Symposium Report

Inclusive Education in North Europe and Japan: Current Situation and Challenges

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Purpose of the Symposium

Northern Europe is the birthplace of the idea of normalization, and has been promoting the integration of the system under the welfare state. Since the 1990s, Northern Europe has been promoting inclusion in particular.

As a result, Norway has abolished special schools, in principle, and built support system for children with special needs in regular schools. In Denmark, inclusive education is promoted and prefectural special schools were transferred to the municipalities. In Finland, they integrally promote security in special education and academic achievements; as a result, about 30% of pupils are enrolled in regular schools and receive part-time special education. In Sweden they abolished special schools for students with visual impairments, physical impairments and illness, and is now discussing the integration of special schools for students with intellectual disabilities.

In this symposium, by viewing the current status of inclusive education in various Nordic countries, we intend to clarify issues of inclusive education in Japan. In particular, by inviting leading researchers of four special needs education research from Nordic countries (Sweden: Dr. Jerry Rosenqvist, Professor of Kristianstad University; Denmark: Dr. Susan Tetler, Professor of Aarhus University; Norway: Dr. Kari Nes, Senior Lecturer of Hedmark University; Finland: Dr. Sakari Moberg, Professor, University of Jyväskylä), we heard reports on the current status and challenges of inclusive education in each country. After that, two researchers as specified debaters (Professor Susumu Kase, Tokyo Gakugei University; Associate Professor Tomomi Sanagi, Chiba University) presented the topics for discussion.

Dr. Satoru Takahashi (Professor of Tokyo Gakugei University) and Dr. Kanako Korenaga (Associate Professor of Kochi University) moderated the discussion, and Ayako Tabe (Ph.D. Program Student of Tokyo Gakugei University) made a record of the symposium. During discussions, Ms. Kanako Tabe (interpreter, Tokyo Medical and Dental University) made simultaneous translation in English.

Symposium Presentations Summary

(1) Dr. Jerry Rosenqvist (Professor, Kristianstad University, Sweden): Inclusive Education in Sweden

One dilemma for special education is the difficulty to define a single meaning of the concept in a scientific way. There have been a multitude of terms and expressions used through modern history to explain what is meant by the term. Dissatisfaction with the recent term at a certain period of time has led to the search of another “mot propre.” In the Anglo Saxon language hemisphere the road from special education, via special needs education to integration and inclusion, has been lined with interpretations and misinterpretations, temporary satisfaction, and dissatisfaction.

Another dilemma is that special education has a normative character, which means that there often exists a national, officially sanctioned, politically cor-
rect recommendation for the way to look upon certain problems in schools, and how to solve these problems. As a consequence, such solutions sometimes differ greatly from scientifically grounded, less political and less problematic solutions.

One example is the strive for inclusive education where all students are seen as resources. Another one is the increasing demands in Sweden for diagnoses in order to get economical resources for special education. Still another example is the parallel official opinions of promoting a school for all, where the students are looked upon as equal, and—on the other hand—a grading system built upon competition, which apparently excludes some students. The former opinion is based on integration of students, and of instructional subjects. The latter presupposes segregation of subjects, and of students, so that they could be judged and measured individually in order to get a proper mark.

These dilemmas become especially apparent in research, as well as in practice, if one tries to approach special education problems in relation to the total school practice, and avoid looking upon problems as special qualities connected to certain people.

In spite of the said dilemmas, a certain development seems to have taken place. A view where all human beings, and especially students in the school, are looked upon as equal with a broad definition of “normality” seems to get more and more recognition. Today, the policy of “a school for all” has strong support and the new classification by the World Health Organisation, “International classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)” stresses a health perspective which considers and includes all human beings, not only those “with (or in) special needs.” As a paradox—the number of special measures and special classrooms are again increasing.

(2) Dr. Susan Tetler (Professor, Aarhus University, Denmark): Inclusive Education in Denmark

In 2010, an inspection of the Danish public school system was performed to provide recommendations for how schools can increase the academic standard and drastically reduce the number of students assigned to special education. Thus, schools are now expected to provide education that ensures good learning outcomes for all students while fostering social and educational inclusion.

