ordos City level, assessed through five indicators: territorial area, population, Mongolian population, city flower, and city tree.

At the national level, the correct response rates for territorial area, population size, and number of ethnic groups were 58.92%, 83.21%, and 93.10%, respectively. The highest accuracy was observed for the number of ethnic groups, while the lowest was for the national territorial area. Responses at the national level were primarily associated with grade level. As shown in Figure 1, knowledge related to territory, population, and ethnic groups varies across grades. For territorial knowledge, the overall trend shows that the higher the grade, the higher the accuracy rate, indicating that "national territorial area", a key topic in junior secondary geography examinations, receives greater emphasis in Grade 9.

Regarding the number of ethnic groups, differences across the three grades are minimal. However, for population size, Grade 8 students achieved the highest accuracy rate, even surpassing Grade 9 students. This is mainly because this topic is covered in the first volume of Grade 8 geography, meaning that students in this grade have recently studied it and retain a higher level of familiarity.

At the level of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, the correct response rates for territorial area, population size, and east–west length were 1.35%, 0.75%, and 0.75%, respectively.

At the level of Ordos City, the correct response rates for territorial area, population, Mongolian population, city flower, and city tree were 3.9%, 2.1%, 0.6%, 1.2%, and 1.5%, respectively.

These findings indicate that students demonstrate extremely low levels of accuracy in their knowledge of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Ordos City. Moreover, no significant correlations were found with grade level, household registration status, or length of residence in Ordos. This suggests a notable deficiency in local knowledge within patriotic education. The classroom serves as the primary channel through which students acquire patriotic knowledge. However, in the nationally unified textbooks (People's Education Press edition) used in Ordos, knowledge related to regional and local conditions is neither a central component of the curriculum nor a focal point in entrance examinations. As a result, such knowledge has not been effectively incorporated into students' cognitive framework of patriotic knowledge, nor has it become an integral part of patriotic education.

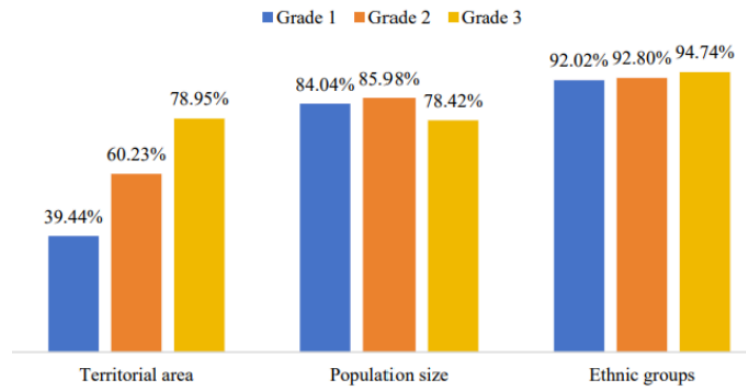


Figure 1. National-level patriotic knowledge

3.2. Analysis of the content and hierarchical cognition of patriotism

Love for a country's landscapes, its history, culture, and people, as well as love for the nation itself, constitute the principal components of patriotic education [3]. Sukhomlinsky observed that "the most intimate memories in a person's emotional life are invariably tied to the place where they grew up and to those who cared for them. When, in adulthood, they come to understand the greatness of the motherland, memories of their hometown, parents, and siblings often imbue their patriotism with vivid emotional intensity" [4]. In this sense, the starting point of patriotism lies in love for one's hometown, which in turn begins with love for one's parents, relatives, and close associates. From this foundation, affection for family extends to love for fellow citizens; attachment to one's native land broadens into appreciation for the country's vast landscapes; and fondness for local customs and traditions develops into admiration for the nation's long-standing history and culture.

Ultimately, love for landscapes, people, history, and culture converges in love for the state. The core of a state lies in its political authority; without such authority, there can be no state [5]. For the Chinese people today, the object of patriotic attachment is the People's Republic of China. Articles 1 and 2 of the *Constitution of the People's Republic of China* clearly state that the PRC is "a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants", and that "all power belongs to the people". In terms of its political nature, the socialist state represents the interests of the people, and this state was founded by the Communist Party of China. In this sense, support for the Party, commitment to socialism, and patriotism are understood as fundamentally unified.

