

Educational Discourse and Regional Differentiation in North Korea

A City-Level Comparative Analysis of Sinuiju and Rason*

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This article examines how education is discursively constructed at the city level in North Korea through a comparison of Sinuiju and Rason. Drawing on corpus-assisted discourse analysis of regime and counter-regime English-language media, it investigates how educational narratives are embedded in patterns of governance, inequality, and spatial differentiation. The findings show that regime discourse constructs education as hierarchical, merit-oriented, and institutionally structured, while counter-regime discourse reframes it as a site of administrative enforcement, household burden, and uneven access. These framings vary between the two cities. Sinuiju is positioned as an educationally differentiated and institutionally dense space, whereas Rason is framed through administrative exceptionality, labor integration, and intensified regulation linked to its special economic zone status. Temporal analysis indicates that educational discourse is mobilized episodically, consistent with campaign-driven governance. Overall, the study demonstrates that education functions as a flexible discursive interface through which the state manages regional differentiation and legitimizes uneven institutional arrangements within a centralized political system. By foregrounding subnational variation, the article contributes to research on governance, regional complexity, and regime reproduction in North Korea.

Keywords: North Korea; educational discourse; regional differentiation; city-level analysis; governance

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1. Introduction

After perestroika in the Soviet Union and market reforms in China, the survival of a hereditary communist dictatorship such as North Korea has puzzled scholars for decades. Neither the sudden death of the ‘Dear Leader’ and succession of the relatively young Kim Jong Un, nor the ‘Arduous March’ famine of the 1990s — in which up to one million North Koreans died¹⁾ — were sufficient to destabilize the regime.

North Korea scholars as well as North Korean authorities consider the education system a key element for regime stability promoting socialism, nationalism, communitarianism, collectivism and a personality cult around the leading Kim family.²⁾ Starting from the age of 3, North Koreans are nurtured to highly respect and love the Kims like heavenly figures.³⁾ An induced socio-cultural trait that even North Korean refugees cannot easily leave behind.⁴⁾ The 2013 national curriculum reform

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- 1) Daniel Goodkind and Loraine West, “The North Korean Famine and Its Demographic Impact,” *Population and Development Review* 27, no. 2 (2001); Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2009).
 - 2) Myunghee Lee, “Authoritarianism at School: Indoctrination Education, Political Socialisation, and Citizenship in North Korea,” *Asian Studies Review* 48, no. 2 (2024); Thomas Wainwright et al., “Elite Entrepreneurship Education: Translating Ideas in North Korea,” *Environment and Planning A* 50, no. 5 (2018).
 - 3) Yu-Jin Jang and Young-Meen Suh, “Qualitative Research on Early Childhood Education in North Korea: Literature and Interviews with Defector Educators,” *Child Indicators Research* 18, no. 2 (2025).
 - 4) Korea Hana Foundation, “Report on North Korea’s Economy and Society as Perceived by 6,351 Defectors” (Korea Hana Foundation, 2022), 253.

reaffirmed this ideological goal, to first and foremost indoctrinate the students towards the North Korean political system,⁵⁾ although more overt and with a new visible emphasis on global standards, mathematics and science education.⁶⁾

Given its central role, education can also serve as an early indicator of systemic change. Existing research has largely focused on macro-level developments, including ideological adaptation to the line of succession⁷⁾, curricular reform⁸⁾ and changes within specific subjects⁹⁾. This study instead examines regional variation in educational discourse. Despite highly centralized governance, North Korea exhibits significant regional differentiation,¹⁰⁾ shaped by uneven development and local so-

5) North Korean Education Commission, "First General 12-Year Compulsory Education Ordinance (Elementary, Middle and High Schools)" (2013).

6) Jang and Suh, "Qualitative Research on Early Childhood Education in North Korea".

7) National Institute for Unification Education, Understanding North Korea (Department of R&D Division, 2023), Accessed July 20, 2025. <https://cloud.uniedu.go.kr/uniedu/atchfile/down/F000138621.pdf>.

8) Mann Gil Han and Kwan Hyung Lee, "An analysis on the educational policy of the Kim Jong Un regime and the reform of North Korean school system," *North Korean Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (2014); Jang and Suh, "Qualitative Research on Early Childhood Education in North Korea".

9) Jinsoo Cho, "The Weakening of Social Control in North Korea since the Arduous March: The Case of Physical Education," *Asian Studies Review* 48, no. 2 (2024).

10) Christina H. Kim and Juwon Kang, "Reworking the Frame: Analysis of Current Discourses on North Korea and a Case Study of North Korean Labour in Dandong, China," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 56, no. 3 (2015); Hazel Smith, "Bad, Mad, Sad or Rational Actor? Why the 'Securitization' Paradigm Makes for Poor Policy Analysis of North Korea," *International Affairs* 76, no. 3 (2000).

cio-economic conditions. While curriculum authority is centralized, educational practice and needs may vary locally. Following a relational understanding of place, cities are treated as sites where national institutions, local functions, and discursive meaning intersect.¹¹⁾

The paper focuses on Rason and Sinuiju, selected for their elevated economic or administrative status and their location along the Chinese and Russian borders. Research on North Korean refugees¹²⁾ suggests that the shift toward a private economy is particularly pronounced in these border regions. At the same time, the two cities differ in their development trajectories. Rason became North Korea's first Special Economic Zone in 1991 and followed a more state-driven development path, while Sinuiju's economy developed more organically through a mix of official and informal trade. In terms of trade volume, Sinuiju significantly exceeds Rason.¹³⁾

Building on these local characteristics, the study derives expectations about city-specific educational needs, reviews existing knowledge on education in both cities, and generates new insights through corpus-assisted discourse analysis. By combining systematic text segmentation with qualitative coding, the study compares regime and counter-regime

11) Agnew John, "Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society" (Allen and Unwin, Boston, 1987).

12) Korea Hana Foundation, "Report on North Korea's Economy and Society as Perceived by 6,351 Defectors," 10.

13) Dick Nanto and Mark Manyin, "Special Economic Zones in the DPRK" [National Committee on North Korea (NCNK), 2011]; Violet Kim, "Sinuiju's Increasing Role in Sino-North Korean Trade," *Daily NK*, October 29, 2019.

discourses on education across both cities. As one of the first large-scale news-based analyses with a city-level focus, this approach enables fine-grained comparison across locations and sources while avoiding article-level overgeneralization, and provides a replicable framework for future subnational research on authoritarian media discourse.

The study contributes to research on subnational variation and discursive governance in North Korea by demonstrating how regional differentiation is symbolically produced within a centralized political system.

2. City Education in Rason and Sinuiju

Most studies on education in North Korea are macro studies with little inside into the specific structure of the education in cities. Based on existing research, official statistics, and structural constraints, the following contextual expectations can be outlined regarding structure, inequality, and regional specificity.

