

## Abstract

## Analysis of Primary and Secondary Education in the Kim Jong-Un Era

Kim, Jisoo  
Kim, Jihye  
Kim, heuijeong  
Kim, Byeongyeon  
Han, Seungdae  
Kang, Hoje  
Kim, Sun  
Jo, Jeongrae

The purpose of this study is threefold. First, it aims to review and analyze the goals of the DPRK's new education policy in the Kim Jong-Un era. The Kim regime has set out a new direction for its education policy that markedly differ from that of its previous regime, calling for a systematic analysis. Second, this study aims to examine each element of the education reform. Areas examined in this study are changes in kindergarten education program, new curricula for elementary and middle schools, teacher quality and compensation policy, improvements in educational environment, emphasis on vocational training, and changes in ideological studies. Lastly, given heightened interest in peace on the Peninsula, we aim to propose ways to facilitate active interaction and cooperation in the area of education between the South and the North.

Social Change and Education Reform in the Kim Jong-Un Era

The fundamental shift in politics and economics under Kim Jong Un's leadership in DPRK has also swept through the area of education. The administration has abolished the National Defense Committee, the symbol of its previous regimes' military-first policy. Under its 'in-our-own-style economic management policy,' the new governance system now revolves around the State Affairs Commission, manifesting the country's pursuit of a new economic system that mixes elements of both planned economy and market economy. The country now formally acknowledges with attempts to institutionalize the role of market economy even in education through enactment of laws such as Teachers Act and Vocational Training Act. With the overarching goal of achieving high-level science and technology proficiency for all of its citizens, the education reform involves developing new school system and curricula, revamping teacher quality and industry-specific workforce policy, and improving educational environment and school facilities.

What deserves special attention in Kim Jong-Un era's education reform is a new focus on development of student capabilities through exploratory programs and industry-specific education in middle schools. This is one of the most radical changes along with acknowledgement of a market system in the country's economy and introduction of differential wage system made under the current regime. The DPRK has introduced the element of competition for the purpose of inducing higher quality of education, and this is likely to bring about even more competition within the country's education system.

#### Key Changes in Education Policy in the Kim Jong-Un Era

##### - Kindergarten Education

The DPRK's kindergarten program, previously consisted of 9 subjects, now has been integrated into one comprehensive curriculum. This new integrated curriculum stresses real-world situations and implications, a marked shift from the

textbook-oriented learning in the past. It also adopts play-based comprehensive approach that emphasizes children-centered education activities. The introduction of integrated curriculum and comprehensive play-based education is an attempt to keep pace with the global trend in education. Separate subjects on Kim Il-Sung, Kim Jong-Il and Kim Jong-Un have been abolished and replaced by learning political ideology within the boundary of the new integrated curriculum.

#### - Primary and Secondary Education

The new curriculum for primary and secondary education also places a manifest emphasis on producing world-class science and technology talents and on keeping pace with the global academic standards. Such change is well demonstrated in the new curriculum's focus on English education, international dynamics in social science, science and modernization, more hours of information technology and the use of multimedia for effective teaching. The new curriculum also stresses facilitating development of students' explorative capacities and critical thinking. Accordingly, students are asked questions that stimulate expansive thinking as well as encouraged to formulate integrative, interdisciplinary perspectives toward an issue. Such fundamental shift in approach is most evident in the introduction of an integrative and interdisciplinary subject in the area of science education. Textbooks also have undergone major revision and now contain far more pictures and graphics as well as academic activities, all aiming to facilitate students' explorative and critical thinking.

#### - Strengthening of Teacher Quality and Compensation Policy

The DPRK's new teacher policy prioritizes enhancing teacher credentials and providing them with sufficient means to maintain stable livelihoods. The country had faced a severe shortage of teachers during the period of the so-called Arduous March, and Kim leadership took explicit measures to secure qualified individuals

as teachers and to provide them with better wage and better social prestige. What these changes aim at is quality school education by ensuring teachers' faithful implementation of new education directives (as embodied in new curriculum and teaching plans). The new emphasis the Kim leadership intends is well demonstrated in the newly legislated Teachers Act and Education Directive Enforcement Law.

