

Recent Developments in Japan's Special Needs Education – Promoting an Inclusive Education System –

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This article aims to provide an overview of special needs education in Japan. The scope of the discussion encompasses the current situation, policy principles and recent policy trends. Education for children with disabilities in Japan has undergone a systematic transformation in recent years. The highlight of this transformation was the amendment in 2006 of the School Education Act, which initiated the shift from “special education” to “special needs education” on a legal dimension. Readers will understand the significance of this transformation through the discussion developed in this article. The first part of the article outlines the current situation of special needs education. This includes facts and data that are prerequisite to understanding policy intentions as well as the policies themselves. Based on this situation, policy principles that underpin Japan's special needs education are identified and examined. The shift to “special needs education” has had a qualitative effect on the way education for children with disabilities is recognized, understood, and interpreted. Finally, based on the theoretical and historical discussion on “special needs education” and its ideal of “constructing an inclusive education system”, recent major policies are presented and explained.

1. Current Situation of Special Needs Education

In Japan, students with disabilities receive special instruction and support in various settings, including special needs schools, special needs classrooms, *tsukyu* classrooms, and regular classrooms. The *tsukyu* scheme refers to a special program for disabled students enrolled in regular schools. These students visit a *tsukyu* classroom in their schools several hours a week and receive tailored lessons individually or in a small group based on their needs.

The number of students who are classified as having special needs is rapidly growing, both in absolute terms and when measured in relation to the shrinking student population. In compulsory (primary and lower-secondary) education, there were about 362,000 special-needs students in 2015 (MEXT 2016b). This corresponds to about 3.58% of all students. In Japan, 137,894 students study in 1,114 special needs schools, which target students with relatively severe disabilities (MEXT 2016b).

While the number of students attending special needs schools

and the number of such schools continue to increase, what is more remarkable about the recent figures is the growing share of special needs students attending regular schools. The number of students in special needs classrooms is 201,493 and that of students participating in *tsukyu* programs 90,270 (MEXT 2016b). In relative terms, students attending special needs schools accounted for less than 1% of all students up to the high school level in 2015 (MEXT 2016b). This trend reflects recent concerns about inclusiveness as well as the rising share of students diagnosed with milder forms of disabilities.

According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2012, around 6.5% of the students in regular classrooms may possibly have developmental disorders (MEXT 2012). Although this survey is conducted through observation by teachers, not by medical experts, the results reveal the need to respond to children with developmental disorders in regular classrooms.

2. Principles of special needs education

MEXT (2017b) defines special needs education as “education for students with disabilities, in consideration of their individual educational needs, which aims at full development of their capabilities and at their independence and social participation”. Children with disabilities need to be given appropriate education

with careful consideration for the degree of each condition of disability and their individual educational needs, so that they can maximize their possibility, become independent, and take part in society. MEXT is tasked with fulfilling this mandate and has strengthened its efforts to improve special needs education.

All schools should implement special needs education (MEXT 2007a) in response to the growing population of students in need of special support, including those with developmental disorders. MEXT recognizes that special needs education is not just for students with disabilities but that it also offers a motive force for a cohesive society within which every person plays an active role while recognizing diverse identities (MEXT 2007a).

Education for disabled children used to be conducted in a framework of “special education”. Special education focused on providing thorough care to children with disabilities in special settings such as “special schools” and “special classrooms”. In special education, the priority was placed on providing educational opportunities to these children because there were still children who had been judged unable to go to school due to the severity of their disabilities (MEXT 2017c).

As the multiplication and diversification of disabilities had been intensified and the demand for supporting students with developmental disorders such as Learning Disabilities (LD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and high-functioning autism in regular schools has swelled, focusing only on children with severe disabilities failed to meet these demands. It became imperative for MEXT to respond to these demands and take steps to reform the framework of “special education”.

