

# **An Exploration on the Realities and Difficulties of South Korea's Inclusive Education through the Perspective of Disability Studies**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper attempted to explore issues surrounding South Korea's inclusive education. First, this paper explored the constructions of disabilities and inclusive education. It tried to show that disabilities and inclusive education were temporary construed in South Korea's situations. Second, this study tried to understand the concepts and changeability of disabilities and inclusive education in South Korea through the perspective of disability studies. It briefly introduced the perspective of disability studies, and discussed how to understand disabilities and inclusive education from the perspective of disability studies. This paper tried to criticize the current situations surrounding South Korea's inclusive education from the perspective of disability studies, and attempted to suggest the necessity of the studies that explore the fundamental approaches related to South Korea's inclusive education.*

**Keywords:** *Special education, Inclusive education, Disability studies, Realities, Difficulties, Fundamental approaches*

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. The necessity of the study**

Many students with disabilities in South Korea have received educational services in general schools by the name of inclusive education. Especially, the number of special education students who attend general schools greatly increased from 37,857 students in 2008 to 61,999 students in 2016 [1, 2]. However, the number of special education students who attend general schools may be no longer increase in the future. Although the number of special education students who attend general schools was somewhat increased by 26 students in 2016 in comparison with the previous year 7171, the total number of special education students was decreased by 117 students in comparison with the previous year [2][3].

It may be assumed that the decrease of the number of school-age students in South Korea is related to the decrease of the number of special education students. However, this assumption seems not to be persuasive. The number of school-age students was decreased from 8,553,772 students in 2011 [4] to 6,789,267 students in 2015 [3], but the number of special education students was increased from 82,665 students in 2011 to 88,067 students in 2015 [3]. Therefore, the decrease of the number of students with disabilities seems to be difficult to be explained by the change of the number of school-aged students. Instead, the decrease in the number of special education students seems to come from various reasons

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such as the difficulties in the diagnose of some types of disabilities including the difficulty in the diagnose of learning disabilities [5], the negative perception towards disabilities or special education students [6], and the uncertainty about the effect of special education [6].

Situations in inclusive education can be more complicated and various in the future. Especially, the types of disabilities of students with disabilities who attend general schools can be more complicated. For instance, the number of students with learning disabilities in South Korea was 2,770 students in 2015, but the number of these students decreased to 2,327 students in 2016 [2][3]. Although the number of students with learning disabilities in 2016 decreased in comparison with the previous year, the number of special education students who attend general schools did not decrease in comparison with the previous year [2][3]. This implies that general schools seem to have students with disabilities who have more diverse types of disabilities including those with severe disabilities in comparison with the past.

Special education in general schools seems to be changing in many ways. However, the studies regarding inclusive education seem not to reflect various aspects that may need to be considered in South Korea's inclusive education. For instance, the study of [7] reviewed the studies published in one domestic and two international journals regarding visually impaired students, and showed that visually impaired students' voices were not well exposed in the studies of the domestic journal in comparison with the studies of the international journals. This may imply that disabled students' voices are often silenced in the studies related to special education in South Korea. If the studies related to inclusive education do not comprehensively reflect students with disabilities, it may be difficult to understand the realities and difficulties in South Korea's inclusive education.

Limitations in studies regarding inclusive education can happen from various topics related to inclusive education. Especially, the studies through fundamental approaches need to be studied for understanding South Korea's inclusive education. The study of [8] reviewed the literature related to academic or philosophical discussions in South Korea's special education, and showed that there were not many studies that explored South Korea's special education through academic or philosophical approaches. The study of [8] may be inferred that the inclusive education, an area of special education, seems not to be actively discussed in terms of academic or philosophical approaches. It is necessary to do fundamental approaches on South Korea's inclusive education in order to identify the basic issues. Therefore, this study attempted to explore inclusive education through the perspective of disability studies that can be considered as a fundamental approach.

## **1.2. Research questions**

The purpose of this study attempted to explore the realities and difficulties of South Korea's inclusive education through a theoretical approach. The research questions are as follows.

- 1) What are the realities and difficulties of South Korea's inclusive education?
- 2) How can we understand inclusive education through a theoretical approach?

## **2. The realities in disability and inclusive education**

### **2.1. The major perspectives on disabilities**

People can have various perspectives on disabilities. Some people may think disabilities from non-disabled person's positions, and some people may understand disabilities from disabled person's positions [9]. Figure 1 shows how people can think of disabilities.

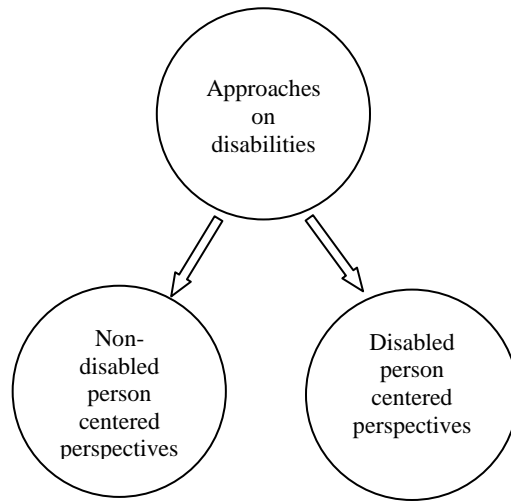


Figure 1. The major perspectives on disabilities

## 2.2. The major placements of special education students

Students with disabilities in South Korea are mostly placed in general schools or in special schools in 2016, and those with disabilities in general schools are placed either general or special classrooms [2]. Figure 2 shows the major placements of students with disabilities.

