Shout from the Most Silent Nation, North Korea: Can Mathematics Education Be Politically Neutral?

JungHang Lee

North Korea has been making CNN headlines on their nuclear missile tests and human rights issues. However, North Korea still remains as the most closed and shadowed country. This workshop addressed mathematics education in one of the most closed countries in the world—North Korea, as an extreme example of political influences on mathematics education. Questions on political influence on mathematic educations were proposed and discussed.

North Korean secondary school mathematics education is examined through the review of North Korea's social and educational structures as well as its political and ideological position.

Since it is almost impossible to obtain any type of information about North Korea, I conducted in-depth interviews with defectors, who are now in South Korea, former secondary school mathematics teachers and students, to understand their real life experiences in secondary school mathematics in North Korea. Interviewees responded to questions concerning typical ways their teaching and learning were carried out in mathematics classes; the Workers' Party's influence in every aspect of education, from teacher education to curriculum and textbooks issued; and the impact the March of Suffering (nine consecutive years of negative economic growth, which killed ten percent of North Korean population) had on the teaching and learning of mathematics as well as its lingering effects in secondary mathematics education.

There are two main focuses of this workshop. One is to introduce an extreme case study of mathematics education in North Korea influenced by political and ideological standpoint. This would broaden the participants' understanding of

J. Lee (✉)
Nyack College, New York, USA
e-mail: junghang.lee@nyack.edu

mathematics education as not only a self-regulating subject, but also as an interwoven matter shaping and shaped by the vessel and the people in it. This also proposes a chance to reassess the participant's own mathematics education system with possibly enhanced span. For example, U.S. school mathematics education is greatly influenced by the No Child Left Behind Act, which was signed by former President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002. It sounded very attractive to the general public, yet caused many problems over the years. On December 10, 2015 President Barack Obama signed legislation replacing No Child Left Behind Act with the Every Student Succeeds Act. Mathematics education in U.S. will again be modified and promoted by its society's political stance.

After my presentation on the subject matters, several small groups were formed and we discussed the following questions:

- Should mathematics be a politically neutral subject?
- Is there any political influence on mathematics education in your country?
- What are the benefits and detriments of politically motivated mathematics educations?

Open Access Except where otherwise noted, this chapter is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.