It was in this context that MEXT took the initiative to shift from “special education” to “special needs education”. The School Education Act was amended in 2006 and the reform went into effect the following year to provide a legal status to “special needs education”. Accordingly, MEXT clarified that special needs education should be implemented in every school which disabled students attend (MEXT 2007a). In addition to special needs schools, regular schools are tasked with providing appropriate guidance and necessary support in response to individual educational needs deriving from disabilities (MEXT 2007a).

The shift to “special needs education”, however, should not be

understood as a negation of the former “special education” framework. Practitioners, especially those in “special schools”, had yielded excellent insights that contributed to an advancement of education for children with disabilities (Miyazaki, Satake, and Chihara 2011). The transformation should be understood as a response to the shift of situation.

In 2014, Japan ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Convention had already been adopted at the UN General Assembly in December 2006 and taken effect in May 2008. In consideration of voices raised by people with disabilities, the Japanese government vowed to reform the domestic legal framework for disability affairs thoroughly before ratifying the convention (MOFA 2016).

An inclusive education system stipulated in Article 24 of the Convention means persons with and without disabilities study together with the purposes of strengthening respect for human diversity and enabling persons with disabilities to develop their mental and physical abilities to participate in a free society. It is, therefore, necessary that (i) persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system (which includes both regular and special needs schools), that (ii) persons with disabilities can access primary education and secondary education in the communities in which they live, and that (iii) reasonable accommodations to meet an individual’s requirements are provided (MEXT 2017a).

As a compilation of the efforts to abide by the Convention, the Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities was enacted in 2013. The act stipulates the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of disabilities and that of not providing reasonable accommodations. MEXT established a detailed guideline in its area of jurisdiction, including education, culture, and sports, to promote the spirit of the law (MEXT 2015). It has, therefore, become more exigent to provide reasonable accommodations to children with disabilities at school.

3. Policy directions of special needs education

MEXT has aimed to promote special needs education for constructing an inclusive education system and to educate children with disabilities and without disabilities together insofar as possible. While this overarching goal connotes various meanings when applied to actual administration, they can be summarized into six topics: diverse education settings, enhanced school organization, rich study environment, high degree of expertise of teachers, school curriculum based on the principle of the inclusive education system, and continuous support system.

3.1. Continuous and diverse education settings

MEXT has improved continuous and various education settings for children with disabilities. Accordingly, these children are likely to receive support and instruction corresponding to their needs in a flexible manner. Typically, special needs schools, special needs classrooms, and *tsukyu* classrooms are classified as education settings particularly reserved for children with disabilities.

In special needs schools, students with relatively severe disabilities receive thorough support and instruction. Children learn by special curriculum, surrounded by facilities and equipment

that respond to special needs derived from disabilities. Before the 2006 revision of the School Education Act, the types of “Special Schools” for disabled children had been established separately per the types of disabilities: “Schools for the Blind”, “Schools for the Deaf” and “Schools for the Intellectually Disabled, the Physically Disabled and the Health Impaired” (MEXT 2017b). These schools were legally organized under the same umbrella of “Special needs schools” in the 2006 amendment of the School Education Act, responding to the needs of the increasing number of children with multiple disabilities (MEXT 2006a). Under the new system, one particular special needs school can accommodate several types of disabilities.

In addition to accommodating students with relatively severe disabilities, special needs schools are expected to give advice and support to disabled children by capitalizing on their expertise and skills at the request of regular schools (MEXT 2007a). In other words, special needs schools function as a resource center for special needs education in the community.

Special needs classrooms in regular schools are for children with relatively mild disabilities. Children in special needs classrooms study the same curriculum as those in regular classrooms with some flexibility allowed depending on the degree of disabilities.