A review of the literature indicates that patriotism, in both content and hierarchy, encompasses landscapes, people, history and culture, as well as state authority. The implementation of patriotic education follows a cognitive progression—from loving one's parents, to loving one's hometown, to loving one's country—moving from the near to the distant, from the particular to the general, and from the concrete to the abstract. Based on this logic, the questionnaire included eight items to assess students' understanding of the content and hierarchy of patriotism: (1) Patriotism means loving the People's Republic of China; (2) Patriotism means supporting socialism; (3) Patriotism means supporting the Communist Party of China; (4) Patriotism means loving one's hometown; (5) Patriotism means loving the country's magnificent landscapes; (6) Patriotism means loving the long-standing history and culture of the Chinese nation; (7) Patriotism means loving one's parents and relatives; (8) Patriotism means loving people of all ethnic groups and forming friendships with them. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale: "strongly disagree", "somewhat disagree", "uncertain", "somewhat agree", and "strongly agree", assigned values from 1 to 5. These eight items collectively capture

four dimensions of patriotic content cognition, with an overall mean score of 4.71, which serves as the benchmark for evaluating each dimension.

In terms of content, Items 1–3 assess cognition of "love for the state", Items 4–5 assess "love for landscapes", Item 6 assesses "love for culture", and Items 7–8 assess "love for the people". Among these dimensions, the mean scores for "love for the people" and "love for the state" fall below the overall mean of 4.71 (see Table 1), indicating relatively weaker recognition in these areas.

As shown in Table 1, the dimension of "love for landscapes" comprises two elements—"love for one's hometown" and "love for the country's landscapes"—reflecting an internal hierarchy within this dimension. Both elements have mean scores above 4.71, demonstrating a high level of student recognition and identification with the idea that patriotism entails love for one's hometown and the nation's natural environment. Notably, the mean score for "love for one's hometown" exceeds that for "love for landscapes", reinforcing the notion that patriotic education should begin with local attachment and gradually expand outward. The dimension of "love for the people" includes "love for parents" and "love for fellow citizens", both of which fall below the overall mean. This suggests that, at the level of patriotic cognition, students have difficulty clarifying the relationship between affection for parents, regard for fellow citizens, and patriotism. They struggle to extend personal emotional bonds with family and acquaintances into a broader sense of national attachment. Within the dimension of "love for the state", only the item "patriotism means supporting the Communist Party of China" scores above the overall mean. In contrast, the items "patriotism means loving the People's Republic of China" and "patriotism means supporting socialism" both fall below the overall average. This indicates that students generally find it difficult to understand the meaning of "loving the state" from the perspective of political authority, and they lack a clear conceptual grasp of the relationships among patriotism, support for the Party, and commitment to socialism.

Table 1. Content and levels of patriotism

Categories of Patriotic Content	Mean	Subcategory	Mean
Love of the country's landscapes	4.82	Love of one's hometown	4.88
		Love of the country's landscapes	4.76
Love for people	4.60	Love for parents	4.59
		Love for compatriots	4.62
Love for culture	4.81	Love for history and culture	4.81
		Love for the Republic	4.68
Love for the country	4.67	Love for Socialism	4.62
		Love for the CPC	4.72

3.3. Analysis of the cognition of patriotic practices

Patriotism is not only an expression of national sentiment, but also a form of responsibility and obligation. In the contemporary context, rational forms of patriotism are advocated—these include opposing blind xenophobia and extremist violence, adhering to laws and social norms, and approaching social issues with calmness, objectivity, and inclusiveness, so as to serve the interests of both the state and the people [6].

The questionnaire included four items to assess whether students possess a rational understanding of patriotic practices. Two items—"supporting domestic products and avoiding foreign goods, especially Japanese products" and "harboring hostility toward countries and organizations opposed to China"—were designed to evaluate such understanding from a negative perspective. The other two items—"expressing a

clear patriotic stance on issues of sovereignty" and "studying hard to acquire skills and serve the country"—were used to assess students' rational patriotic cognition from a positive perspective. All four items offered binary response options: "agree" or "disagree".