Education across North Korea is governed by a universal national curriculum. Although Rason gained some autonomy through its special economic zone, this does not extend to education. Children in both Rason and Sinuiju therefore follow the 12-year compulsory system: 1 year pre-school (제학교전교육), 5 years primary (제소학교), 3 years lower secondary (초급중학교), and 3 years upper secondary education (고급중학교).¹⁴⁾ The system also includes specialized schools for talented students

in fields such as arts, sports, foreign languages, and science.¹⁵⁾

In Sinuiju's Pothong Elementary School and Dong High School, have been officially portrayed as "model schools"¹⁶⁾ in sports and science, while Sinuiju Ponbu Kindergarten is frequently referenced as a prestigious institution for performance arts. The Sinuiju Overseas Chinese School serves the local Chinese community. In Rason, the Rajin Foreign Language High School reflects the importance of language training.

After completing compulsory education, some students have the opportunity to pursue higher education, typically lasting two to six years depending on specialization. Available sources suggest that Rason hosts one university and two technical colleges, while Sinuiju has seven universities and two technical colleges,¹⁷⁾ although most of these institutions are likely specialized universities rather than comprehensive universities in the North Korean sense.¹⁸⁾

1) Wealth and Power Relations

Within the UNESCO framework, North Korea presents itself as a na-

14) Cho, Jeong-Ah et al., *Universities and Higher Education in North Korea in the 'Knowledge Economy Era'* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2020).

15) National Institute for Unification Education, *Understanding North Korea 360*.

16) "Spotlight on Sinuiju," *38 North*, July 23, 2010.

17) Man-Gil Han et al., *Analysis of North Korea's Education Statistics and Educational Institutions* (Korean Educational Development Institute, 2010), 79.

18) Cho, *Universities and Higher Education in North Korea in the 'Knowledge Economy Era'*.

tion that nurtures all citizens equally and promotes students based on talent rather than social background or wealth. Official narratives emphasize early literacy — often achieved in kindergarten — and free access to education.¹⁹⁾ However, existing studies show that family wealth, gender, and power relations significantly shape educational opportunities.²⁰⁾ While gender inequality linked to conservative gender roles²¹⁾ likely affects all regions, wealth and power relations vary spatially.

The Songbun system provides privileged access to universities and specialized schools for political elites and those connected to the Kim family. Geographic distance from Pyongyang — approximately 150 km for Sinuiju and 500 km for Rason — can therefore act as a structural constraint, as proximity to central political and symbolic institutions is associated with access to elite educational pathways. This is particularly relevant for higher education, which is concentrated in Pyongyang.²²⁾ Different from most countries there is no freedom of travel between the regions and cities of North Korea, making access to specialized schools and higher education in Pyongyang extremely difficult for children of Rason and Sinuiju. The remote education law (원격교육법) introduced in

19) UNESCO DPRK Education Commission, “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea — Education for all 2015 national review” (2014).

20) Jeong-Ah Cho, Hee-young Lee, and Ji-soon Lee, *The daily life and gender politics of North Korean women* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2019).

21) Women are expected to prioritize the family. Men enrollment in university was double that of women.

22) Cho, *Universities and Higher Education in North Korea in the ‘Knowledge Economy Era’*.

(Table 1) Educational Macro-Factors

City	+	Specifics	Relative wealth	Distance to center
Pyongyang		Political & economic core	Highest	0
Sinuiju		Trade & border economy	Moderately high	150 km
Rason		SEZ & port trade	Moderate	500 km

April 2020 has the goal to make after work university classes remotely accessible to everyone who wants. While such online on the job classes can increase the accessibility of higher education in Rason and Sinuiju they require a good network infrastructure and cannot equally compensate a full-time university education.

Conversely, the relative economic wealth of both cities may positively affect educational opportunities. Access to money or goods became crucial during the 1990s famine, when students and teachers often lacked sufficient state support. Families who succeeded in emerging black markets were the first who could afford to send their children back to school and also supply for teachers and their families.

Although public distribution and education again normalized in the 2000s, economic wealth continues to be an inequality factor because teachers learned to receive a private side income, and parents learned that they came to perceive their children's school performance and chances for higher education through money. A fertile ground for a black market in private education.²³⁾ Furthermore, parents are today required

23) Hyun Jung Jo, "The Application of Private Education in North Korean Education and Its Meaning," *Journal of Education Science* 53, no. 4 (2022); Jeong-Ah Cho, "Utilitarianism in education and uneven development of educa-

to bear the costs for school books, uniforms and a school fee, and paying the school more than necessary is another way to receive special treatment for their children.

While reliable economic data remain scarce, households in both cities are likely better positioned than those in rural areas. Their strategic border locations make them key hubs for official and informal trade with China and, in Rason's case, Russia. Sinuiju, at the mouth of the Yalu River, is the primary center for DPRK–China trade,²⁴⁾ while Rason in the far northeast, officially designated as the Rason Special Economic Zone (SEZ), is the largest transshipment point for goods and raw materials to and from Russia. Both cities host major rail crossings, and Rason additionally benefits from an ice-free port with Russian and Chinese involvement. Although SEZ development in Rason has not fully met expectations,²⁵⁾ existing infrastructure and limited commercial activity contribute to regional wealth., the infrastructure build and the little commercial activities help regional wealth. Both cities are also among the few spots in North Korea that generate occasional income from tourism.

While distance from Pyongyang reduces the likelihood of high Songbun status, the relative economic wealth of both cities makes them comparatively favorable environments for private educational investment.

tion in North Korea in 2000s," *Korean Journal of Sociology of Education* 17, no. 4 (2007).

24) "Spotlight on Sinuiju," *38 North*.

25) Ruediger Frank, "The North Korean Parliamentary Session and Budget Report for 2017," *38 North*, April 28, 2017.

2) Vocational needs, Language and School

The Rason SEZ's aim of promoting economic expansion through foreign investment and partial market liberalization, together with Sinuiju's role as a major trading hub with China, generates demand for a workforce with skills that differ from those emphasized in the broader North Korean education system.

Research shows that SEZs drive educational change from two directions: governments anticipate required skills and adjust policy accordingly, while companies shape training through vocational practices and influence demand for higher education qualifications.²⁶⁾ Language skills are a key prerequisite for international trade and foreign investment, as local workers must be able to communicate with foreign partners and follow instructions. In Rason and Sinuiju, Chinese and Russian — and to a lesser extent English — are particularly relevant. Although foreign language schools exist in many major cities, the case of Rason can be interpreted as aligning with these specific structural demands.

In addition, North Korean workers are expected to assume functions within joint ventures, requiring knowledge of international trade practices, business operations, and cross-cultural interaction. However, such expertise has historically been concentrated in training institutions in

26) Fadi Sakka, "Human Capital Development in Special Economic Zones: The Case of Dubai" (ResearchGate, 2018); Fangjun Lu, Wei Sun, and Ji Wu, "Special Economic Zones and Human Capital Investment: 30 Years of Evidence from China," *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 15, no. 3 (2023).

Pyongyang and Wonsan rather than in Rason or Sinuiju.²⁷⁾

More sector-specific demands arise in tourism and services, where skills in hospitality management, customer service, tour guiding, and basic business administration are required.²⁸⁾

3) Analytical Proposition

This study advances three analytical propositions to guide the comparative analysis of educational discourse in Rason and Sinuiju.

