Macrothink Institute™

Global Journal of Educational Studies
ISSN 2377-3936
2023, Vol. 9, No. 2

A Brief Historic Review of Special Education for Students with Extensive Support Needs in the US, Hawai'i, and Japan

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Received: December 2, 2023 Accepted: December 25, 2023 Published: December 30, 2023

doi:10.5296/gjes.v9i2.21582 URL: https://doi.org/10.5296/gjes.v9i2.21582

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a scoping review situating the history of special education for students with extensive support needs (ESN) in the United States and Hawaii, as well as in Japan and other parts of East Asia. With the continued globalization of our interactive world, none of our educational systems exist in a vacuum; our systems have and will continue to influence one-another. This influence is evident throughout the literature, showing that though the timing of special education reform in each of these regions differ, many parts of our educational systems mirror one another. Despite our differences, what we all share is a common goal of reducing the stigmatization of students with disabilities in our schools and societies, and we will only achieve that through a global shift toward presumed competence.

Keywords: Special education, Extensive support needs, United States, Japan, Hawaii

1. Introduction

Students with disabilities have had the right to a free appropriate public education since the adoption of IDEA in 1975 (US Department of Education, 2014). While this was a groundbreaking piece of legislation for all students with disabilities, it was especially relevant to students with extensive support needs (ESN) who can be defined as a population of students with low-incidence disabilities such as intellectual disability, autism, significant cognitive disability, developmental disability, or multiple disabilities who typically qualify for alternative statewide assessment (Kleinert et al., 1999; Taub et al., 2017). While many students with less significant disabilities had been receiving public education in the general education setting for years, for many students with ESN, this would be the first time they would have access to the public education system in the United States. Prior to IDEA, most of this population either received no formal education or were educated in residential facilities (Rosenthal, 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to provide a scoping review situating the history of special education for this population of students in the United States and Hawaii, as well as in Japan and other parts of East Asia. These regions were selected in part due to my own familiarity with each educational system, being a United States citizen and having lived in Hawaii and Japan for two years respectively, and in part due to the stark differences between our cultures and educational systems (Kayama et al., 2020). By comparing and contrasting the history of special education in these regions, similarities and differences will be highlighted that point to possible global barriers toward education for this population and all students with disabilities.

1.1 Statement of Positionality

As mentioned above, the regions in this review were chosen, in part, due to my own teaching and educational experience. However, my time in both Hawaii and Japan and their educational settings was brief. There are likely levels of nuance to the educational system in Japan or aspects of native Hawaiian history that I simply do not understand by way of not being a part of either respective culture. To mitigate this, I engaged in reflexivity, attending to the subtle ways my own experience, worldview, and assumptions could impact my analysis of the literature (Hunt, 2010). Still, I must acknowledge that the following is a history of special education in the US, Hawaii, and Japan from the perspective of a white author in the United States.

2. History of Special Education for This Population in the United States

The next section will summarize a brief history of special education in the United States with particular attention to the impact of this history on students with ESN. This will begin with the early history prior to the disability rights movement and then move through the institutionalization and deinstitutionalization movements. The modern history of special education in the US, beginning with the passage of IDEA and other educational acts will be discussed and their implications on students with ESN considered. Finally, the section will conclude with a specific look into the state of Hawaii's special education history, noting the

significant differences between Hawaii and the continental US.

2.1 Early History in the US

Prior to the 18th century people with disabilities were often exploited, hidden from public eye, or even executed in many areas of the world (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). There was not much difference in the United States, although in his comprehensive history, Trent (1994) does describe people with intellectual disabilities as integral parts of society in colonial and early America. People who were physically capable often worked alongside their nondisabled peers in labor-intensive jobs. On the other hand, people who were not capable of such tasks were still taken care of within the family (Trent, 1994). With the dawn of the industrial revolution, however, this would radically change.

In the early 20th century, a combination of the industrial revolution, an increase in immigration to the United States, and a growing interest in eugenics led to people with disabilities, especially those with more extensive support needs, being viewed as nuisances and unworthy dependents (Griewe, 2016; Trent, 1994). It was thought that without education and intervention, these people would become a menace to society and end up in jail, or worse. In some parts of the United States and other countries people with disabilities were so societally maligned that ordinances known as “Ugly Laws” were created to prevent them from even being seen in public (Griewe, 2016). As a reaction, communities established institutions designed to care for and educate people with more significant support needs in order to shape them into productive members of society. Eventually this led to the widespread adoption of institutionalization for individuals with disabilities (Smith & Polloway, 1993).