As shown in Figure 2, the surveyed students generally demonstrate a relatively high level of rational understanding of patriotic practices. Most do not regard boycotting foreign goods—particularly Japanese products—or harboring hostility toward unfriendly countries and organizations as appropriate forms of patriotism. Among the two items reflecting rational patriotic practice, "studying hard to serve the country" received the highest level of agreement, with nearly 83% of students endorsing this view. The second item, "expressing one's stance on issues of sovereignty", was supported by 58.62% of respondents. Although this represents a majority, approximately 42% of students expressed opposition, indicating a degree of ambivalence.

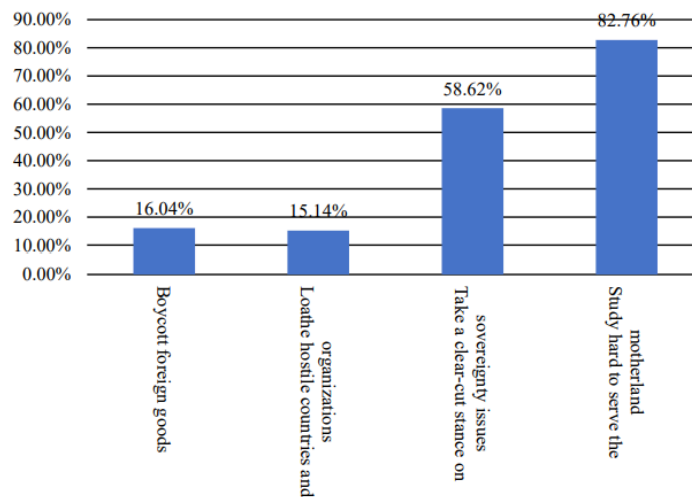


Figure 2. Perceptions of ways to express patriotism

To further examine students' perceptions of patriotic practice, the questionnaire also included an open-ended question: "In your opinion, what is the most appropriate way for junior secondary school students in the new era to express patriotism?" A total of 585 students provided valid responses. The word cloud analysis presented in Figure 3 shows that the most frequently occurring term is "study", with "studying hard" appearing 375 times. This concept encompasses learning scientific and cultural knowledge, as well as national history. The second most frequent theme relates to the purpose of such effort, namely "serving the country", with a frequency of 180. Representative expressions include "responding to the call of the state", "caring about the nation's future", "protecting state property", "contributing to the country", and "making contributions to national development". The third most frequent category concerns participation in patriotic activities, with a frequency of 95. Examples include "watching patriotic films", "reading patriotic literature", "participating in patriotic social activities", "taking part in patriotic performances", and "joining patriotic essay or poetry competitions". These responses reflect relatively concrete forms of patriotic practice, which explains the high frequency of the term "participate".

Overall, students' responses derive from three main sources. First, some responses are directly influenced by the questionnaire itself—for instance, watching patriotic films or participating in essay competitions, which correspond to earlier items assessing preferred forms of patriotic education. This suggests that students generally lack "patriotic imagination", relying instead on externally provided options. Second, many responses reflect classroom instruction. Expressions such as "studying hard" are commonly emphasized in political

education courses, and their specific content varies by grade level. For example, Grade 8 students often append the idea of "linking personal destiny with that of the nation", likely because they had recently attended a themed class meeting on the relationship between the individual and the country prior to completing the questionnaire. By Grade 9, the notion of "studying hard" expands into "learning scientific and cultural knowledge", accompanied by additional elements such as "safeguarding national unity" and "maintaining national security", reflecting recent classroom instruction on national security concepts. Third, a small number of responses stem from students' own independent understanding and imagination. Only a few students proposed individualized and concrete ideas, such as training in athletics to win medals at the Olympic Games, becoming skilled farmers to alleviate national food supply pressures, protecting the ecological environment, practicing core socialist values, performing acts of kindness, and engaging in volunteer service. These responses indicate a nascent but still limited capacity for independent conceptualization of patriotic practice.