First, educational discourse in North Korean border cities is not uniform but spatially differentiated, reflecting each city's political – economic function within the state system. In Sinuiju, education is framed as a tool for producing technically competent and ideologically reliable human capital for economic development, whereas in Rason it is more often articulated in relation to experimentation, adaptation, and controlled openness associated with its special economic zone status.

Second, educational discourse operates as a mediating mechanism between central ideology and local socio-economic realities. Rather than reproducing abstract socialist norms, city-specific narratives translate regime ideology into locally intelligible expectations, obligations, and aspirations.

Third, variation in educational discourse reveals how the North

27) Frank, "The North Korean Parliamentary Session and Budget Report for 2017".

28) Gareth Johnson, "The Rason Special Economic Zone: Like Nowhere Else in North Korea," *NK News*, June 18, 2021.

Korean state manages tensions between marketization, border exposure, and political control by selectively emphasizing different educational virtues — such as discipline, loyalty, technical skill, or innovation — depending on urban context.

These conditions shape the discursive environment in which education is articulated without predetermining educational practice or experience. The analysis therefore shifts from structural context to discursive construction, examining how education is framed, muted, or re-configured in regime and counter-regime narratives at the city level rather than testing empirical effects.

3. Methodology & Research Design

1) Theoretical Foundation

This study applies discourse analysis to examine how education in Rason and Sinuiju is framed, contested, and legitimized in public communication inside and outside North Korea. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis,²⁹⁾ media are treated not as neutral observers but as active constructors of social reality. In authoritarian regimes such as North Korea, state media project ideological continuity, while external

29) Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Routledge, 2013).

reporting by researchers and defectors produces counter-regime discourse that highlights tensions and contradictions.

The use of English-language regime sources is treated as an analytical feature rather than a limitation. These outward-facing materials are designed to present domestic institutions and policies to international audiences and thus offer insight into how the state seeks to narrate and legitimize itself to an international audience.³⁰⁾

2) Research Design

In the absence of detailed city-level data on education, the research questions are exploratory:

Q1: How are Rason and Sinuju educationally constructed in North Korean regime discourse?

Q2: How does Rason's and Sinuju's counter-regime discourse differ from official discourse?

Q3: Does the discourse differ through time?

To answer these questions and to help process many articles this study adopts a Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) approach, combining corpus-linguistic tools with qualitative analysis. CADS enables the identification of salient linguistic patterns (keywords, collocations, concordances) while grounding interpretation in sociopolitical context.³¹⁾

30) Rob York, "How North Korea Has Used English-Language Media to Drum up International Support," *NK News*, 2020.

Following CADS we will first reflect the descriptive corpus properties of educational discourse inside and outside of North Korea — exploring what the news can tell us about education in the respective cities. Then we interpret in a discourse analysis what discursive function city-education plays. Both perceptions on the corpus will be accompanied by a key word and time trend analysis.

(1) Corpus Creation

A corpus is a large and structured collection of texts, stored and processed electronically.³²⁾ The text collections of this study consist of article segments defined by their newspaper source type, keyword, search-period and segmentation rule.

There are two types of newspaper sources: North Korean regime newspapers and external counter-regime reporting on North Korea. The analysis does not assume internal uniformity within these categories but focuses on recurring discursive patterns across heterogeneous sources.

Regime discourse sources were selected based on electronic availability and archive accessibility. As North Korean webpages typically retain only about one year of content and are subject to retrospective censorship, KCNA Watch — a service provided by the American news portal NK News — was used as a proxy to access archived material. It indexes 17 English-language North Korean outlets, which form the regime

31) Paul Baker, *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis* (London: Continuum, 2006).

32) Michael Stubbs, *Text and Corpus Analysis: Computer-Assisted Studies of Language and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

〈Table 2〉 Newspaper sources by type

Platform	Description
regime discourse*	
Chongnyon Chonwi	A youth-focused publication, typically associated with the Kimilsungist–Kimjongilist Youth League.
KASS	The Korean Association of Social Scientists promotes ideological and academic discourse aligned with the regime.
KCNA.kp/ KCNA.co.jp	The primary state-run news agency; provides official government statements and daily news updates. Korean and Japanese-hosted versions exist.
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Government site presenting policy updates and North Korea's international positions.
Naenara	The DPRK's official web portal offering curated content on culture, politics, and economy for foreign audiences.
Rodong Sinmun**	The Rodong Sinmun is North Korea's official newspaper of record and published by the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea.
Uriminzokkiri	A propaganda site targeting overseas Koreans and foreign audiences, known for its multilingual output.
Voice of Korea	North Korea's international broadcasting service, delivering state narratives to the global audience.
Pyongyang Times	An English-language newspaper that showcases North Korean perspectives on global and domestic issues.
counter-regime discourse	
38 North	An authoritative analysis and news website focused on North Korean affairs. Run by the Stimson Center, it offers detailed research, policy analysis, satellite imagery insights, and nuanced assessments.
Daily NK	An influential online newspaper publishing real-time news sourced directly from contacts inside North Korea. Emphasizes human rights, social conditions, and market economy developments.
Rimjin-Gang	An independent outlet using citizen journalism to provide uncensored reports from inside North Korea. Offers firsthand accounts and in-depth features exposing everyday realities.

NK Insider	A specialized media platform offering analysis, interviews, and commentary with insider perspectives on internal politics and social issues.
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* To save space only those newspapers that yielded unique results on the search query are included in this overview. Excluded are: DPRK Today, KFPD, Kim Il Sung University, Ministry of Public Health, Minju Choson, Ryugyong and Sports DPRK.

** Due to access restrictions, approximately 33% of *Rodong Sinmun* articles (corresponding to roughly 5% of the total corpus) were available only in truncated form. These items were retained in the analysis and segmented where the available text met the established criteria for city-anchored educational discourse. No inferential reconstruction beyond the visible text was undertaken.

discourse corpus.

Counter-regime sources were selected for their exclusive focus on North Korea and include Daily NK, Rimjin-Gang, NK Insider, and 38 North. These outlets provide complementary perspectives, ranging from defector-based reporting (Rimjin-Gang, Daily NK) to border-trade investigations (NK Insider) and policy-oriented analysis (38 North). Paywalled platforms such as NK News and more general regional media (e.g. Radio Free Asia, The Diplomat) were excluded to maintain accessibility and thematic focus. Table 2 provides an overview of all included outlets.

The comparison between regime and counter-regime discourse is not intended to contrast official and external accounts, but to examine how similar educational themes are structured across different discursive systems. This makes it possible to identify which patterns are specific to regime narratives and which remain stable across differently positioned discursive environments.

City-specific educational articles were identified using keyword combinations of city names and education-related terms. In the case of Rason

the former cities – now Rason districts – Songbong and Rajin were also included in the query.

