

Education in North Korea: How the North Korean regime uses the educational system to preserve the system

Topic and Research Question

North Korea is one of the states with one of the longest years of compulsory education. It is often said that education has positive effects on the development of democracy. North Korea, however, so far, shows no signs of a democratic transition although children have to visit schools for 12 years. The research questions the thesis thereby tries to answer are:

- 1.) Why has North Korea, as one of the countries with one of the longest history of compulsory education, not transitioned towards democracy?
- 2.) How is the educational system in North Korea instead used to preserve the state? What are the 'techniques' used in education to expand the longevity of the system?

State of the Art

Several authors have done research on how the North Korean state could have survived for such a long time and some also have drawn a connection to the educational system. Byman and Lind (2010a) conclude that social engineering, ideology, co-opting and the use of force are the main tools that keep the system alive. Frank (2013) names the combination of repression and ideology as factors stabilizing the North Korean system.

A comprehensive look purely on the educational system is given by H. Kim and D. Kim (2005). According to them, all classes are filled with, what they call "human remodeling". Education is full of teachings about the party's ideological system, revolutionary traditions, and indoctrination of hate against the Japanese and Americans. They also describe how the so-called Children's Union and the Youth League are used to indoctrinate North Korean children further and thereby stabilize the regime.

Authors like D. Lee (2010) focus on the hatred that is generated through education against Americans and Japanese to legitimize the regime. In his work, he also analyzes North Korean school textbooks stating that they are used to idealize the Kim family, generate loyalty to the regime and create hate against the enemies.

Thereby, according to the state of the art on this topic, the North Korean educational system is used to stabilize and prolong the regime. Objectives include an ideology education about the Kim family and the teaching of hate for the countries perceived to be the enemies of the North Korean nation.

Methodology and Approach

To approach the topic the so called "Three Pillars of Stability", a model developed by Gerschewski et al. (2012), consisting of a legitimization, a co-optation and a repression pillar, was adapted to apply it for an educational setting. The pillars of these model could be used in an educational setting as shown in the below figure:

To figure out which of these pillars are used in North Korean schools 18 interviews were conducted with North Korean defectors living in South Korea. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews with the use of an interview guide containing 65 questions. Nine broad categories were developed: 1.) an introductory one asking the interviewee questions about his general school life, 2.) a category asking about the teaching of historical facts, 3.) one questioning the interviewee about the occurrence of ideology in his or her education, 4.) another category connected to the use of violence in the education, 5.) a category dealing with the teachings of hate for perceived enemies, 6.) one category asking about the self-criticism sessions and religion, 7.) one questioning about the physical forces of control in the education, and lastly, 8.) a category introduced to talk about the violation of educational rights.

The interviews were analyzed by using the qualitative content analysis method described by Mayring.

Main Facts

All three pillars of stability are present in the North Korean education system. The legitimization pillar with the use of ideology and propaganda shapes the beliefs of the children and further legitimizes the regime by making the leaders appear as admirable, humble people overworking themselves for their people – someone the children should be forever thankful to. Children get educated about every part of the life of the leaders with a particular focus on their achievements. With this cult like education the authority of the leaders gets legitimized and with constantly using the concept of Confucianism not only are the children encouraged to obey the leaders as father-like figures but also the succession from grandfather to father to son gets legitimized.

With the construction of a foundation myth, portraying the leaders (and their family) as liberators of the Korean peninsula from the Japanese and as defenders of the North Korean nation from the American invaders, the

children get taught to look up to the leaders as national heroes and to be forever thankful to them. To further make these claims about the leaders believable constantly a rewritten, distorted form of history is presented in classes showing the leaders in a favorable light and the world as admirers of them.

Regularly North Korea is portrayed in the classes as the best country – especially compared to South Korea which is described to children as poor and as a mere colony of the US. To further legitimize the regime renewed conflict is used in all classes branding Japan and particularly the US as enemies of the Korean people. While this education in the case of Japan mostly focuses on the past to highlight the liberation fight of Kim Il Sung, the US constantly till today is portrayed as the enemy.

The co-optation pillar gets used to co-opt the children of families with the right background and with enough financial capability. These children either purely through their background or by giving bribery to teachers will be able to receive better grades and can advance to university easily. Children with certain backgrounds will also be granted access to special schools with often better equipment and learning opportunities. Through the youth movements, especially the Children's Union and the Youth League, children are further co-opted by integrating them into formal structures of the regime and teaching them more ideological material.

The repression pillar is mostly present in education through the use of surveillance and intimidation. Surveillance is brought into schools by encouraging children to report other children misbehaving and by the regular control of bags and questioning by teachers or government officials. With the self-criticism sessions, another form of surveillance is introduced in schools. As during these criticism session, children will have to talk about all their wrongdoings; others will point out these

<p>Legitimation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideology & Propaganda <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indoctrination in religious beliefs • Promotion of ideologies in classes • Regime developed subjects • Presentation of an ideal future • Favourable image of the ruler • Renewed conflict • Nationalism • Foundational Myth <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manipulated history • Personalism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following the example of the ruler, men of the people • International engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis of the role in international organizations • Performance
<p>Co-optation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limiting access to education • Use of youth parliaments • Use of youth movements
<p>Repression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveillance in school • Punishments for students • Denial of human and civil rights

wrongdoings and criticize them for these, a behavior of watching other children is encouraged.

Results

Out of the 17 objectives of the pillars of stability in educational settings at least 11 were found to be present in North Korea. These are: 1.) the promotion of ideology in classes through teachings about the leaders, 2.) the use of regime developed subjects teaching about the childhood and revolutionary activities of the leaders, socialist morality, and party politics, 3.) the presentation of a favorable image of the leader showing them as admirable people of good character and most concerned with the well-being of their people, 4.) renewed conflict mostly aimed at the U.S. and Japan to create a feeling of encirclement that only the leader can protect the citizens from, 5.) nationalism often in comparison to South Korea as mere colony of the U.S, 6.) a foundational myth using tales from the anti-Japanese struggle and the Korean War to make the leaders appear as national heroes, 7.) personalism in the sense that children are expected to follow the example of the leader, 8.) limitations in the access to certain schools and universities by family background and financial capability, 9.) the use of youth movements namely the Children's Union and the Youth League, 10.) the presence of surveillance in school mostly through the self-criticism sessions, and 11.) punishments of students.

North Korea, thereby, uses education to gain the workforce needed by the country, while at the same time suppressing all positive effects education could have and instead uses it to stabilize the regime further.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at the library of the University of Vienna.

About the Author

Angela Bauer holds a BA in Political Science. She gained work experience during her two year stay in South Korea and her work for an NGO there. Her research interests include the two Koreas and their relationships with each other.



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