

South Korea and right to education – is it being fulfilled? Right to Education Index Findings for South Korea 2016

Introduction

The right to education Index (RTEI) is a new global index designed to drive accountability, and progress towards realizing the right to education. RTEI works with civil society, research institutions and governments to collect data on a wide variety of indicators of the right to



education to identify progress being made towards the fulfillment of the right to education as well as obstacles to it. RTEI will be produced on a biennial basis to track such progress, identify trends and support efforts towards the right to education.

The notion of quantifying the “Right to Education” is not a familiar one, and when it comes to South Korea, the normal expectation seems to simply rely on the country’s commitment to high standards. The RTEI process, however, went beyond this simplistic stereotype and was very revealing as to where some of the issues exist and provided an opportunity to reflect on some issues outside the given criteria which need attention as well.

Issue Area 1 – Accessibility/discrimination

Although South Korean domestic laws prohibit discrimination in education, pregnant girls are often not able to continue attending schools. Culturally it is not accepted by other parents so they are removed and they either get education in a more private setting or put an end to their academic pursuits. Although there are no guidelines which trigger this removal, the culture of the society does not allow them to coexist with their peers, as they are considered a bad influence for the student body. So in practice, pregnant girls or young mothers are expelled from school.

RTEI Results for South Korea

South Korea Index Score – 78

Themes and Subthemes	Governance	76	Accessibility	71	
	International Framework	75	Free Education	78	
	Domestic Law	71	Discrimination	54	
	Plan of Action	67	Participation	81	
	Monitoring and Reporting	100	Acceptability	75	
	Financing	74	Aims of Education	47	
	Data availability	69	Learning Environment	83	
	Availability	95	Learning Outcomes	94	
	Classrooms	81	Adaptability	76	
	Sanitation	98	Children with Disabilities	55	
	Teachers	100	Children of Minorities	66	
	Textbooks	100	Out of School Education	83	
			Out of School Children	100	
Cross-Cutting Themes Scores	Alignment of education aims			40	
	Children with Disabilities	Overall State of Education for Children with Disabilities		66	
	Content of education			87	
	Girls' Education	Overall state of girls' education		83	
		Discriminatory environment		86	
		Relative state of girls' education		97	
	Indigenous and Minority Populations	Discriminatory environment		58	
	Monitoring and Accountability	Strength of monitoring and accountability		86	
	National Normative Framework	National Normative Framework		74	
	Direct and Indirect Costs	Legal restrictions		100	
	Private education	Practice environment		72	
	Regional disparities	Status of private education		100	
				No data	
	SDG 4		4.1 Free and equitable		60
			4.3 Beyond K-12		95
			4.5 Inequality and inaccessibility		94
			4.6 Adult literacy and lifelong learning		98
			4.7 Sustainability		71
			4.a Safe learning environment		83
			4.c Qualified teachers		67
		Overall		81	
Teachers		Effect of teaching		117	
		Content of teacher training		0	
		Overall teaching framework		30	
Focus Areas	Theme:	Accessibility and Acceptability			
	Subtheme:	Aims of Education, Discrimination			
	Cross-Cutting Theme:	Teachers – Content of teacher training, Teachers – Overall teaching framework			

Please note that in some areas, lack of data might have resulted in low scores however with additional research, more encouraging results may happen.

For migrant, refugee or internally displaced children: Migrant workers' children and North Korean refugees will attend the same public school system where the language used is Korean. So although they are not discriminated, they will be disadvantaged from a linguistic point of view. Even North Korean refugees will have a hard time, given the high proportion of English words commonly used in Korean society.



Issue Area 2 – Adaptability/children with disabilities

Although there are laws recognizing the right to education for children with disabilities, the accommodation measures are not available for children with disabilities in mainstream schools. Especially children with physical disabilities are in suitable facilities away from home. The mainstream education system, most schools are not built with their special needs in mind – no ramps, or bathrooms for wheel chairs etc. Children with cognitive, emotional, or learning disabilities however, depending on the degrees of their abilities, can participate in some mainstream classrooms and then they go to their special education classroom with special education teachers. But mainstream schools are not equipped to accommodate all of them.