Q1: Sinuiju AND (education OR school OR student)

Q2: (Rason OR Songbong OR Rajin) AND (education OR school)

The search period begins with the advent of the internet in the 1990s, and all available online articles were included. The search period ends on April 30, 2025, marking the beginning of this analysis in May 2025. The search queries were applied to google for the counter-regime discourse and to KCNA watch for the regime-discourse.³³⁾ URLs were collected using Python's Selenium library and parsed for title, content, source/author, and URL using BeautifulSoup4.

The collected articles were cleaned by removing entries lacking city-specific keywords and duplicate articles. Duplicates are common in regime media, where KCNA articles are republished — often with minor edits — across outlets such as Naenara, The Pyongyang Times, and Rodong Sinmun. Articles were treated as duplicates when more than 90 percent of their content overlapped.

In total, 602 unique articles from 1994–2025 were retained. Table 3 provides an overview. Duplicate articles were excluded from content coding to avoid inflating the thematic weight of individual reports.³⁴⁾

33) The freely accessible KCNA watch search engine does not allow the logical OR, which is why multiple queries were used to achieve the same result.

34) While duplicates were retained for word frequency analysis, it should be noted that repetition across regime outlets may reflect editorial syndication practices as much as intentional discursive emphasis. In either case, however, the effect for the reader is one of reinforcement, which justifies their inclusion in fre-

〈Table 3〉 Overview of extracted articles by newspaper type and query

Type	Q2 (Rason)		Q1 (Sinuiju)		TOTAL
	Reg.	C-Reg.	Reg.	C-Reg.	
Extract	511	50	240	39	840
Duplicate	115	0	122	0	237
Unique	396	50	117	39	602

The collected articles were screened for city-specific educational discourse using the following segmentation rules. A segment begins with a sentence explicitly naming the city (Sinuiju, Rason, or its sub-units) or identifying actors from the city engaged in an educational context, including:

- schools (primary, secondary, vocational, higher education)
- students or pupils
- teachers or educational administrators
- educational exchanges, training, curricula, or learning institutions

The segment extends forward to include immediately following sentences that refer to the same city or actors through anaphoric devices (e.g., pronouns such as they, their, he, she, it, or definite noun phrases such as the city, the school, or the students), or that elaborate or evaluate the same referent.

If a sentence naming Rason contains comparative or referential expressions (e.g., similar, the same, such, also), the segment extends backward to include the preceding sentence defining the referenced action or

quency-based visualizations.

condition. A segment ends when a new main referent is introduced that is not linked to the city by anaphora, or when subsequent sentences no longer depend on the city-based referent.

If the city appears only in a list of locations without further reference, the segment is limited to that single sentence. Segments were excluded if the city was mentioned only as a geographic or bibliographic reference without relevance to educational discourse.

Normative legal texts, such as laws and regulations, were excluded from segmentation and coding, as they constitute institutional background rather than journalistic or narrative discourse.

Segmentation was assisted by ChatGPT 5.2 and subsequently manually validated. All machine-generated segments were reviewed and either confirmed, extended, merged, or excluded. Of 504 initial segments, 324 were retained.

As shown in Appendix A, the distribution of segments across outlets is uneven, with some sources contributing only limited observations or covering a single city. This constrains outlet-level comparison; accordingly, the analysis focuses on cross-source discursive patterns rather than individual outlets. Figure 1 displays the resulting four corpora, divided by city and discourse type.

(2) Corpus Analysis

For the overall analysis of educational discourse across the four corpora, a short content analysis provides an overview of each corpus and is followed by a discourse analysis that groups segments into intelligible

〈Figure 1〉 Corpus by query and source

Q1: Sinuiju	1) S-RC 193 segments	2) S-CRC 18 segments
Q2: Rason	3) R-RC 105 segments	4) R-CRC 8 segments
	Regime Discourse	Counter-regime Discourse

education-related categories. Although the corpus spans 1994–2025, only a small proportion of segments (36 out of 324) originates from the Kim Jong Il period. This limits the feasibility of comparing discourse across leadership periods; the analysis therefore focuses on temporal patterns within the dataset.

While the segmented full text is used for discourse analysis, the content analysis is based on top-20 keyword lists. Keywords are ranked by thematic breadth (article count, AC) and intensity (term frequency, TF). Thematic breadth reflects how widely a term appears across documents, while intensity captures its overall frequency within the corpus. This ranking approach is standard in corpus analysis.

Text processing — including tokenization, English stop-word removal, and frequency calculation — was conducted using the scikit-learn library in Python. The city names (Rason, Sinuiju) and the term “education” were excluded from the keyword lists, as their frequency reflects the search

design rather than analytical significance. By contrast, the keyword “school,” although part of the original query, was retained because its relative distribution and institutional variation across corpora provide insight into how educational discourse is weighted and structured.

In addition, a manually defined list of reporting markers, grammatical fillers, geographic references, leader references, honorifics, and event-specific terms was excluded from the keyword overview and analyzed separately, as these elements index discursive legitimation and narrative context rather than the structural vocabulary of education. Given the extended timeframe, keyword meanings may vary across periods; the analysis therefore focuses on recurring usages, while noting temporally specific variations where relevant.

4. Findings

1) Content Analysis

Table 4 provides a comparative overview of the dominant educational vocabulary in regime and counter-regime discourse on Sinuiju and Rason, illustrating differences in the types of educational actors, practices, and conditions most frequently referenced.

〈Table 4〉 Dominant Educational Vocabulary
in Sinuiju and Rason by Discourse Type

Sinuiju		Rason	
Regime Discourse	Counter-Regime Discourse	Regime Discourse	Counter-Regime Discourse
school	school	school	student
teacher	parent	officials	school
training	student	Pyongyang	teacher
college	child	party	parent
student	family	worker	principal
university	money	secondary school	academic
Pyongyang	university	student	homeroom
child	home	primary school	class
teaching	high school	committee	child
University of Education	middle school	middle school	training
Middle school	local	life	university
primary school	border	girl	primary school
kindergarten	state	young	Chinese
method	vacation	child	ministry
talent	tutor	youth	Pyongyang
contest	committee	teacher	poor
party	party	factory	authority
art	Pyongyang	care	special
technology	authority	uniform	
sport		classroom	

Note: Keywords are ordered first by article count and second by term frequency. Shorter counter-regime keyword lists reflect the smaller size and episodic character of the counter-regime corpora. The table is intended as an orienting comparison and does not imply discursive opposition or equivalence.

(1) Regime Discourse: Keyword Overviews by City

① Sinuiju

Regime discourse on education in Sinuiju describes a highly articu-

lated and vertically differentiated educational system, with sustained attention to institutions, pedagogy, and student evaluation.