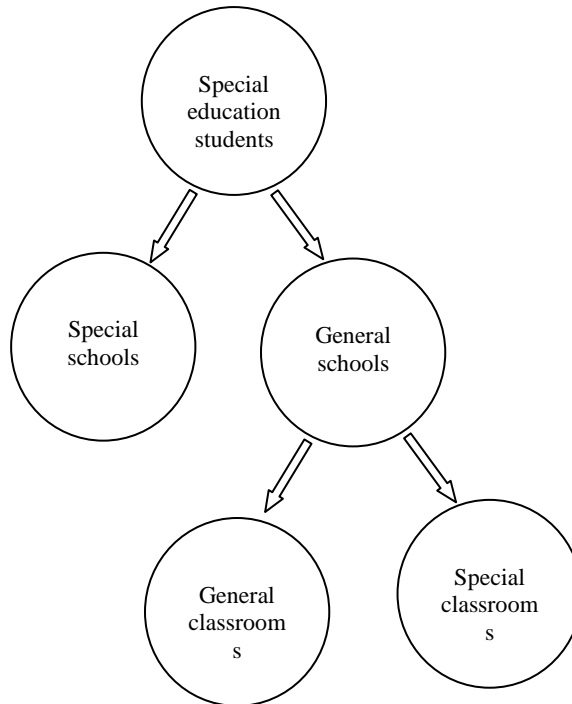


Figure 2. The major placements on special education students

### 3. Understanding inclusive education through the perspective of disability studies

This study attempted to understand South Korea's inclusive education through the perspective of disability studies. The perspective of disability studies tends to criticize the medical model on disabilities that assumes people with disabilities as those who need treatment, and tries to interpret disabilities through the social model on disabilities that pays much attention to social environments such as the environment surrounding people with disabilities [9].

The approaches through the perspective on disabilities studies help us to understand the artificial classifications between students with disabilities and non-disabled students [9]. A classification between students with disabilities and non-disabled students may be shown like [Figure 3]. Figure 3 implies that students may be classified by students with disabilities and non-disabled students according to whether or not disabilities, and implies that students with disabilities may be classified as mental disabilities or physical disabilities according to the types of disabilities.

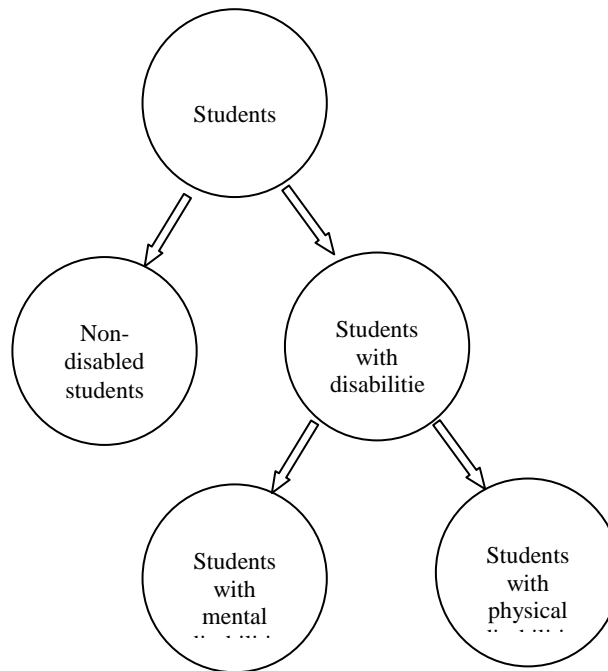


Figure 3. A classification on students

### 4. Conclusion

Students with disabilities in South Korea are more placed in general schools than in special schools [2]. However, it seems not to be easy for students with disabilities to receive appropriate educational supports while attending general schools [6][10]. The difficulties in inclusive education seem to happen in many ways, and these difficulties seem to bring some students with disabilities to choose their educational placements as special schools instead of general schools [10].

This study implied that the difficulties in inclusive education can be come from various reasons. First, many studies on inclusive education in South Korea seem to

focus on providers who provide inclusive education rather than receivers who receive inclusive education. For example, the study of [7] reviewed the articles in one domestic and two international journals related to visual impairment, and showed that visually impaired students' voices were seldom reflected in the studies in the domestic journal in comparison with the studies in the international journals.

The difficulties in inclusive education seem to be happened throughout inclusive education. In particular, domestic studies related to inclusive education are one of the most frequently addressed topics in special education, but the fundamental approaches on inclusive education seem not so be sufficient. This phenomenon occurs not only in inclusive education as an area of South Korea's special education, but also happens in overall special education.

Consequently, it is necessary to discuss the fundamental realities related to inclusive education, and needs to lessen the difficulties in South Korea's inclusive education. In others words, it is necessary to explore fundamental issues surrounding South Korea's inclusive education.

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