As these institutions became more and more populated and the idea that some people were inherently intellectually inferior to others took root within American society, education within these institutions was met with increasing pessimism. Subsequently, the focus was shifted to simply keeping people with disabilities out of society to prevent their contribution to a fictional intellectual decline in the American population (Carlson & Deidrich, 2009). The techniques that were developed in order to “successfully” manage the growing numbers of peoples with complex disabilities that were entering institutions became dark and abusive (Ferleger, 2008; Thornberry & Olson, 2005). Human beings were routinely treated like animals, physically restrained with ties or ropes for hours or days at a time, despite even experts of the day considering this to be unnecessary and harmful. People who were unable to move on their own were left sitting or lying in their own waste in their beds (Ferleger, 2008). It would be decades later on the tail of the civil rights movement that the process of deinstitutionalization would begin.

While students and adults with disabilities were still regularly being placed in institutions away from their families, the fight for equitable education was beginning to take root. Protests and demonstrations around the unequal treatment of African Americans in society, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, were building steam and clearly showing the inequality and violence of the Jim Crow era. While many White students were able to attend schools that were adequately funded and supplied with materials, Black students were relegated to schools with outdated materials, and not enough of them to go around. Then, in

1954, the Supreme Court ruled that separate educational facilities for African American students were inherently unequal, laying the groundwork for the inclusive education efforts that would follow in the 20th and 21st centuries (Blanchett et al., 2005).

By the 1960s, institutions were beginning to fall out of favor globally (McCarron et al., 2019). As the media began covering the unequal treatment of African Americans in the United States, so too was the abhorrent treatment of those with disabilities brought to the public eye. Journalist Geraldo Rivera was one of the most influential, displaying in full color the deplorable conditions that those in the Willowbrook State School faced in their daily lives (Reimann, 2017). In particular, the Willowbrook news story forced the American public to acknowledge the way that we were collectively treating human beings and allowing them to be treated. Alongside a newfound interest in the treatment of institutionalized persons came the advent of the Disability Rights Movement, where individuals with disabilities came together to protest and fight for equal treatment in society. Looking to Brown V. the Board of Education, people began to question the efficacy of self-contained settings for students with mild disabilities (Dunn, 1968). As we move into the modern era of special education in the US, this critical evaluation of self-contained placements extends to students with extensive support needs, with one study finding marked differences in instruction and activities between the general education and self-contained settings for adolescents with autism (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2012), and another indicating students with ESN educated in more restrictive placements were provided less access to the general curriculum, less interaction with nondisabled peers, less academic instruction, and less access to age-appropriate materials, among other significant differences (Jackson et al., 2022).

2.2 Modern History in the US

The modern era of special education can be marked by the passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EHA) in 1974, later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This Act and its subsequent revisions were the first federal mandate that guaranteed all students, regardless of disability, access to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). It also guarantees the right to the Individualized Education Program (IEP), access to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), culturally appropriate educational evaluation, parent and teacher participation, and procedural safeguards granting parents the right to due process in the event their child is not receiving the education outlined in IDEA (US Department of Education, 2014). However, accountability for their progress and the quality of special education teachers would remain tepid until subsequent IDEA reauthorizations and other educational acts.

One such act, signed into law in 2002 by George W. Bush was the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which led to an increase in school accountability and statewide testing. This push for accountability changed general education as well as special education, spawning the development of alternate assessments and even standards for students with ESN, although the effectiveness of these assessments is debated (Jones et al., 2019). NCLB along with the subsequent reauthorizations of IDEA inspired a paradigm shift where many educators began to presume the competence of students with disabilities, even those with ESN, engaging in

what is known as the least dangerous assumption (Jorgenson, 2005).

Up to this point, the commonly accepted paradigm was that intelligence tests were accurate and reliable enough to predict the future outcomes of a student's ability. Given the poor performance many students with ESN exhibit on these tests, this often resulted in these students being provided with a lower quality education under the assumption that they would not benefit from more academic rigor anyway. Jorgenson proposes that the far less dangerous assumption is that intelligence tests are not infallible, that every student is capable of learning, and that all people have different talents and abilities (Jorgenson, 2005). This increase in presumed competence has led to more inclusive settings (Morningstar et al., 2015) and academic standards-based instruction (Courtade et al., 2012) for students with ESN in the classroom. Likewise, this presumption of competence has reached the world of special education research, promoting the inclusion of perspectives of students with more extensive support needs in scholarly articles and the direct participation of disabled people themselves in generating knowledge about disabilities (Dyches et al., 2004). While there is quite a way to go in terms of providing an equitable education to students with ESN, history shows a consistent, if slow, march in the right direction in the United States, though that history can be vastly different depending on the state.

