Overview of the Seminar

The 29th Asia-Pacific International Seminar on Education for Individuals with Special Needs


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Summary: The National Institute of Special Needs Education held the 29th Asia-Pacific International Seminar on Education for Individuals with Special Needs, together with a pre-conference program (including a school tour, etc.), with support from the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, during four days starting December 1, 2009, at Yokohama Symposia. The seminar theme this year was “The Current Situation and Issues of Education for Children with Autism – Promoting Autism Education with Perspectives toward a Cohesive Society.” The participants came from 14 countries; Australia, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the host country Japan. The number of participants totaled approximately 220 over the course of the seminar. As the pre-conference program, a school tour related to the seminar theme and discussion via the Internet were held. During the main seminar, a keynote speech, an international comparison of basic data on education in the participating countries, and country reports were presented, and on the final day, all representatives of participating countries engaged in general discussion.

Keywords: autism, World Autism Awareness Day, special needs education, cohesive society, Asia-Pacific

I. Introduction

The National Institute of Special Needs Education (NISE) has actively carried out international exchanges and made contributions as one of its responsibilities as the national center for special needs education. In particular, as part of its activities focused on the Asia-Pacific region, the NISE has held annual seminars since 1981 with the participation of representatives involved in special needs education in more than a dozen Asian-Pacific countries. Heretofore, the NISE has hosted around 370 representatives from various countries.

The 29th Asia-Pacific International Seminar on Education for Individuals with Special Needs was held in 2009 at Yokohama Symposia over the course of four days, including the pre-conference program. The seminar theme this time was “The Current Situation and Issues of Education for Children with Autism – Promoting Autism Education with Perspectives toward a Cohesive Society.”

The participants hailed from 14 countries, including Australia, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the
host country Japan. Representatives from each country were chosen upon the recommendation of the National Commission for UNESCO in each country and were selected from among various experts such as administrative officials, school principals, and researchers.

During the seminar, approximately 220 persons participated, including those from Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, support organizations for individuals with disabilities, special needs schools, universities, and foreign students from various countries. At the same time, this seminar was positioned as part of the events for Disabled Persons’ Week, and so panels showing the NISE’s research activities were displayed at the seminar venue with the aim of introducing latest research on special needs education to the general participants.

II. Content of Seminar

1. Seminar Theme


2. Host

   The National Institute of Special Needs Education
   Support: Japanese National Commission for UNESCO
   Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA Yokohama)

3. Schedule/Venue

   Schedule: 2009.12.1~2009.12.4

   November 31 (Monday)   Arrival in Japan of international participants
   December 1 (Tuesday)   Theme-related institution tour and discussion
                           (Funakoshi Elementary School, Yokosuka City), and a visit to National Institute of Special Needs Education,
   December 2 (Wednesday) Opening Ceremony, Keynote Speech, Reports on Comparison of Basic Country Data, Country Reports
   December 3 (Thursday)  Country Reports
   December 4 (Friday)    Country Reports, General Discussion, Closing Ceremony
   December 5 (Saturday)  Departure from Japan of international participants

   Seminar venue: Yokohama Symposia
4. Theme-Related Institution Tour

On the morning of December 1, an opportunity was provided to see teaching in action and to hold discussion with Funakoshi Elementary School, Yokosuka City. Initially, a firsthand tour was scheduled, but as a preventative measure against influenza, it became necessary to avoid a direct visit to the school during the foreign participants' first week in Japan. So, a tour and discussion via Internet were arranged with the understanding and active cooperation of Funakoshi Elementary School and the Yokosuka City Board of Education.

There are around 540 students at Funakoshi Elementary School, and there are two special needs classes (one for intellectual disabilities and one for autism/emotional disturbances). We requested a tour of the school because it complements the seminar theme, as a school that actively promotes joint activities and learning in regular classes, together with close attention to education for autistic children adapted to the specific characteristics of the disability and the individuality of each child.

The program progressed in the following order: 1) observation via the Internet of individual study of Japanese and mathematics by two children with autism who are in the special needs class, 2) two-way discussion via the Internet between these children and the country representatives, 3) viewing of videos filmed in advance of children engaging in group study in the special needs class, joint activities and learning in the regular classes, and an overnight study trip outside the school conducted jointly with children in special needs classes of other schools, and 4) Q&A and discussion via the Internet between the principal of Funakoshi Elementary School, the teacher in charge of the special needs class, and the country representatives.

The tour of Funakoshi Elementary School via the Internet, discussion and information exchange through video viewing were a significant support that aided the country representatives in understanding the actual situation of special needs education in Japan.

5. Keynote Speech

Following the Opening Ceremony and greetings from the Director of Special Needs Education Department of the MEXT, the keynote speech on “Autism and Education” was presented by ATSUMI Yoshikata, head of the NISE’s Information Center of Education for the Persons with Developmental Disabilities. He gave a comprehensive explanation on autism that seminar participants and audience needed to know as common basic knowledge, organized into five areas: 1) origin of and changes in the concept of autism, 2) clinical entity and etiology, 3) characteristics of autism, 4) the importance of education for autism, and 5) the significance of autism awareness in society.