Keywords such as ‘school’, ‘kindergarten’, ‘primary school’, ‘middle school’, ‘college’, and ‘university’ refer to formal state-run institutions, and ‘student’, ‘teacher’, and ‘child’ to their participants. These actors are typically situated in organized instructional settings or institutional activities such as lesson delivery, school events, or academic programs. The phrase ‘University of Education’ denotes the two central teacher-training institutions in Sinuiju and appears in contexts of staff preparation, curriculum development, and pedagogical standardization.³⁵⁾

Educational practice is described with notable specificity. Keywords such as ‘training’, ‘teaching’, and ‘method’ refer to instructional techniques, lesson organization, and reform efforts, consistently embedded in concrete settings such as training sessions and demonstration lessons — for example at the children’s traffic safety education park in Sinuiju³⁶⁾ — or in teachers’ application of individualized “creative and reasonable teaching methods”³⁷⁾. Pedagogy is thus framed as something to be actively implemented and evaluated rather than as an abstract ideal.

Beyond core instruction, Sinuiju regime discourse emphasizes student differentiation and performance. The keywords ‘talent’ and ‘contest’ appear in structured competitive contexts — academic competitions, exhibitions, or skill demonstrations — where students or school groups are

35) “Preparations for Teaching in Full Swing,” *Naenara*, April 18, 2020.

36) “Sinuiju Traffic Safety Education Park for Children,” *Naenara*, July 18, 2018.

37) “‘Nursery’ of Talents,” *Naenara*, June 1, 2019.

selected and publicly recognized. These segments highlight organized mechanisms for identifying ability, for instance through the notion of “hard training by means of competition”³⁸). Similarly, ‘art’, ‘technology’, and ‘sport’ are embedded in performance-oriented contexts, functioning as arenas for displaying achievement and institutional excellence, as illustrated by a child from Ponbu Kindergarten who “distinguished herself by presenting a good picture at a national kindergarten children’s talent contest”³⁹).

Governance-related terms, notably ‘party’ and ‘Pyongyang’, situate education within a central framework. These references appear in contexts of guidance, support, or recognition — such as aligning achievements with central directives—rather than direct intervention in everyday school management.⁴⁰) Regime discourse thus presents education as a structured, multi-level system in which pedagogical practice, performance evaluation, and institutional hierarchy are closely interlinked.

② Rason

Regime discourse on education in Rason centers on formal schooling but places greater emphasis on administrative embedding and social function than on pedagogy. This orientation is reflected in segments where schools are consistently referenced alongside local administrative units or collective actors, situating them within broader organizational

38) “Immortal Youth (3),” *Naenara*, May 19, 2016.

39) “Home of Child Prodigies,” *Naenara*, April 18, 2018.

40) “To Promote Development of Local Education,” *Naenara*, April 29, 2024.

structures rather than as autonomous pedagogical spaces.

Core keywords such as ‘school’, ‘student’, ‘teacher’, ‘child’, ‘youth’, and ‘girl’ refer to school-age populations in organized educational settings, typically embedded in descriptions of collective activities, supervision, or participation in organized events, such as the attendance of Rason delegates at the 66th Korean Children’s Union anniversary celebrations (R-RC_ID_8). Educational levels are marked by ‘primary school’, ‘middle school’, and ‘secondary school’, with fewer references to higher education or teacher training. Administrative actors are particularly prominent: ‘officials’, ‘committee’, and ‘party’ appear in contexts of inspection, coordination, and directive implementation. Educational activities are often framed as outcomes — occurring thanks to “the devoted efforts and sincerity of officials”⁴¹⁾ — and as guided by local or party authorities, constructing schools as sites of managed social order rather than primarily pedagogical environments.

A distinctive feature of Rason regime discourse is the linkage between education and productive activity. While ‘worker’ and ‘factory’ appear in the corpus, they are mainly associated with infrastructural or organizational contexts — such as school uniform production or local industry — rather than direct student participation in labor. This indicates an indirect articulation of education within a broader socio-economic framework rather than explicit vocational practice.⁴²⁾

41) KCNA, “Development of Educational Institutions Brisk in DPRK,” *KCNA*, October 7, 2023.

42) “Rason School Uniform Factory Inaugurated,” *KCNA*, November 11, 2023.

Material and organizational aspects of schooling are foregrounded through keywords such as ‘care’, ‘uniform’, and ‘classroom’, which appear in descriptions of provisioning, maintenance, and physical conditions. These are embedded in narratives about proper student appearance, orderly environments, and infrastructure development, including “the building of multi-functional classrooms”⁴³⁾, suggesting a focus on stability, discipline, and material adequacy. The keyword ‘life’ further links education to everyday socialization, appearing in contexts of youth upbringing, moral guidance, and collective routines.⁴⁴⁾

Regime discourse in Rason thus presents education as a socially functional and administratively supervised institution closely tied to labor, order, and youth management, with limited emphasis on pedagogical innovation or competitive differentiation.

(2) Counter-Regime Discourse: Keyword Overviews by City

① Sinuiju

Counter-regime reporting on education in Sinuiju frames schooling as a site of household involvement, economic pressure, and administrative intervention. Core institutional terms such as ‘school’, ‘student’, ‘child’, ‘parent’, ‘family’, and ‘home’ refer less to education as an abstract system than to the everyday interface between schools and households.

43) “Successes Made in Enhancing Educational Quality,” *Pyongyang Times*, September 27, 2024.

44) “Let Us Defend the Rights of the Masses,” *KASS*, June 29, 2016.

Reporting emphasizes parental responsibility for supervision and compliance, for example when authorities call on parents to conduct “home-based education in parallel with school-based education” and criticize families for failing to “properly send their children to school” or for using them in business and errands.⁴⁵⁾

Education-related expenses and informal practices are a central theme. Keywords such as ‘money’, ‘tutor’, and ‘vacation’ appear in reporting on private tutoring, supplementary education, and informal payments, often framed as sources of inequality. Heat related long vacations are depicted to intensify disparities, as “some wealthy parents rushed to find talented tutors” during extended breaks, while poorer families struggled to meet basic schooling costs.⁴⁶⁾ Access to resources is likewise stratified: one mother notes she cannot afford a computer for her child because “they cost so much I can’t even dream of it,” turning IT education into a source of exclusion.⁴⁷⁾

Institutional pathways such as ‘high school’, ‘middle school’, and ‘university’ are referenced primarily in relation to admission, competition, and financial burden. Rather than meritocratic progression, reporting highlights bribery and unequal opportunity, as reflected in a gradu-

45) “Sinuiju People’s Committee Calls on Parents to “Take the Lead,” in Following the Party’s Childcare and Education Policies,” *DailyNK*, January 27, 2022.

46) “N. Korean Schools Start Summer Vacation Early Due to Hot Weather,” *DailyNK*, July 9, 2024.

47) “It Classes Cause Frustration among N. Korean Middle Schoolers,” *DailyNK*, June 4, 2024.

ate's complaint that he had "foolishly assumed it was possible to get into college on talent alone, even without any money"⁴⁸). Administrative and political actors — 'committee', 'party', 'authority', 'ministry', 'state', and 'Pyongyang' — are associated with enforcement and regulation, appearing in contexts of inspections, directives, and crackdowns, including a campaign that treated private tutoring as a "serious crime" and subjected families to public punishment.⁴⁹)

Spatial descriptors such as 'border' and 'local' situate education within Sinuiju's geographic context, linking schooling to cross-border economic pressures and urban conditions. Border-city students are described as less easily controlled than those from inland regions, while local economic opportunities can pull children out of school, as in reports of middle school girls skipping classes to produce fake eyelashes and wigs to support their families.⁵⁰) Counter-regime discourse thus presents education through concrete problems, constraints, and administrative encounters rather than system design or pedagogical ideals.