2.3 History of Special Education in Hawaii

The United States is a vast country spanning multiple time-zones, extremely different environments, and a proverbial melting pot of cultures. It would be disingenuous to claim that the federal history of special education in the United States is the same story in every US state and territory, especially when considering a territory like Hawaii, a state that was only added in 1959. In the following section a brief history of disability and special education in Hawaii will be discussed, and differences between Hawaii and the contiguous United States will be highlighted.

Like many parts of the world, the early history of disability and special education in Hawaii is sordid, however there are notable differences. Starting in the early 1900s, the Hawaii board of Health began to take into custody those who were suspected of leprosy, with nearly 8,000 people being exiled over the century to what essentially were medical prisons (Imada, 2022). However, unlike the lack of resistance to institutionalization exhibited during the same time period in the continental United States (and many other countries), Native Hawaiians "refused to abandon their loved ones," and instead "maintained kinship and care across the fences, walls, and laws of Hawaii's carceral medical institutions" (Imada, 2022, p. 1). This act of resistance unmade the colonial model of disability and represented an acceptance of family and community members with disabilities unseen in other parts of the country.

This juxtaposition between the colonial way of thinking and the culture shared by Native Hawaiians presents modern problems in special education as well. Specifically, in the state of Hawaii there is a history of substandard education and overrepresentation of Native Hawaiians identified with a disability (Ogata et al., 2006). While Eurocentric teaching values restrictive schooling practices and obedience, Native Hawaiians have historically valued oral tradition, contextual orientation, and overlapping speech, the latter of which can lead

non-Hawaiian educators to misidentify culturally appropriate behavior as inappropriate.

In an effort to combat these colonial influences and reintroduce the Native Hawaiian population to elements of its culture and language, Hawaii established a private school system dedicated to the indigenous population. These private schools, and subsequently other charter schools, identify values based in not only education, but culture, economics, and environmental stewardship, all in an effort to support the Hawaiian community (Vitousek & Beamer, 2013). However, these schools are highly competitive with admissions based on the total Native Hawaiian population of a given district, and as a result many students with disabilities are deemed ineligible for Kamehameha schools (Fujii, 2008). Ogata (2006) even posits this as another potential explanation for the overrepresentation of Native Hawaiians identified with disabilities in public schools.

As a prior secondary special education teacher in Hawaii, I have witnessed firsthand the mis- or over-identification of Native Hawaiian students for special education. I spent many hours arguing with administrators in an attempt to ensure my students were placed in their least restrictive environments or would graduate with a high school diploma instead of a certificate of attendance. Anecdotally, more often than not it seemed that I met the most resistance from administration when the student(s) in question exhibited culturally appropriate but "educationally inappropriate" behaviors like those mentioned by Ogata. Further, in terms of students with more extensive support needs, overrepresentation was obvious. In one of my classrooms which was also one of the most restrictive settings in the school, the majority of my students were from historically marginalized groups, with many being Pacific Islanders. While the history of special education in Hawaii is not the same as other parts of the United States, we share many of the same modern issues, like overrepresentation. In fact, even countries with fundamentally different educational systems from our own, such as Japan, share fundamentally similar issues.

3. History of Special Education in Japan and Other East Asian Countries

The following section will summarize the history of special education in Japan and other East Asian countries, with particular attention again focused on students with extensive support needs. This will begin with the early history of special education and the blanket exclusion of students with disabilities from public school in Japan and other East Asian countries. It will highlight shifting cyclical attitudes towards the education of students with disabilities, largely in conjunction with WWI and WWII. Then, the modern reform of special education in a post WWII Japan will be discussed along with similarities to other countries in the region.

3.1 Early History of Special Education in Japan and Other East Asian Countries

The exclusion of students with disabilities in schools in Japan has been baked into its history for centuries for a variety of reasons including a societal understanding of these individuals as "useless" and a tradition of exempting students from "compulsory" education for a variety of reasons based on the parents (Kayama & Haight, 2013). Even when legislation was passed that included compulsory education components, parents were able to request exemption for a host of reasons, resulting in no formal education for the majority of students with

disabilities until around 1890. This societal stigmatization of people with disabilities is prevalent throughout East Asia due to a variety of cultural and religious influences (Kayama et al., 2020).

At the turn of the 19th century, Japan introduced its first classrooms dedicated to students who were underachieving in traditional classrooms. Eventually, as more of these classrooms were set up, they were opened to students with more moderate to extensive support needs such as global intellectual disabilities who otherwise were not attending public school, though they were still not widely available (Kayama & Haight, 2013). Then in 1907, the Ministry of Education officially recommended classrooms for students with intellectual disabilities, vision impairments, and hearing impairments within teacher preparation programs in order to better learn how to effectively educate this population. Without a societal shift in attitudes toward people with disabilities, support for these classrooms waned and many schools closed their special education classrooms shortly after opening them.