Furthermore, following that, in relation to the fifth area of the keynote speech addressing autism awareness, there was an appeal for solidarity made to the country representatives in conjunction with the approach of World Autism Awareness Day (April 2 each year) by the vice-chairperson of Autism Society Japan, who is concurrently head of the planning for the Executive Committee for World Autism Awareness Day, and an expert on developmental disabilities countermeasures from the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare.
6. International Comparison Reports

Following the keynote speech, YANAGISAWA Akiko, researcher of NISE, gave a presentation of basic data on education in the participating countries. The basic data was compiled by the NISE using materials related to special needs education which were collected through the participants. The purpose of this presentation was to allow the participants to understand the differences and similarities between their countries and to aid their understanding of the country reports that followed. Basic data on Asia-Pacific countries is printed in the Journal of Special Education in the Asia Pacific and is also available on the NISE website.

7. Country Reports

From the afternoon of December 2 through the morning of December 4, country reports on 14 countries including Japan were presented based on this year’s theme. Presenting on Japan were two senior researchers of NISE, HIROSE Yumiko and SASAMORI Hiroki, with a report entitled “The Current Situation and Issues of Education for Children with Autism – Promoting Autism Education with Perspectives toward a Cohesive Society.” They reported concerning the history and current issues of autism in special needs schools and special needs classes.

Below are the countries, names, and affiliations of the presenters.

Australia
Ms. Fiona Forbes (Principal, Peel Language Development School; President, Australian Special Education Principals Association)

Bangladesh
Mr. A. B. M. Arshad Hossain (Director/Deputy Secretary, Department of Social Services, Ministry of Social Welfare)

China
Ms. Leilei ZHAN (Senior Editor, Jiangsu Education Journal House)

India
Dr. Alka Bhargava (Director, Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Human Resource Development)

Indonesia
Ms. Kairun Nisa Dwiyani (Staff, Sub Division of Administrative Court, Directorate of special Education for Development, Ministry of National Education)

Japan
Ms. HIROSE Yumiko (Senior Chief Researcher, Department of Educational Support, National Institute of Special Needs Education)
Mr. SASAMORI Hiroki (Senior Chief Researcher, Information Center of Education for the persons with Developmental Disabilities, National Institute of Special Needs Education)
Korea
Ms. An Soo-Kyoung (Education Researcher, Division of Planning and Research, Korea National Institute for Special Education)

Malaysia
Mr. Bong Muk Shin (Director, Special Education Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia)

Nepal
Mr. Narayan Prasad Subedi (Section Officer, Inclusive Education Section, Department of Education, Ministry of Education)

New Zealand
Ms. Joanna Curzon (Team Leader, Research, Professional Practice Special Education, Ministry of Education)

Pakistan
Mr. Muhammad Afsar Khan (Secretary to the Government of NWFP, Social Welfare and Women Development Department, government of NWFP, Zakat, Ushr)

Philippines
Dr. Maria Lourdes Arellano Carandang (Clinical Psychologists, Cardinal Santos Medical Center)

Sri Lanka
Mr. H. P. Nimal Lakshman (Director, Non Formal and Special Education, Ministry of Education)

Thailand
Dr. Somporn Warnset (Director, Special Education Center Region 9, Ministry of Education)

8. General Discussion
On December 4, the final day, general discussion was held based on the country reports. The framework of the discussion was as follows:

1) What conditions are common to all countries and how are they being dealt with?
2) What sorts of new conditions and initiatives are there in other participating countries, or what sorts of conditions and initiatives are there in other participating countries that do not exist in your own country?
3) What good practices and ideas furnished you with useful information?
4) Comments on matters other than the above.

Points mentioned as being common to all countries included the fact that autism is beginning to be understood as a unique disorder, the importance of early intervention and teacher training, and the necessity of a meaningful curriculum.

As circumstance and initiatives that do not exist in participants’ own countries, the following were mentioned: information on education for developmental disabilities offered by the NISE via the Internet, study programs for parents/guardians, and government support, etc.

There were many items mentioned by each country as good practices and ideas that furnished useful information, including giving persons with disabilities a voice in drawing up government
policies, respect and empowerment for persons with disabilities, the role of visiting teachers who link the home and the school, awareness-raising through the media and early detection campaigns, comprehensive support packages for children with autism, offering of a preparatory stage for transferring from special classes to regular classes, and teaching children without disabilities how to interact with children with disabilities.

III. Conclusion

In continuation from the previous year, the framework for general discussion was distributed to the country representatives prior to the start of the seminar this year. This provision enabled representatives who are not native English speakers to prepare in advance to express their opinions more comfortably at the general discussion, while all representatives were able to better organize their thoughts while listening to other country reports. This year for the first time, a Japanese translation of the country reports was distributed to Japanese audience at the seminar. This helped Japanese audience to ask questions in a more lively manner.

Until this year, the seminar report was published only in English. However, so that not only readers overseas but also readers in Japan can better utilize the results of the seminar, both an English version and a Japanese version would be published this year and also appear on the NISE website.

With the encouragement of the country representatives, many of whom said, following the general discussion, that they “learned a great deal from each other,” our entire staff would like to devise ways to better develop this seminar so that it is even more meaningful and so that its results are utilized by even more people in the future.