

Assessing Access to Education for Children with Disabilities in the DPRK

Jasmine BARRETT and Keith MCVILLY

When the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2016 it made a commitment to provide access to education for children with disabilities. Furthermore, DPRK domestic legislation guarantees free compulsory twelve-year education for all children, meaning withholding education from a child is illegal. Currently a network of eleven special (segregated) schools cater to deaf and blind children. Children with other disabilities are supposed to enroll in mainstream schools. We analyze DPRK state media news reports and other publications to assess access to education for children with disabilities in the DPRK. We find that the special school system is well developed but that children educated in special schools lack opportunities to interact with non-disabled children and have achieved worse academically than their mainstream peers. Accessing mainstream education is difficult for some children due to a lack of systematic support combined with cultural and structural barriers. Inclusive education is beginning to emerge but largely depends on the discretion of individual teachers and their willingness to perform additional labor to accommodate a child's learning needs.

Keywords: Disability, North Korea, inclusion, education, special school

Introduction

In March 2022, while carrying out a survey of school-aged children in her local area, Pak Eunju, a teacher at Yaksu Primary School in Hyeongjesan District, Pyongyang, met a little girl named Ji Yeonmi. Yeonmi was unable to walk due to a physical disability, but Pak was determined she attend school the same as

Jasmine Barrett (jasmine.barrett@student.unimelb.edu.au) is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne; Keith McVilly (keith.mcvilly@unimelb.edu.au) is a professor at the University of Melbourne

Seoul Journal of Korean Studies 37, no. 2 (December 2024): 233–268.

© 2024 Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies