

Development of Special Needs Education in Japan and Some Current Problems

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1. The special education in Japan Before World War II

Special education began in Japan in the latter part of the 19th century. The first special school, a school for children with visual disabilities and children who were deaf, was established in Kyoto in 1878. The first special class, a class for children with intellectual disabilities, was set up in 1890 in Matsumoto City, Nagano Prefecture. In other words, special education for these have 127 and 115 years' history respectively until now.

The number of special schools and special classes for children with various kinds of disabilities had increased favorably until around 1930, but thereafter the rise of militarism and the War devastated the special education. At the end of the World War 2nd, the external number of special schools for children with blindness and deafness was still more than 100, but most schools were burned by air raids or the children were forced to move to rural area without school teaching. In the case of special classes, all were closed except one in Tokyo, at which the children also moved to rural area..

The special education had to be reconstructed after the 2nd World War based on the philosophy of democratic education, which was introduced by the educational policy of the occupation army.

2. Development of Special Education in Japan since the End of the World War 2nd

The new education law was enacted in 1947 and 6-3 compulsory education system started.

The development of special education was rapid; firstly, the special schools for children with blindness and deafness was reconstructed and secondly, special classes mainly for children with intellectual disability increased in number. Thirdly, the special schools for children with intellectual disability, with physical disability, and with health impairment, which had also increased in number, became compulsory education schools in 1979.

In 1979, the total number of special schools and the children was respectively 837 and 88,847, and total number of special classes and the children was respectively 20,865 and 115,711.

The development of special education since the end of the 2nd World War is divided in 3 terms:

- (1) Development of special schools and special classes. 1947- 1979
- (2) Movement of integrated education- Dumping. – 2000
- (3) Development of special needs education. – Present.

As mentioned above, we had made our efforts to increase special schools and special classes after the War with confidence that it is the right way. However, around 1979, the movement of integrated education began rapidly and radically, even though they are minority.

For instance, radical group of students of Tokyo Gakugei University in where I was working at that time, occupied the president room of the University together with outside supporters and claimed the breakup of the department of special education because it had promoted the discrimination in education.

I was only person in the University to affirm the significance of making of the education in special schools compulsory, as it made possible for every child including ones with even severe and multiple disabilities who had been excluded from school education thus far, to provide the appropriate school education.

The student paper wrote that Prof. Yamaguchi was the Ministry scholar who accepted the discriminative special education system. Sometime I was taken in their office for a kangaroo court and

sometime we discussed the matter bitterly in NHK TV debate.

As this movement was criticized in Western countries as “Dumping”, it was impractical theory and movement because there was not yet enough preparation to provide appropriate education for all children with disability in regular class of regular school in Japan at that time. It was natural that the movement of integrated education had been faded out.

Recently, instead of integrated education, the new reform movement from special education towards special needs (supportive) education has begun.

We might analyze above-mentioned three terms from dialectical point of view as follows:

- (1) Thesis; the end of the War –around 1979. Development of special schools and special classes in number had been encouraged.
- (2) Antithesis; 1979-2000. The movement of integrated education had been carried out partially but strongly.
- (3) Synthesis; - Present. The reform of special education towards inclusive and supportive education has begun to proceed.

In term (1), we made our effort to increase the number of special schools and special classes. It was basically right but not 100%. We could provide appropriate education for children with disabilities but only in separate and discriminative places such as special schools or special classes. In some cases, children had to commute the schools taking more than 1 hour by school buses, or they had to live in boardinghouses because the schools were too far from their homes. Our mistake was to disregard for the principle of “ Least Restrictive Educational Environment (LRE) ”.

This is the term of “Thesis”.

In term (2), which is “Antithesis”, they claimed that all children with disabilities had to be placed in regular classes in regular schools immediately. It was basically wrong because they ignore to give appropriate education to every child, but the direction towards LRE they aimed, was right.

Now in term (3), we have begun to reform the special education as “ Synthesis “ to sublimate “ Thesis “ and “ Antithesis “.

“ Special Needs Education “ preferably “ Inclusive and Supportive Education “ - the theme of this ISEC 2005, is to provide appropriate education to all children including ones with most severely and profoundly disabilities in LRE.

3. Policy of reform of special education by Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology (MEXT) and some problems to be solved.

The movement of reform of special education has been carried out throughout several special committees set up in the MEXT.

(1) Resource Room

The first committee chaired by Kaoru Yamaguchi was set up in 1990 to discuss to develop “ Resource Room System” (part-time special class) in special education system and submitted the report to the MEXT in 1992..

Based on this report, the School Education Law was amended in 1993 so that resource room was included in special education system along with special school and special class.

Since then, number of children who receive special education of this type has increased year after year and reached 33,652 (0.31% of all compulsory school age children) in 2003.

One of the significant changes is that the number of children enrolled in special classes and even in special schools has increased very rapidly since this amendment. [At present, 171,540-1.56% of all school age children are received special education, in special schools(51,955-0.47%), special classes(86,933-0.78%), or resource rooms (33,652-0.31%)]

I guess that resource room bridged between regular class and special school /class which was segregated from regular school/class, and unified these into one system.

I think this is very important one step towards inclusive education.

(2) Learning Disabilities (LD) and LD-like

The Committee on Resource Room discussed partially “Educational Provision for Children with LD and LD-like” to react for the petition of parent group of LD. Then “Committee on LD and LD-like” was set up in 1992, also chaired by Kaoru Yamaguchi. The final report of this committee was issued 1999 after 7 years discussion.

The main points of the report were as follows:

- The definition of LD was made as “ LD has basically no intellectual developmental delay but has difficulties to learn and use the skills such as speaking, listening, reading, writing, calculating and reasoning”
- A tentative plan was presented about how to identify these children.
- The teaching types and places for these children were presented such as special care by regular class teacher, team-teaching, individualized teaching, resource room and itinerant teaching by specialists

(3) Towards Special Education in 21st Century

The next Committee “ Towards Special Education in 21st Century” chaired by Hayao Kawai (Present Commissioner for Culture Affairs) was set up in 2000 and made the final report in 2001. Among several points of the report on how to provide appropriate education for children with special educational needs, one of the major points was that definition of “Special Supportive Education” was shown such as “In addition of children in special schools and special classes, to provide positively for children in regular classes who need special supportive education like LD and ADHD (Attention Deficit /Hyperactivity Disorder) etc.”

(4) Special Supportive Education hereafter

The last Committee was set up in 2001, titled “ How to be Special Supportive Education hereafter” chaired by Noboru Kobayashi (pediatrician).

In this final report, several rather innovative reform plans were presented as follows:

- To abolish special school according to the kinds of disabilities and reform it to be community school to provide support as educational support center to regular school in the community as well as special education in the center.
- To establish special educational support room by unifying special class and resource room.
- To appoint a special educational needs coordinator in every primary, secondary and special school.
- To set up in-school committee to discuss special needs of each child with learning difficulty, supported by all teachers of the school.
- To make individual teaching program for every child with special needs.
- To enhance the quality of teachers.
- To coordinate between relative agencies.

(5) Midterm Report by Central Council for Education in MEXT

Based on the final report of the last Committee, Central Council for Education in MEXT set up a working group to discuss special supportive education and issued “ Midterm Report “ in December 2004., in which almost all the same issues as the last Committee were discussed and organized in the similar lines.

Responding to the request by MEXT, I submitted my opinions for this Report and presented some problems to be solved.

- As a whole, this Report is well organized and shows the policy of special supportive education precisely and concretely.
- It is good to be able to continue present type of special school and special class for the time being if it is necessary.

- Consider about international trend of the principle of inclusive education which has been advocated in UN, UNESCO and now spreading throughout the world including developing countries.

- I recommend especially two measures: dual placement and open room:

Dual placement means that children in special schools and special classes have another register in regular classes in regular schools in their communities, so that children, teacher, and people in regular classes, regular schools and communities accept him/her as a member of their classes, schools, and communities.

Open room aims for every child who has difficulty in his/her class to be given a support any time. It bridges between resource room and regular class, and I believe it is one of the most effective step towards inclusive education.

4. Regionalism and Parents' Power

I am pessimistic on how MEXT will accept my proposals, because changes between midterm and final report are usually limited to minor ones.

I rather expect these reforms will be realized in local governments:

Proposal of dual placement appeared in the reports of committees in Saitama Prefecture, Tokyo Metropolitan and Yokohama City and already partially in process

Open rooms were set up in several schools in Kobe City, Yokkaichi City in Mie Prefecture, Kasuyacho in Fukuoka Prefecture and so on, supported by volunteers like retired principals, students specialized in special education, parents of children with disabilities etc.

Special Supportive Education Plans are being made in rather small towns such as Shiki City in Saitama Prefecture, Ashibetsu City, and Tokai Village.

One of the most excellent plans was made in Miyagi Prefecture in which:

- Special Supportive Education has been firmly based on the principle of inclusive education.
- Every child must be registered in regular school in his/her community, then considered necessity of special supportive education if necessary, such as support in regular class, resource class, special class, or special education outside of the regular school (former special school).

I do hope these plans made in local governments will be realized in the near future and I believe the most powerful influence to be so, will be given by parents movement.

Regionalism and Parents power are two major keys of future success of Inclusive and Supportive Education, which will lead to reform entirely and completely school education in Japan