Epilogue  Advancing Environmental Education Research from Asia: Why Asia?

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I. Meaning of conducting international collaborative research

The original purpose of publishing this special electronic issue “Environmental Education in Asia” of the “Japanese Journal of Environmental Education” (JJEE-EEA) was to establish a common platform for joint research on the development of environmental education (EE) in Asia and to foster international collaboration. The previous special issue of JJEE-EEA, published in 2016, included review papers in three themes: EE in Formal Education, EE in Non-formal Education, and Research Trends in EE. Researchers from Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea each provided examples from their respective countries. That special issue was composed and published, in part, due to the collaborative relations EE associations in these countries have. As such, the main goal, and the achievement, of JJEE-EEA 2016 was to share EE efforts across countries.

Unlike the defined limited scope of JJEE-EEA 2016, for this consecutive issue, we encouraged researchers to propose and conduct international collaborative research under the general theme of EE in Asia, and we sought to cover diverse issues and topics of EE. The papers in this special issue detail international collaborative research including that focused on a specific species (oriental white stork), a specific area (a national park), a specific issue (nuclear energy), and a legal issue. We were pleasantly surprised to have such a variety of EE topics proposed to accept for this issue. While the previous issue (JJEE-EEA2016) succeeded in sharing general EE contexts from different Asian countries, this issue (JJEE-EEA 2019) succeeds in exploring and demonstrating issue-specific international collaborative research in the EE context in Asia.

Each of the ten papers in this special issue show findings that could only have been discovered through international collaborative research, indicating the importance of adopting international perspectives instead of focusing on specific situations only in a single country or region. Collaborative research is challenging due to different cultures and languages. A researcher needs to get out of his or her comfort zone to engage in such a difficult task. While behind each paper authors faced challenges in designing and implementing international collaborative research, it is worth engaging in. As the world becomes more globalized and environmental problems become more critical in determining our continued existence on the planet Earth, initiatives such as Sustainable Development Goals become urgent. These goals cannot be solved without international collaboration, and to make collaborate efforts effective and meaningful, differences and similarities between countries should be examined. The papers in this issue are focused on this task. Uncovering these differences and similarities will ultimately inform developing solutions that cross national boundaries for issues raised in the case studies.

II. Quick overview of each paper

While it is difficult to adequately convey the depth of each paper, here we briefly summarize their focus and findings.

This special issue begins with Tabiraki and Nam (2019) who specifically focused on oriental white stork education in Japan and South Korea, explaining the similarities and differences of stork education in both countries. They concluded that stork education is not only a program for the conservation of one species but could also contribute to UNESCO’s Education for Sustainable Development efforts in the region.

Ishiyama et al. (2019) looked at how national parks are managed in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea revealing the differences in the specific roles of national parks in each country as well as shared goals; and recognized the importance of local residents as specific targets for EE.

Inoue et al. (2019) studied how nature-based activities contribute to EE in early childhood, found some challenges
in implementing those activities, and made several recommendations for nature-based activities for this age-group to be developed and improved.

The rather new concept of resilience education was studied and discussed by Hata et al. (2019). While the review of cases in Japan and the US revealed significance of this learning approach, the authors raised some issues including necessity of clarifying and nurturing the responsibility of local residents in future resilience education efforts.

Ninomiya et al. (2019) specifically focused on EE in higher education, mainly universities, in South Korea, Malaysia, and Japan, and identified several shared themes including improving teacher training in EE and nurturing professionals in environmental fields.

Saito et al. (2019) provided a unique study on comparing EE promotion act in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea as international comparisons of EE law are limited. They found that all those countries emphasize the importance of various actors’ participation in EE.

Suzuki et al. (2019) reviewed EE activities implemented by international cooperation and aid agencies, and revealed that although EE might not be the central issue in international cooperation and aid assistance programs, it works to develop the capacities of stakeholders as well as for conservation.

