

JAPAN

Current Status and Issues of Autism Education in Japan

- Autism Education Aiming at the Realization of a Cohesive Society -

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1. Current status of education for children with autism in Japan

Children with autism in Japan are taught at schools for special needs education (SNE), at classes for SNE and resource rooms set up in regular elementary and lower secondary schools, or in regular classes, depending on the degree of disability. There are estimated 20,000 children and students with autism in schools for SNE, 48,000 in classes for SNE, 7,000 using resource rooms and 84,000 in regular classes.

Schools for SNE have been set up to provide education pursuant to that given at regular schools to children with comparatively severe disabilities, and to alleviate the difficulties they encounter in daily living and learning caused by their disabilities. In many cases, children with autism having intellectual disabilities, in particular, are enrolled in the elementary, lower and upper secondary departments of SNE schools for children with intellectual disabilities. The educational contents for children with autism provided at schools for SNE differ in accordance with their life stage; however, they are all oriented toward self-reliance through the acquisition of skills that serve them well in daily living and in future vocations.

The classes for SNE in regular elementary and lower secondary schools promote joint activities and learning with the cooperation of regular classes. However, the main focus in classes for SNE is on alleviating the difficulties the children face in their daily living and learning due to their disabilities. Most children with autism enrolled in classes for SNE are in classes for autism/emotional disturbance or for intellectual disabilities. Both classes provide education to children with autism, referring to contents given at schools for SNE.

The services at resource rooms are provided to children with autism enrolled in regular classes of elementary and lower secondary schools on a part-time basis in order to alleviate the difficulties they face in their daily living and learning due to their disabilities. The special needs services provided at resource rooms are aimed at children with high functioning autism without intellectual disabilities, who learn in regular classes for most of the time. For several hours a week, instructions that take into account their specific cognitive characteristics are provided to help them build up proper human relations, to learn rules in collective activities and to adjust their own behavior through games and exercises.

2. Issues of autism education in Japan

It was only recently that autism was clearly stated in laws, including the School Education Act, as a

discrete category of disability in Japan. Autistic children, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, have up to now been educated within the framework of education for children with intellectual disabilities.

Furthermore, because the education of children with autism in SNE classes was started mainly in the classes for children with emotional disturbance, autistic children have so far been taught in the framework of emotional disturbance in classes for SNE. When the National Institute of Special Needs Education conducted a field survey of classes for SNE for emotional disturbance in 2006, it revealed that autistic children accounted for approximately 75% in elementary schools, and 60% in lower secondary schools. This survey led to the renaming of SNE classes for emotional disturbance to “classes for SNE for children with autism/emotional disturbance” in 2009, and the recognition of autism education has been on the gradual rise.

Since the condition of children with autism is also affected by the degree of intellectual development, schools and classes for SNE are now conducting a wide variety of education, from instruction with major emphasis on intellectual disabilities to instruction aimed at children with high functioning autism without intellectual disability. In the education field, therefore, one of the major issues is about whether the contents and method of education match the characteristics of each child with autism, and whether the instruction is appropriate.

There is also an issue in terms of the expertise of teachers in charge of teaching classes for SNE and resource rooms. In Japan, teachers who have the license to teach in regular elementary or a lower secondary school may also teach at classes for SNE and resource rooms: No special license is needed. As a result, some teachers may be teaching children with autism without any experience, and may teach them without understanding the special needs arising from autism.

The issues in autism education in Japan may be narrowed down to the following points: Because it is assumed that educating children with autism differs from the way children with intellectual disabilities or with emotional disturbance who have psychogenic difficulties are educated, it is necessary to examine: (1) not only the contents and ways of teaching children with autism accompanying intellectual disabilities but also (2) the contents and ways of teaching children with high functioning autism. In terms of the expertise of teachers in charge of autism education, (3) it is also necessary to investigate the programs for teacher training and SNE license acquisition to enhance the expertise of teachers in charge of autism education at schools and classes for SNE and at resource rooms.

3. Future direction in educating autistic children

(1) Understanding characteristics and education

The goal of autistic education is to have children with autism participate socially in a cohesive society. To make this possible, it is essential to understand the basic symptoms of autism - the difficulties in interpersonal relationships, in communication, and their behavioral characteristics, such as restricted interests and concerns and obsessiveness with specific things - and to devise instruction in accordance with those characteristics. Children with autism exhibit keen interest in what they are

interested, but they show no interest at all in things they are not interested. In social situations also, people with autism may not be able to take in the necessary information if they find no interest in that area, and it may lead to difficulty in adaptation. Since it is difficult for them to learn proper social behaviors through experience only, it is very important to implement educational intervention that match their characteristics.

When teaching, teachers must fully understand the individual characteristics of children with autism and draw up individualized education plans, referring to the findings of studies conducted so far and to successful educational practices. These include teaching methods and educational materials/tools adapted to their cognitive characteristics, development of assistive devices, alleviation of anxiety that arises when they have to deal with changes or when they are placed in an unpredictable situation, taking measures to support difficulty in generalizing what they have learned, and considerations for their hypersensitivity, etc. Then, education must be planned step by step, without exerting too much stress to the children, to proceed from one-on-one instruction to group participation.

(2) Adjusting the living environment

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) deems *body functions and structure, activities*, and *participation* as the main factors of human living functions, and regards troubles in those living functions as disabilities. It regards person's health condition such as illness, personal factors and environmental factors as having influence on each other. The basic symptoms of autism continue life long. In autism education, it is important not only to have the viewpoint of alleviating individual difficulties but also to understand the symptoms of autism as one attribute of the individual and foster their social adaptation while adjusting the living environment itself at the same time. One such example may be to set up a structured educational environment, inclusive of human environment, and to organize routine learning activities.

(3) Professional development of teachers

In Japan, educating children with autism involves making use of various educational settings — schools for SNE, classes for SNE, regular classes and resource rooms. There is an urgent need, as a future challenge, to further develop pre- and in-service teacher training programs so that teachers may have the expertise to draw up appropriate education plans according to the conditions and characteristics of each child with autism, having or not having intellectual disabilities.

(4) Cooperation with relevant organizations

Finally, it is important to consider lifelong and continuous support for children with autism from an early stage. In order to link early detection of autism to early education, from school education to work, it is essential to promote cooperation among healthcare, welfare, medical care, education and labor organizations. Particularly, close collaboration with medical agencies is importance as some children with autism may have comorbid epilepsy or develop secondary behavioral problems or

psychotic manifestations.

<Questions and Answers after Country Report>

Q1. There is a large percentage of autistic children in Japan. Is this due to a broadening of the diagnosis?

A1. Dr. Atsumi answered – Globally the scope has expanded into the spectrum disorder as highlighted by Lorna Wing – ASD. Japan takes a different perspective like UK to support the needs of the child, rather than just the diagnosis.

Q2. How do you develop collaboration between inter-agencies? What strategies do you have?

A2. There is collaboration between the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) and MEXT at a government policy level. The MHLW has a center for medical and we are working with them on a media strategy. At a local level at a health check, we use a support plan – this has not been established but we are working towards this.

Q3. If teachers have training, how are they supported to implement this into the classroom?

A3. Concerning the training given by NISE – when teachers go back to their schools, we monitor what they are implementing into their classes – it is not regular but there is some follow up. Other training providers away from Tokyo who supply training for autism to teachers also provide follow up, too.