- Improving Educational Environment and School Facilities

The initiative of improving school as well as and general learning environment aims to provide students with better educational facilities. Although Kim Jong-Il also intended to bring elements of information technology and science into education, the economic constraints during that era limited expanded implementation of the initiative beyond the major cities. The same initiative is in the process of realization in the Kim Jong-Un Era so far in the form of providing network and computers and making classroom environment multi-functional. New classroom environment is designed to boost quality of education through means such as virtual experiment using computer and network in a science class. Though a government-led initiative, however, it has been materialized largely through sponsorship of community organizations and parents donation, thereby resulting in substantial disparities among local communities and schools. However, since the DPRK government has previously admitted the presence of urban-rural area disparities in educational infrastructure (Education Newspaper, 2016. 5. 12), such trend is likely to intensify in the coming years.

- Emphasizing Vocational Education

Emphasis on providing vocational training as part of formal school education has been materialized primarily by means of establishing a new kind of school, Advanced Skills Middle School. Provision of serious, needs-specific vocational training

in the new type of school marks a clear departure from its former general education program which only offered basic skills training. Being the DPRK's new model of producing technological talents to meet diverse human resources needs across the country, Advanced Skills Middle Schools offer specialized, region-specific vocational curricular in the fields of metal industry, electricity, coal industry, electricity, chemical engineering, agriculture, pomiculture, fishery, and information technology.

#### - Changes in Ideological Education

Study of ideology in the DPRK's education program refers to learning activities that shape students' belief system such as world view and ethical values. The Kim Jong-Un regime emphasizes 5 core values: Kim Jong-Il patriotism education, faith education, anti-hierarchy education, and ethics education. Two of the most notable aspects of the new approach are 1) that learning about revolutionary tradition and party policy are not part of the 5 core values, and 2) that the component of greatness education highlights the human side of the Great Leader rather than mystifying the Great Leader's activities. Such change in ideological education is believed to reflect the new economic realities in which most of its people rely on their labor and market for sustenance. Needless to say, this is very different from the country's previous leader-centric economic system in which all its citizens received food based on its central rationing system.

#### South-North Cooperation in Education

##### - Academic Interactions through Overseas Academic Conferences

Even in times of strained relations, overseas academic conferences can serve as potential venues for South-North interaction and cooperation. Participation and interaction at these academic conferences will serve as a starting point for establishing a functional trust base that can be strengthened through continuous and sustained interaction between the South and the North's scholars. As bureaucrats

and scholars in North Korea are known to rarely change but maintain their specialty areas, building acquaintances and a trust relationship can prove especially invaluable in raising the level of South-North interaction depending on changes in the future relation.

South-North overseas academic interaction could first start in areas of mutual interests such as kindergarten education program, curriculum reform, raising teacher capacity, improving school environment and vocational training.

- Hosting Joint South-North Academic Conferences

Improvements in the South-North relations may enable hosting a joint academic conference in the future. Areas of recent academic interests on both sides are developing capacity-centered curriculum, play-based comprehensive kindergarten program, harnessing IT to enhance teacher capacity, renovating school facilities to enable use of cutting-edge technology and providing vocational training in advanced secondary education.

Except for politically sensitive ideological education, hosting a joint academic workshop on any one of these subject is expected to ameliorate the South-North relations and contribute to better school education on both sides of the Peninsula.

- Hosting Joint South-North Workshops

Should overall South-North relations allow, a joint workshop can serve as an arena where teaching professionals from both the South and the North can participate in and collaborate on projects of mutual benefit. Products of such joint efforts can be applied to schools on both sides and provide further opportunities for continuous feedback. Potential areas for such joint workshop include developing play-based comprehensive kindergarten curriculum, teaching presentational English skills for college students and virtual science experiment using IT-based facility.

Such joint efforts will produce opportunities to build a trust base among South

and North's teachers and other teaching professionals and will certainly redound to advancing the relations to peaceful coexistence and eventual unification.

- Developing Common Education Programs

Once a functional level of trust is established between the South and the North with a mutual aspiration for peaceful coexistence, a common education program can be put in place. While joint workshops can produce phase-by-phase curriculum, common education program is mid- to long-term programs to be implemented over a semester or an academic year. Potential areas for common education program include math, science, foreign language, computer, and IT subjects.

Development of such joint education program can be achieved through joint participation in a process ranging from formulating a program development team to program research and development and teacher training, to pilot implementation, evaluation, modification and expansion. These experience will facilitate building a sense of trust and unity and thus to peaceful coexistence and the process of reaching unification.

- Operating Joint South-North Education Institutions

Sustained peaceful coexistence based on a solid trust relationship between the two can give rise to opportunities for an academic institution established and run jointly by the South and the North. Such institution in the beginning can serve as a special venue for joint teacher training and later can be expanded to take up other roles such as vocational training institutes or science technology university possibly first in the Kaesong Industrial Complex.