Next, a comparative study on school EE in South Korea and Japan conducted by Matsubaguchi et al. (2019) showed a clear difference between these countries. South Korea teaches environmental studies as stand-alone subjects and also has licensed environmental study teachers, whereas Japan does not have either, thus the authors have recommendations for improving EE activities in Japan.

Kim and Goto (2019) compared literature on the coverage of nuclear energy in national curriculum in Japan and Korea, and found changes occurred in the narratives used in national curricula in both Japan and Korea after the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011.

Finally, To et al. (2019) looked forward and presented research on the potential of collaborative research in Asia. Based on a pilot survey, they identified trends in South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan regarding strong interest in training opportunities and international collaboration.

III. Have we gained new Environmental Education insights from Asia?

Although environmental education programs are conducted all over the world, the majority of EE published research has generally been in North America and Europe. For example, a review of EE evaluation studies published in international journals revealed that majority of studies focused on EE programs were conducted in the US (Stern et al. 2014). This review also mentioned how most previous research looked at unique characteristics of individual programs, and therefore, lacked perspectives to allow the comparison of outcomes across studies (Stern et al. 2014).

We believe that our efforts to compile EE research across Asia in one special issue contribute to fill this gap in the existing research.

Our intent in this JJEE-EEA is to share and compare EE across Asian countries and to show the new potential of EE research. EE is still a relatively young interdisciplinary field (Reid and Payne 2013) and new efforts are needed to understand the significance of EE beyond one culture or country. If EE research conducted and published in international journals were dominated by only a few countries, it would be difficult to understand the meanings of EE across different countries, cultures, and societies. It would be challenging to grasp how specific programs or efforts from one country would be applied (or could not be applied) in different countries with different cultures. Asia is composed of countries with diverse cultures, religions, and languages. Asian countries face similar issues that other countries on different continent also face. For example, Japan currently faces depopulation and aging; some estimates predict that one in every 2.5 people will be more than 65 years old by 2060. Countries in Asia such as South Korea and China also face (or will face) similar depopulation and aging issues. Likewise, countries on different continents, such as Italy are facing similar demographic problems. On other hand, other Asian countries such as India and Indonesia are facing the opposite problem, a rapid increase of human population, which is also a problem in many African countries. In this sense, the varying conditions in Asia could arguably represent those of the world.

Additionally, many Asian countries have unique traditions and cultures regarding how people interact with their environments. With wildlife, for example, various animals such as tigers, monkeys, elephants, and dragonflies
are portrayed in Asian myths, legends, and arts (Knight 2012), which emphasizes peoples’ mental connections to nature. Such cultural differences and diversity cannot be ignored if the world is to achieve global goals in solving environmental problems through international collaboration. As such, international collaborative EE research in Asia, while challenging, can be informative on a global scale.

Through EE research in Asia, we could and should uncover new aspects of EE that go beyond one country’s framework or perspectives, a robust understanding of EE that could be applied across countries and their cultures and languages. Our goal for this special issue of JJEE-EEA could be rephrased as “to provide a platform for researchers who are not only doing research in his or her country, but are willing to engage in international interactions and contribute to mutual and global understanding.” In other word, we aim to provide a platform for “globally engaged scholars.” In addition to these special issues, we host several meetings where potential authors meet and discuss goals and contents of potential international research, as explained in Editorial (Opening Remarks) of this issue (Furihata and Sakurai 2019). This helps us to create and strengthen a network of scholars with different background but shared interests and goals.

While our endeavor has just started and we are still struggling to understand the possibilities and implications of an EE journal focused in Asia, we are confident that as we continue compiling this research and publish consecutive JJEE-EEA special issues in years to come, the specific trends, characteristics, and meaning of such efforts will be clearly demonstrated. Our endeavor will be continued in the next special issue, JJEE-EEA 2021, at which time we will welcome submissions from all over the world for the first time, rather than limiting papers from those countries with EE associations affiliated with the Japanese EE association. Our continued efforts to promote and conduct international EE research and compile outcomes of those efforts would both directly and indirectly contribute to the development of EE research in Asia as well as world-wide.

References