The *tsukyu* scheme is for children with lighter disabilities, including low vision, hearing problems, learning or language disorders, LD, or ADHD (MEXT 2006b). *Tsukyu* students usually spend most of their time in mainstream classes but receive additional private or small-group lessons for several hours a week. The *tsukyu* scheme was stipulated in the Ordinance for Enforcement of the School Education Act in 1993 for elementary schools and middle schools. In 2016, the ordinance was amended to allow high schools to establish *tsukyu* classrooms, providing continuous support to high school students who received special needs education while in middle school. This amendment will go into effect in FY2018.

Many children with disabilities, including those in the *tsukyu* program, study in regular classrooms with children without disabilities. Also, “Joint Activities and Learning” are stipulated in the Courses of Study, Japan’s national curriculum standard, and many schools have implemented educational programs for co-learning between children with and without disabilities. MEXT is accelerating this trend, for this surely contributes to promoting the inclusive education system.

3.2. Enhanced school organization

Support and instruction that respond to the needs of disabled children necessitate a stable school organization. Accordingly, MEXT has strived to secure teachers and staff members in sufficient numbers to support these children at school.

The pupil-teacher ratio is kept low in special needs education settings in comparison with regular classrooms; namely, the number of students per one teacher is significantly small in special needs schools and in special needs classroom. The Act on Standards for Class Formation and Fixed Number of School Personnel of Public Compulsory Education Schools (the so-called Act on Standards for Public Compulsory Education Schools) stipulates the national standards for the class size and teacher allocation for various types of public schools in compulsory education. According to the act, the maximum number of students that one teacher looks after is set at 35-40 in regular classrooms, 8 in special needs classrooms and 3-6 in special needs schools.

Although there has not been a legally stipulated standard for the class size of the *tsukyu* scheme, the demand for *tsukyu* teachers has grown drastically in the last decade. As a result of an intense negotiation in 2016, the financial authority conceded to the request for the creation of the class size standard for the *tsukyu* scheme. Through a ten-year process starting from FY2017, a pupil-teacher ratio of 13 is expected to be achieved in the *tsukyu* classrooms (MEXT 2017a).

Non-teaching staff also play an important role in supporting special needs children. The national government aids local efforts to employ non-teaching staff in various ways. Notably, the cost of employing special needs education assistants has been taken into account in the local allocation tax grant since FY2007 (MEXT 2007b). The grant provides a significant incentive for local governments to improve the support system in regular schools (including kindergartens). Special needs education assistants respond to the needs of children with disabilities, including developmental disorders.

3.3. Rich study environment

The number of the classrooms in special needs schools has not kept pace with the increase in the number of the students. In some schools, a classroom is divided by a partition into two compartments, each of which holds a separate lesson. In other cases, non-classroom facilities are converted to temporary classrooms. This situation is considered to deteriorate the quality of students’ experience in special needs school.

In 2007, MEXT conducted interviews to investigate the issue. In the interviews, many prefectural governments referred to financial constraints in improving the facilities, the difficulty of estimating the number of students, and the limitation of the school premises. Since then, MEXT has conducted a survey every year and encouraged the prefectural governments to improve the situation systematically by utilizing the subsidies from MEXT; in general, MEXT subsidizes from a third to half of the cost of construction.

3.4. High degree of expertise of teachers

In addition to the quantity of teachers, the quality of teachers is critical in the successful provision of a quality learning experience to students. While teachers in special needs schools must be experts in the provision of special needs education, teachers in regular schools are increasingly expected to possess, at least, foundational knowledge and skills to deal with disabled children. MEXT has taken measures to improve the expertise of teachers both for special needs schools and regular schools.

Teaching in a special needs school requires possession of a general teaching license corresponding to each division (kindergarten, elementary, middle, or high school) and a special needs school teacher certificate. Nevertheless, due to a supplementary provision allowing an exception to the rule, it is permissible for teachers at special needs schools not to possess a special needs school teacher certificate. The provision seems to have been inserted reluctantly to overcome the shortage of teachers at the time of the creation of the certificate system for special schools.