② Rason

Counter-regime reporting on education in Rason depicts a constrained educational environment shaped by administrative exceptionality and

48) "Many High School Graduates in N. Korea Face Barriers to Getting Higher Education," *DailyNK*, April 26, 2024.

49) "Lifting the Veil on Sinuiju's Crackdown on Private Education in January 2022," *Daily NK*, March 6, 2023.

50) "Sinuiju's Booming Cottage Industry: Fake Lashes and Wigs," *DailyNK*, October 17, 2024.

economic limitation. Institutional keywords such as ‘school’, ‘student’, ‘teacher’, ‘principal’, ‘class’, and ‘homeroom’ refer to routine school organization and administrative control, but these are presented through conflict and distrust rather than stability. For example, reporting on first-grade homeroom assignments highlights parental scrutiny and unequal influence, with parents objecting to a financially struggling teacher and “well-connected families” securing placement with more affluent teachers.⁵¹⁾

Household vulnerability is foregrounded through terms such as ‘parent’, ‘child’, and ‘poor’, which appear in contexts of limited resources and unequal access. A teacher’s poverty itself becomes part of the educational problem, as parents prefer materially secure teachers assumed to be less dependent on extra income from student’s families. Educational pathways (‘training’, ‘academic’, ‘university’, ‘primary school’) are likewise framed as constrained by material and administrative barriers. This is reflected in reports of regional test-score rankings placing Rason at the bottom, followed by dismissals of officials and principals, while parents attribute poor outcomes to longstanding deficiencies in teaching and accountability.⁵²⁾

Administrative terms such as ‘authority’, ‘ministry’, ‘Pyongyang’, and ‘special’ point to intensified regulation linked to Rason’s exceptional

51) “Class Divisions: N. Korean Parents Reject Impoverished Teachers for Their Children,” *DailyNK*, April 8, 2025.

52) “North Korean Educational Authorities Rank Average Test Scores of Students Nationwide,” *DailyNK*, April 15, 2021.

status. The keyword ‘Chinese’ further situates education within selective, state-managed cross-border cooperation, particularly in economic training contexts, without implying broad access or openness, as illustrated by training programs in Tianjin connected to special economic zone development.⁵³⁾

2) Discursive Connections in City-Level Education Discourse

This section examines how education is discursively reframed across regime and counter-regime discourse, drawing on the baseline vocabularies established in Section 4.1. Following critical discourse approaches that treat education as a site where governance, responsibility, and social hierarchy are negotiated (Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 1998), the analysis does not treat regime and counter-regime narratives as monolithic opposites, but highlights how discursive divergence is mediated by city-specific conditions. Three recurrent dimensions structure this reframing: education as governance versus burden, meritocratic cultivation versus differentiated inequality, and the reproduction of center–periphery relations.

Table 5 synthesizes the 10 dominant discursive dimensions through which education is framed across regime and counter-regime discourse in Sinuiju and Rason. It serves as an orientation device for the following analysis, indicating which dimensions are strongly foregrounded, backgrounded, marginal, or absent. The table refers to patterns of representa-

53) “20 NK Officials Getting Schooled in Tianjin,” *DailyNK*, June 4, 2012.

〈Table 5〉 Comparative Discursive Framing of Education
by City and Discourse Type

Discursive dimension	Sinuiju – Regime discourse	Sinuiju – Counter-regime discourse	Rason – Regime discourse	Rason – Counter-regime discourse
Vertical differentiation of education	Strongly foregrounded (full institutional hierarchy)	Backgrounded (education stages as pressure points)	Moderately foregrounded (focus on compulsory levels)	Marginal
Meritocratic cultivation	Strongly foregrounded (performance, contests, talent)	Reframed as strain and exclusion	Backgrounded	Absent
Pedagogical optimization	Strongly foregrounded (training, methods, improvement)	Marginal	Moderately foregrounded (organizational improvement)	Minimal
Administrative enforcement	Backgrounded (guidance-oriented framing)	Strongly foregrounded (inspection, compliance)	Strongly foregrounded	Strongly foregrounded
Institutional governance anchoring	Strongly foregrounded	Foregrounded (intervention-oriented)	Strongly foregrounded	Strongly foregrounded
Household responsabilization	Marginal	Strongly foregrounded	Backgrounded	Strongly foregrounded
Economic burden and resource constraint	Absent	Strongly foregrounded	Marginal	Strongly foregrounded
Productive – social integration	Marginal	Absent	Strongly foregrounded (school – labor linkage)	Weak

Material provisioning and infrastructure	Foregrounded (sufficiency framing)	Foregrounded (inequality framing)	Foregrounded (organizational emphasis)	Limited
Spatial exceptionality	Backgrounded (border context implicit)	Foregrounded	Strongly foregrounded (special status explicit)	Strongly foregrounded

Note: Descriptors reflect relative discursive salience and framing within each corpus rather than empirical scope or institutional impact.

tion and co-occurrence across segments, not to empirical intensity, policy effectiveness, or institutional outcomes.

Across the four corpora, education is not framed as an isolated institutional domain but is repeatedly connected to broader social, administrative, and spatial logics. Existing scholarship on North Korean discourse has emphasized its role in performing governance, stabilizing authority, and organizing social domains through symbolic and institutional language. The dimensions identified here extend this literature by showing how education is connected to governance, households, and space in differentiated ways at the city level rather than through a uniform national discourse.

A first dominant pattern is the vertical differentiation of education, particularly pronounced in regime discourse. Education is articulated as a hierarchically ordered system composed of distinct institutional levels, ranging from kindergarten to higher education and teacher-training institutions. This structuring stabilizes education as a long-term sequential process. In Sinuiju, this differentiation is dense and detailed, reflect-

ing the city's role as an established educational center. In Rason, by contrast, it is more limited and concentrated on compulsory schooling.

This logic is largely bracketed in counter-regime discourse, where educational stages are referenced mainly as sites of pressure or access barriers. Rather than steps in a developmental trajectory, schools appear as locations where administrative demands are imposed. A representative Sinuiju counter-regime segment notes that parents were addressed at “a recent meeting of the people's committee of the city” over schooling compliance⁵⁴⁾ illustrating how educational stages are reframed as points of intervention rather than progression.

Closely connected to vertical differentiation is the dimension of meritocratic cultivation, which operates primarily within regime discourse. Education is framed as a mechanism for identifying, cultivating, and displaying ability through contests, evaluations, and performance-oriented activities. This links educational progression to demonstrable achievement and reinforces a value grammar in which talent is actively produced and recognized. Regime discourse frequently employs formulations such as students being “trained ... as talented children” through schooling,⁵⁵⁾ presenting educational success as the outcome of structured guidance rather than social selection. This resonates with prior analyses highlighting the coexistence of meritocratic language and ideological cultivation in North Korean education discourse.⁵⁶⁾

54) “Sinuiju People's Committee Calls on Parents to “Take the Lead”.