Today, inclusion is no longer just a matter of international declarations (value and ideology), but also a matter of expectation and policy and so primarily a matter of implementation at scale. This change forces municipalities to work systematically to build the necessary capacity in order to implement this national strategy. However, the large number of marginalized students clearly indicates that the existing knowledge-base development, and experiences with inclusive practices have limited impact and sustainability in the long run.

Research shows the need for more systematically applied double-loop learning strategies and activities in order to move ordinary learning communities in a more inclusive direction. In other words, the innovative changes have to both build capacity within the entire municipality organization and develop individuals’ professional competence in classroom activities.

Therefore, the focus of the national strategy is three fold: 1) to establish task forces both on a national and a municipality level to guide and supervise administrators and head teachers to support efforts of inclusion, 2) to develop strategies and tools for inclusive educational activities, and 3) to prepare for both pre-service and in-service training for professionals.

The outcome of inclusive efforts depends crucially on the understanding of ‘inclusion.’ This national strategy is a political top down decision, motivated by increasing costs in the field of special education. The challenge, then, is how to get school professionals to be committed and to take ownership of the process of developing inclusive activities in their classrooms.

(3) Dr. Kari Nes (Senior Lecturer, Hedmark University, Norway): Inclusive Education in Norway

Inclusive Education in Norway Today

Inclusive education is here seen as efforts to remove barriers to learning and participation for all (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

Norway has the highest proportion in the world of its learners attending a common, free and public local mainstream school of more than 97%; regardless of abilities and aptitudes, age, gender, skin color, sexual orientation, social background, religious or ethnic background, place of residence, family education or family finances. Less than 0.5% are in special schools. About 2.2% of all learners attend private schools. For learners with a disability there is a support system established locally which also has access to external ex-
pertise. There is no permanent streaming according to abilities; as the main rule, the educational differentiation and support is to take place within the class. This is part of the overarching principle of adapted education.

**History of Inclusive Education in Norway**

Universal schooling for children was introduced in Norway in the 1700s. 'The unitary school' emerged from the beginning of the 20th century as part of the nation building process. In this process, seemingly leading to liberty and democracy, the Norwegifying policies implied exclusion of ethnic minorities by strong assimilation strategies.

Access to education for (some) learners with disability was established by law in 1881. A dual system with special and regular schools existed for nearly 100 years.

The dual system was in principle repealed in 1975 when "The special school act" was abolished and the 'integration law' was adopted. All children now received their educational rights established under a common education act. The right to special education also was ensured. The state special schools as well as the institutions for intellectually disabled closed down in the beginning of the 1990s.

**Are Norwegian Schools So Inclusive?**

Every learner in Norwegian schools is entitled to adapted education according to his or her capacities, preferably within the class, but numerous studies reveal that some students neither learn nor participate satisfactorily. Why? Threats to inclusion will be discussed.

(4) Dr. Sakari Moberg (Professor, University of Jyväskylä, Finland): Inclusive Education in Finland

The idea of integration, or the principle of the primacy of mainstream class placement in education of students with special needs, was first officially expressed in Finland in 1966. At this time the number of students in special education remained under two percent, and all of them were placed in special schools or classes. In the 1970s a new profession of special education teachers, professionals without a grade level class responsibility, was established. In this so called "part-time special education," students received individual or group-based support without formal enrolment into special student status. Students who had minor difficulties in learning or adjustment had the right to receive this kind of special needs education without the stigma associated with segregated special education. The number of students in the part-time special education (1–3 hrs a week) increased rapidly being now 23% of all students in basic education.

Early intervention is characteristic of the Finnish special needs education. Compared with those in most of other countries, students in Finland tend to receive special needs services more so during earlier grades and less so during later grades. Students with disabilities in Finland tend to "exit" or not to need services as they grow older, whereas their counterparts in other countries continue to receive services throughout their school career.