MEXT, however, takes it seriously that approximately 25% (MEXT 2016a) of the teachers in special needs schools still do not possess the special needs school teacher certificate. What is at stake here is the quality of education that students receive by those who lack qualifications. MEXT aims to achieve the goal of almost all special needs school teachers possessing the certificate by 2020 so that the supplementary provision can eventually be repealed. Accordingly, MEXT is requesting the prefectural boards of education to set out a plan to improve the situation and to allocate qualified teachers to special needs schools.

Encouraging teachers who are already in a special needs school but do not possess the certificate to obtain the certificate is also important. Many universities and boards of education offer education programs for acquiring the certificate. In addition to them, the National Institute of Special Needs Education (NISE) started a distance learning program in October 2016 (NISE 2016). MEXT is urging the prefectural boards of education to ensure that more teachers in special needs schools obtain the certificate by developing their skills and knowledge through these programs.

Teacher candidates for regular schools also have to acquire fundamental knowledge of special needs education. An expected reform of the teacher certificate system will make it compulsory for regular school teacher candidates to take at least one course on special needs education in the teacher training courses from FY2017. This will help regular teachers better understand the essence of special needs education in the context of an increasing number of children with disabilities attending regular classrooms.

3.5. School curriculum based on the principle of the inclusive education system

The Courses of Study have been revised approximately every ten years. They stipulate goals and general contents of each subject. Each school organizes a curriculum, taking into consideration the situation at the school and its surrounding area.

The next revision of the Courses of Study will take place in FY2016 (elementary and middle schools) and FY2017 (high schools). The new Courses of Study will go into effect in FY2018 in kindergartens, FY2020 in primary schools, FY 2021 in middle schools, and FY2022 in high schools. The schedule of the implementation of the new Courses of Study for each department (from kindergarten to upper secondary departments) of special needs schools is expected to follow suit.

In the coming revision, the way the Courses of Study are organized will be reformed significantly. While the organization of the previous Courses of Study has been centered around “what to teach”, the new Courses of Study will be structured in a way that presents the qualities and abilities which children should acquire through the learning process. This spirit is shown in the revision of the Courses of Study for special needs schools as well. In particular, the goals and contents of each subject for intellectually disabled children are reformed, showing clearly what sort of qualities and abilities should be nurtured.

Furthermore, the new Courses of Study for special needs schools will put an emphasis on the coherence and continuity between the curriculums of special needs schools and those of regular schools. In this context, Planning an Individualized Education Plan and Individualized Support Plan is expected to become mandatory for children in special needs classrooms and *tsukyu* classrooms as well as those in special needs schools, facilitating the inter-school and multi-sectoral cooperation. These features reflect the importance of pursuing the inclusive education system. It will allow a better flexibility in the choice of education settings, including mainstream schools and special needs schools, for children with disabilities.

3.6. Continuous support system

Promoting the well-being of children with disabilities requires a well-structured but flexible support system. The most traditional support scheme that MEXT has implemented is the Promotional Program for School Enrollment on Special Needs Education. Through this program, MEXT has financially supported parents or guardians who have children with disabilities for more than a half century. For example, MEXT subsidizes the expenses for transportation, textbooks, accommodations, and so on, thereby, reducing the financial burden on parents and guardians.

Recently, there has been an increasing demand for structuring a more comprehensive and multi-sectoral support system.

Supporting children with disabilities involves various sectors including education, welfare, medical care, and labor. Preventing sectionalism and avoiding shortsightedness are key challenges for those who deal with policies for disabled people. MEXT has been aware of the importance of improving policy coherence, and has planned and implemented various policies that bridge the gap between education and other areas.

A new initiative that starts in FY2017 is the Project for Promoting an Inclusive Education System (MEXT 2017b). In this project, MEXT subsidizes local governments' efforts to improve the cohesive and continuous support system for children with disabilities from pre-school to post-school periods. It includes enhancing cooperation among different government departments such as welfare, medical care, and labor, and promoting information sharing through Individualized Support Plans.

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