55) “Kindergarten Well-Known in DPRK,” *KCNA*, April 8, 2008.

56) Lee, “Authoritarianism at School”; Cho, “Utilitarianism in education and uneven

Counter-regime discourse rarely mobilizes this meritocratic logic. When it does appear, it is typically reframed as a source of inequality or strain rather than opportunity. Educational competition is described less as a pathway for advancement than as a mechanism that amplifies differentiation, particularly between households with unequal resources.

A third discursive connection centers on pedagogical optimization, through which education is constructed as a technical field subject to continuous improvement. Regime discourse repeatedly emphasizes teaching methods, training programs, and instructional refinement, particularly in Sinuiju. Pedagogy is presented as a professional practice improved through expertise, organization, and correct methods, as reflected in references to “improving teaching methods through intensified training”⁵⁷). This framing constructs education as governable through technical enhancement rather than structural reform.

In counter-regime discourse, pedagogical content recedes markedly. References to teaching methods or training appear only sporadically, usually in relation to shortages, uneven implementation, or formal compliance rather than improvement. This contrast reflects what Fairclough describes as a shift from discourses of professional governance to discourses of administrative regulation.

Administrative enforcement emerges as a dominant connective logic in counter-regime discourse. Education is frequently framed as an object

development of education in North Korea in 2000s”.
57) “Nursery” of Talents”.

of regulation, inspection, and corrective intervention by administrative bodies. Committees, ministries, and local authorities appear not as supportive structures but as enforcement agents, particularly in moments of non-compliance. One Sinuiju counter-regime segment describes how schooling issues were addressed through “the provincial unified command on non-socialist and anti-socialist behavior,”⁵⁸⁾ illustrating how education is positioned as a site of administrative discipline. While administrative oversight also appears in regime discourse, there it is embedded within narratives of coordination and guidance rather than coercion.

Another recurring connection is household responsabilization, especially salient in counter-regime discourse across both cities. Education is linked to parental obligation, financial contribution, and household supervision, shifting responsibility away from institutions and toward families. Counter-regime segments refer to parents who “could not afford” private education costs,⁵⁹⁾ embedding education within everyday domestic burden. Regime discourse, by contrast, references households far less frequently and usually without emphasizing cost or strain, maintaining the primacy of institutional provision. This framing resonates with comparative research on “shadow education,” which conceptualizes private tutoring and informal educational expenditures as mechanisms through which educational responsibility and inequality are shifted from

58) Kim, “Lifting the Veil on Sinuiju’s Crackdown on Private Education in January 2022”.

59) Kim, “Lifting the Veil on Sinuiju’s Crackdown on Private Education in January 2022”.

the state to households.⁶⁰⁾

Education is also connected to material conditions through economic burden and resource constraint. Counter-regime discourse foregrounds costs associated with schooling, including tutoring, supplies, and informal payments, framing education as a source of financial pressure. Regime discourse instead highlights material provisioning — such as uniforms, facilities, or equipment — without addressing scarcity, thereby stabilizing an image of sufficiency rather than constraint. This divergence aligns with prior findings on the coexistence of formal provisioning narratives and informal burden in North Korean social sectors.⁶¹⁾

In Rason, education is additionally connected to productive–social integration. Regime discourse links schooling to labor, factories, and social usefulness, framing education as preparation for productive contribution within a localized economic environment. References to students being trained “to become competent workers for factories and enterprises” position education as instrumental to regional economic function. This connection is weaker in Sinuiju and largely absent in counter-regime discourse, where labor appears more often as a compet-

60) Mark Bray and Chad Lykins, *Shadow Education: Private Supplementary Tutoring and Its Implications for Policy Makers in Asia* (Mandaluyong City: Asian Development Bank, 2012).

61) Jo, “The Application of Private Education in North Korean Education and Its Meaning”; Sung-Bae Kim, “Educational Inequality in North Korea and the Private Tutoring Phenomenon in Pyongyang,” in *Pyongyang and the Lives of Its Citizens after Marketization* (Seoul: Soongsil Institute for Peace and Unification, 2024).

ing demand than as an educational outcome.

Finally, spatial exceptionality shapes how education is framed in both cities, though in different ways. In Sinuiju, border proximity subtly informs discussions of opportunity, regulation, and differentiation. In Rason, by contrast, special administrative status is explicitly foregrounded. Education is framed as subject to exceptional rules, intensified oversight, and cross-border reference, particularly in counter-regime discourse. This positions schooling within non-standard governance environments rather than as part of a normalized national system.

The 10 dimensions show that education functions discursively as a nodal point where hierarchy, governance, household obligation, labor, materiality, and space intersect. Differences between regime and counter-regime discourse do not simply reflect opposing evaluations of education, but distinct ways of connecting education to broader social logics under varying urban and administrative conditions.

These interpretations should be understood as indicative rather than causal, as the study does not systematically analyze the relationship between discursive patterns and the institutional structure of local education systems.

3) Temporal Structuring of Education Discourse

Temporal variation in educational discourse should not be interpreted as linear policy development or narrative evolution. Existing research on North Korean cultural and media production instead suggests that atten-

tion to specific social domains is episodic, campaign-driven, and politically contingent rather than continuous. Gabroussenko's⁶²⁾ analysis of North Korean literary policy shows that cultural output is mobilized in concentrated bursts tied to political moments, anniversaries, or intervention campaigns, after which discursive attention recedes without necessarily signaling change. While her work focuses on literature, this insight has been applied more broadly to patterns of cultural governance in the DPRK, where symbolic emphasis and silence function as tools of regulation rather than indicators of neglect.

Applied to regime media discourse, this perspective allows temporal clustering to be interpreted as a feature of governance rather than inconsistency. Spikes in educational reporting—often coinciding with leadership anniversaries, the new school year, inspections, or reconstruction efforts—reflect moments in which education is foregrounded to signal control, care, or achievement. Conversely, periods of relative discursive silence do not imply diminished importance but indicate a return to routinized governance, where education remains regulated without symbolic amplification. This interpretation aligns with critiques of securitization and rational-actor models of North Korean policy, which caution against reading short-term discursive shifts as evidence of substantive reform or decline.⁶³⁾

62) Tatiana Gabroussenko, *Soldiers on the Cultural Front: Developments in the Early History of North Korean Literature and Literary Policy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010).

63) Smith, "Bad, Mad, Sad or Rational Actor?"

In contrast, counter-regime discourse exhibits a different temporal logic. Rather than campaign-like clustering, its temporal distribution is shaped by event-driven reporting and access constraints, producing irregular coverage that reflects moments of information availability rather than coordinated discursive strategy. Temporal variation in counter-regime educational discourse is therefore less indicative of intentional framing and more reflective of structural limitations in observation and reporting.