The doctrine of the least restrictive environment was the leading principle in special needs education during the 1970s and the 1980s. Although mainstream classroom was seen the least restrictive learning environment, special schools and special classes maintained their position; the number of students in segregated settings even increased. In general, national policies and regulations support inclusion, although the word “inclusion” does not exist in the school law or statutes. At the same time, given Finland’s strong tradition of municipal autonomy and the strong teacher union, the implementation of education policies ranges still from very inclusive to more segregated in terms of learning environment. In 2010 over 30% of all students in basic education were receiving some kind of special education: 2.5% were full time in general education classrooms, the majority spent most time in general education classroom, 2.8% in special classrooms in general schools, and 1.2% in special schools. Some passionate inclusionists think that the legitimacy of separate special education in Finland is strong and unquestioned and the movement towards inclusion has been too slow; they talk about “a thwarted development.”

In Finland, as in many countries, the word “inclusion” has sometimes been connected only with the question of place of learning. It may have carried the connotation of full physical inclusion and suggested that there should be no special needs education groups, classes or schools. Some advocates of inclusive education stress the aim of having all learners attend school together; this may mean that students can be “in” but not “of” the class in terms of social
and learning membership. Inclusive education should also meet students’ individual needs, and all students should feel accepted and appreciated in the school community. Most of the teachers in basic education in Finland (about 90%) still want special classrooms for pupils with severe disabilities and think that general education has not yet the resources and personnel to address the individual educational needs of all pupils.

Comments on the Presentations and Discussion

Professor Susumu Kase (Tokyo Gakugei University), the specified debator, submitted a question on how to balance the two challenges of “raising the academic achievement” and “the promotion of inclusive education.” The four Nordic researchers answered as follows.

Dr. Jerry Rosenqvist: To enhance achievement, we must first determine the meaning of “learning.” Teachers may also learn from the students. At first glance, it looks like the students do not have the elements to be studied, but the teacher is learning many things from the students. Dr. Susan Tetler: Keyword is the leadership of the teacher. It is not only how the teacher responds, the process leading to it is important. Dr. Kari Nes: Regarding inclusive education, it is necessary for students and parents as well as teachers of the school to recognize the common needs of the students with disabilities. Now the competence of the teacher becomes important. Rather than arguing to increase special schools, special groups which are smaller than classes for basic education have been created. Dr. Sakari Moberg: We have incorporated in the regular class, effective methods that are used in special schools. In order to increase the awareness of teachers, they are allowed to take courses of inclusive education in teacher training.

Associate Professor Tomomi Sanagi (Chiba University), also the specified debator, submitted her questions. First, inclusive education is diverse. What are the conditions in order to share accurate understanding of the concept of inclusion, and what are the keywords in Nordic countries? Second, curriculum is important in inclusive education. What is the current state of curriculum, and assessment and validity of the curriculum? Are there alternative curriculum, selection of curriculum by children?

One of the audience asked that to promote inclusive education, inclusive community is essential, and what efforts can you make to make such a community? They responded as follows.

Dr. Sakari Moberg: I believe that we should make inclusive education and inclusive schools to be the very first issue. Dr. Kari Nes: Community has grown around the school. Dr. Susan Tetler: It is necessary that we make inclusive employment status in community, and continue to actively integrate the school and community. Universal design is an important keyword. Dr. Jerry Rosenqvist: Currently, 25 percent of students with down syndrome are enrolled in regular classrooms, and have been living in the community. This will then incorporate an inclusive environment in schools, and will lead to inclusive society.

Finally, Dr. Satoru Takahashi (Executive Director and Chairman of International Subcommittee of Japanese Association of Special Education) made a summary of the symposium as follows. As common issues in developed countries, to be able to somehow reach integration, we will proceed with inclusion which is an extremely difficult destination to reach. Therefore, as with this symposium, it is very important that developed countries sit down face to face, brainstorm examples, and learn from each other to discuss. Japanese Association of Special Education also needs to continue similar efforts.

Added Entries

When we held this symposium, we obtained cooperation from many people. Especially we thank Dr. Izumi Ishikawa (Shiraume Gakuen College), Ms. Chihiro Naitoh, and Mr. Tomoya Ishii (Master’s Program Students of Tokyo Gakugei University) for their support.