Figure 3. Word cloud of perceptions of patriotic ways

4. Conclusion and recommendation

4.1. Strengthening education on local and regional knowledge in patriotism

From an epistemological perspective, patriotic education should proceed from the near to the distant and from the concrete to the abstract. In this sense, it ought to begin with love for one's parents and hometown. However, within the school context, knowledge related to patriotic education is primarily derived from textbooks, which are nationally standardized. While such textbooks effectively address common educational needs, they are less capable of comprehensively incorporating local and regional knowledge. This has led to a situation in which students "know national knowledge but lack understanding of local knowledge" in their patriotic cognition. As a result, the continuity and coherence from loving one's parents and hometown to loving one's country are disrupted, and patriotism risks becoming detached from its social and cultural foundations. Therefore, school-based curricula should appropriately incorporate local knowledge, clarify the

relationship between local and national knowledge, and thereby establish a solid cognitive foundation for students' patriotic education.

4.2. Deepening theoretical education on the content and hierarchy of patriotism

The analysis shows that junior secondary school students score below the overall mean in their understanding of "love for the people" and "love for the state", indicating that they are unable to fully comprehend the relationships between loving one's parents, loving fellow citizens, and loving the country. They also struggle to clearly understand why loving the People's Republic of China, supporting socialism, and supporting the Communist Party of China are considered fundamentally unified. As emphasized by Xi Jinping, "the theories, viewpoints, and conclusions taught in ideological and political courses must withstand students' repeated questioning of 'why' if they are to be effective" [7]. Accordingly, in teaching the content and hierarchy of patriotism, it is essential to guide students—through theoretical, historical, and practical perspectives—to understand the underlying rationale that connects these dimensions.

4.3. Enriching the forms of patriotic practice education

At present, classroom instruction remains the primary channel for delivering patriotic education to junior secondary school students. This, however, also indicates a relative lack of diversity in educational approaches, with a continued emphasis on knowledge transmission. As a result, students' "patriotic imagination" remains limited. Survey results on students' preferred forms of patriotic education show the following distribution: 27.89% favor lecture-based instruction, 33.28% prefer thematic debates, 81.11% favor film and media appreciation, 24.29% prefer knowledge competitions, 57.27% favor field visits, 42.28% prefer microfilm production, 30.73% favor class meeting presentations, 23.54% prefer blackboard or handwritten newspaper activities, and 45.28% favor artistic performances. Overall, students demonstrate relatively low interest in traditional formats such as lectures, knowledge competitions, class presentations, blackboard displays, and debates. By contrast, they show a clear preference for more experiential, interactive, and novel approaches, including watching films, participating in artistic performances, and engaging in field visits.

In practice, however, the patriotic education activities that students most frequently experienced over the past year—each with participation rates exceeding 50%—primarily included classroom teaching by teachers, regular flag-raising ceremonies, watching patriotic films, and visiting museums and revolutionary history exhibition halls. This reveals a notable discrepancy between students' preferred forms of patriotic education and those actually provided by schools. Such a mismatch constitutes an important factor contributing to students' limited patriotic imagination.

On December 30, 2015, during the 29th collective study session of the 18th Political Bureau of the Central Committee, Xi Jinping emphasized the need to "deepen research on patriotic education and the interpretation of the spirit of patriotism, continuously enrich educational content, innovate educational carriers, and enhance educational effectiveness". Empathy is a fundamental human capacity. When education is reduced primarily to examination-oriented instruction, students are likely to become passive reproducers of textbook knowledge on patriotism, rather than developing genuine emotional and value-based engagement. Consequently, the intended goals of patriotic education are significantly weakened.

Therefore, it is essential to expand experiential forms of patriotic practice. Activities such as visiting revolutionary history museums, paying tribute at martyrs' cemeteries, watching patriotic films, and participating in themed speech events can help students appreciate the noble values and profound devotion of historical figures to the nation and its people. Engagement in social service activities allows students to experience the value of helping others, thereby fostering a deeper sense of care for the broader community.

Likewise, exploring the natural and cultural environment of one's hometown can enhance appreciation for the country's landscapes. Only through concrete and participatory forms of practice can textbook knowledge be meaningfully integrated with students' cognitive and emotional understanding of patriotism, ultimately contributing to the cultivation of capable successors for socialist development.

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