4) Leadership Anchoring and Symbolic Legitimation

A closer examination of leadership-referenced segments shows that educational discourse does not invoke leadership uniformly. Instead, leadership positioning is historically layered and differentiated by leader, with distinct discursive functions across cities and corpora.

In Sinuiju's regime discourse, Kim Jong Il emerges as the most substantively embedded educational figure. Numerous segments associate him with the founding, development, and early consolidation of educational institutions, particularly kindergartens and teacher-training contexts. These references emphasize personal attention, the discovery and nurturing of talent, and institutional care, framing education as a social sphere shaped through his direct involvement. This pattern aligns with scholarship highlighting Kim Jong Il's role in consolidating social institutions and everyday governance during the post-Cold War period, where legitimacy was often established through visible institutional stewardship rather than abstract ideological articulation.⁶⁴⁾

By contrast, Kim Il Sung appears primarily as a mythic –foundational authority. References to him situate educational institutions within the revolutionary past, providing historical depth and ideological legitimacy without engaging contemporary governance or educational practice. This corresponds with analyses that treat revolutionary memory in North Korean discourse as a legitimating reservoir rather than a guide for present policy action.⁶⁵⁾

Kim Jong Un’s positioning differs markedly from both predecessors. In Sinuiju, his appearances in educational discourse are comparatively sparse and largely ceremonial. Leadership references function as symbolic endorsements — such as attributing the construction of educational facilities to his “wise leadership” — while omitting substantive discussion of pedagogy, access, or institutional operation. His presence thus operates as symbolic condensation, legitimizing educational arrangements without policy elaboration. This aligns with Myers’⁶⁶⁾ analysis of Korean-language internal media, which emphasizes leadership symbolism as moral and legitimating rather than programmatic. The thin and ceremonial framing observed here also reflects the outward-facing logic of English-language regime reporting, which prioritizes symbolic coher-

64) Frank, “The North Korean Parliamentary Session and Budget Report for 2017”; Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950* (New York City: Cornell University Press, 2013).

65) Smith, “Bad, Mad, Sad or Rational Actor?”

66) Brian Reynolds Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (New York City: Melville House, 2011).

ence and international image management over detailed policy communication.⁶⁷⁾

In Rason, leadership positioning intersects with education even less frequently. Where references do appear, they are embedded in contexts of exceptional administrative attention — such as reconstruction, inspections, or crisis response — rather than sustained educational narratives. This contrasts with the institutionally rich educational biography observed in Sinuiju and underscores the city’s positioning as an administratively exceptional space rather than an educational center.

The findings indicate that leadership anchoring in educational discourse is not monolithic but reflects historical layering, city-specific trajectories, and audience-sensitive mediation. Kim Jong Il occupies a central role in Sinuiju’s educational narrative as an institutional patron, Kim Il Sung functions as a source of foundational revolutionary legitimacy, and Kim Jong Un appears primarily as a symbolic endorsing figure whose presence consolidates legitimacy through ceremonial attribution rather than substantive educational narration.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how education is discursively constructed at the city level in North Korea through a comparative analysis of Sinuiju and

67) York, “How North Korea Has Used English-Language Media to Drum up International Support”.

Rason. By combining segment-based corpus construction with qualitative discourse analysis, it demonstrated that educational discourse is not uniform across space, but systematically differentiated according to the political–economic roles of individual cities.

The findings show that regime discourse constructs education as a centrally governed and institutionally structured system while allowing for distinct local emphases. In Sinuiju, education is framed through differentiation, performance, and institutional density, whereas in Rason it is more closely linked to administrative control, labor integration, and exceptional governance. These patterns indicate that even within a highly centralized system, educational discourse is spatially adapted to local functions.

The comparison between regime and counter-regime discourse further demonstrates that divergence operates through systematic reframing rather than simple opposition. While regime narratives emphasize institutional provision and guided development, counter-regime discourse foregrounds administrative enforcement, household responsibility, and resource constraints. These differences are not merely evaluative, but reflect distinct ways of connecting education to broader social and governance logics.

Temporally, educational discourse remains structurally stable but functionally adaptive. Core vocabulary persists across periods, while shifts occur primarily at the level of framing, particularly in relation to leadership anchoring and episodic policy emphasis.

Taken together, the findings suggest that education functions as a

flexible discursive interface through which the North Korean state manages regional differentiation, social hierarchy, and political legitimacy. Rather than simply reflecting institutional arrangements, educational discourse selectively activates, reconfigures, and stabilizes relationships between governance, households, labor, and space.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of city-anchored, segment-based corpus analysis for examining subnational variation within authoritarian media systems. By treating education as a discursive object rather than a policy domain alone, the approach reveals how centralized systems accommodate localized differentiation at the level of representation.

Several limitations should be noted. The analysis relies on English-language regime media, which reflects outward-facing legitimizing discourse, while counter-regime sources are episodic and shaped by access constraints. Future research could extend this framework by incorporating Korean-language sources, expanding the range of cities, and more systematically examining the relationship between discursive patterns and educational structures as well as differences between leadership periods.

Overall, the study shows that North Korean educational discourse is not monolithic but spatially differentiated, temporally adaptive, and strategically deployed, underscoring the importance of subnational perspectives for understanding governance and regime reproduction in the DPRK.

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Appendix

Distribution of Segments by Outlet and City

Outlet	Rason	Sinuiju
KCNA.kp	44	120
KCNA.co.jp	12	76
Naenara	17	70
Pyongyang Times	21	65
Rodong Sinmun	14	25
Voice of Korea	6	29
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	2	3
Chongnyon Chonwi	0	5
KASS	1	2
Uriminzokkiri	0	1
38 North	14	18
Daily NK	16	14
Rimjin-Gang	18	6
NK Insider	2	1

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북한 교육 담론의 지역적 분화에 관한 연구 신의주와 라선의 비교 분석

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본 연구는 신의주와 라선을 비교 대상으로 하여 북한에서 교육이 도시 수준에서 어떻게 담론적으로 구성되는지를 분석한다. 코퍼스 기반 담론 분석을 활용하여 정권 매체와 외부 비정권 매체의 영문 보도를 비교함으로써 교육 담론이 통치 방식, 사회적 불평등, 공간적 차별화와 어떠한 방식으로 연결되는지를 고찰하였다. 분석 결과, 정권 담론은 교육을 위계적이고 제도적으로 조직된 체계로 재현하는 반면, 비정권 담론은 이를 행정적 통제, 가계 부담, 접근성의 불균등이 드러나는 영역으로 재구성하는 경향을 보였다. 또한 두 도시는 상이한 방식으로 위치 지워지며, 신의주는 교육적으로 분화되고 제도적 밀도가 높은 공간으로, 라선은 경제특구의 행정적 특수성과 관리 강화의 맥락 속에서 재현된다. 본 연구는 교육이 중앙집권적 정치체제하에서 지역적 차이를 관리하고 정당화하는 담론적 매개로 기능함을 보여준다.

키워드: 북한, 교육 담론, 지역적 분화, 도시 단위 분석, 통치