Teachers have received training to deal with special needs children since 2013, but for those who were not trained before 2013, maybe there could be compulsory continuing education workshops as well as handbook/manual to expand this capacity.

According to the last year's CRPD (Committee on the rights of persons with disability, the separation of children with disability is against the rights. This goes completely against the rights for physical accommodations, languages, and aid and psychosocial support in the mainstream educational surroundings. This includes support for visually and hearing impaired and autistic children. This is one area that Republic of Korea is far behind its time in providing fair education for children with disabilities.

Issue Area 3 – Adaptability/children of minorities

There are no mobile schools for children with nomads because there are no nomads in South Korea anymore.

There are no domestic laws to provide for language of instruction to be in the child's mother tongue. The only language of instruction is Korean and there are families with mothers who are from South East Asia, such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand but their children do not learn in their mother tongue in Korean mainstream schools. However there are schools to assist the

mothers in learning Korean in local government offices and after-school programs in public schools.

Issue Area 4 – Overall teaching framework

There are some mentions about including health and wellbeing, human rights and arts in the Morals Study curriculum in 2015. It is inquiring into how to engender emotional and societal health. However the students are not consulted in the decision making process of school curricula, school policies and codes of behavior. The rules and regulations are beyond their capacity to influence. There are now – as of 2016, new initiatives where students in middle school, for one semester, can take regular classes before noon and in the afternoons, they will participate in career research and field studies, debate, projects without the stress for mid-term or final exams. This started out as a pilot project in 42 schools starting in 2013 but this is now offered at large to any school that wants to adopt it. But this is still at a beginning stage.¹

Recommendations for Korean government

This survey on rights to education has revealed weaknesses beyond doubt in education in Republic of Korea. The following are some recommendation to improve the right to education.

- Make education available in mother tongue for kids from parents from different background. There is almost no access to kids whose parents speak other languages, given the mainstream education is exclusively done in Korean. They should have access to learn their mother tongue and thus encourage multi-cultural environment.
- For children with disabilities, make sure the mainstream education is available in to them. Ensure school curriculum, physical environment, psychological counseling and also to provide technological support to ensure there's an equal opportunity to learn with other children.

In the section 4.2.1 there's a discussion about whether the national government adopted specific measures to protect children from violence and abuse in school. Although the answers are yes, the blind sight is that the most serious issue for teenagers in Korea is its high suicide rate.² It went from 7.4 per 100,000 in 2004 to 7.8 per 100,000 in 2015. 8% of teen agers are said to have contemplated suicide at a point in time. So even though there are legal boundaries to protect children from violence at school, there's something definitely missing in providing for: "*States*

¹ This article about this new initiative <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/schooling/692796.html> and the official ministry of education web-site for that initiative www.ggoomggi.go.kr explain the progress in more depth.

² According to a media piece, suicide is the leading cause of death among South Korean teenagers, and has been growing since the year 2000. See http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2015/04/28/Suicide-is-leading-cause-of-death-among-South-Korean-teens-says-report/3871430235561/

Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child, "

The budget for suicide prevention is very low – as of 2013, 2,800,000,000 KRW – about \$2.5 million.³

Specific recommendations are

- Engender a new form of culture to respect life
- Close monitoring of reporting in the media about suicide and adjust language
- Expand facilities for suicide counselling and also create manual for suicide prevention to be more widely spread
- Start counselling from early stages – for example a sign of depression
- On-line staff of counsellors to be available all time
- Create follow up programs for those who attempted

School is where students spend most of their time and they spend less and less time at home with the family so it would be critical to have these services in education settings to reduce suicide rate.

³ See 우리나라 자살예방 대책의 문제점과 개선방안, Policy Options for the Improvement of Suicide Prevention Programs, published by Health and Welfare Korea.