After WWI, global perspectives began to enter Japanese public consciousness, resulting in a gradual attitudinal shift away from the perception that people with disabilities were useless. The rights of people with disabilities, including children, were considered and the Ministry of Education once again began to support and promote special education classrooms. However, the belief that these children belonged in segregated classrooms away from their nondisabled peers, and more broadly, society, persisted in both Japan and other East Asian countries (Kayama & Haight, 2013). Unfortunately, even the effort to educate students with disabilities in separate classroom was short-lived due to the rising economic crises in the 1930s. By WWII, tremendous pressure to support Japan's military again resulted in a societal shift toward viewing those with disabilities as sub-human if they could not contribute to the war effort (Kayama & Haight, 2013). By the end of the war and faced with tragedy on a massive scale, Japan's entire educational system, let alone special education, required extensive reform.

3.2 Post WWII Reform of Special Education

After WWII, various educational laws were passed and enacted while Japan was occupied by the Allied Powers led by the US, and these are still the basis of the current educational system in Japan today (Kayama & Haight, 2013). This reform included many concepts that were antithetical to traditional Japanese teaching, including equal access to education as a "right," leading to a slow implementation of formal special education. Kawano-Jones and Jones (1986) posit that there are many reasons why special education policies would need to differ so radically from the US. In the United States, the racial litigation around the civil rights movement is what motivated special education. In contrast, there was no civil rights litigation to pave a way toward special education for Japan. In fact, culturally, Japan is not a litigious nation, nor are particularly concerned with individual freedoms. In contrast with American individualism, child rearing in Japan emphasizes protection and encourages dependence, lending no hand to the concept of the 'dignity of risk' associated with disabled civil rights in the US (Kawano-Jones & Jones, 1986).

While the United States began implementing a national special education system in 1975, the

Japanese government did not implement any sort of formal, individualized special education services for children with "developmental disabilities" (which they have labeled as including learning disabilities, ADHD, high-functioning autism, and Asperger's syndrome) until 2007 (Kayama & Haight, 2013). Because of how slow the reform process was, with many students with severe disabilities still being entirely excluded from public education through the 1970s, the ministry of Education issued a regulation to make special education schools compulsory beginning in the '79-'80 school year. This focus on students with severe disabilities led to a stark decrease in those students being postponed or exempted from enrollment, but it also led to an educational system that entirely segregated students with disabilities from their nondisabled peers.

In the 1990s, the focus shifted toward students with less support needs and in 1993, resource rooms were created so part-time special education services could be delivered to students who would also participate in general education with their nondisabled peers, but it was not until 2006 that students with learning disabilities and ADHD were allowed to receive services in these classrooms. As of 2007, the four types of placement for students with disabilities in Japan are special education schools, special education classrooms, resource rooms, and general education classrooms, with the last placement not technically considered "special education" under the law (Kayama & Haight, 2013). Still, in Japan and throughout much of East Asia, there is still a dominant negative societal view of disability, with many families refusing to acknowledge or talk about their child's disability (Kayama et al., 2020).

4. Similarities between the Regions: Common Problems and Solutions

The differences between these educational landscapes are evident. Each distinct culture results in its own societal attitudes that impact special education for all students, including those with extensive support needs (Kayama & Haight, 2013; Ogata et al., 2006). It has been stated that we are so fundamentally different from one another, in fact, that comparing our educational systems is akin to comparing apples and oranges (Kayama & Haight, 2013). However, there are always lessons to be learned as we move toward a global society. The following section will discuss some of the similarities exhibited between these regions and the problems and proposed solutions we share.

4.1 Problems

There are modern problems in special education that are shared between these two educationally distinct countries, as well as with Hawaii. One specific problem that has been discussed by Japanese and American scholars alike is overrepresentation. There is a significant disparity in the placement of foreign students, and particularly Brazilian immigrant students, in special education classrooms in Japan (Freiermuth et al., 2023). In Hawaii, the cultural dichotomy between American schooling and traditional Hawaiian cultural practices and exchange of knowledge has led to significant overrepresentation of native Hawaiian students being identified with a disability or recommended for special education services (Ogata et al., 2006).

Another problem in special education and disability rights is the stigma associated with

disability. Despite Jorgenson's (2005) proposed paradigm shift, American society and the educational system still presume incompetence, rather than competence, when dealing with people with disabilities. This presumption of incompetence is prevalent in both the US and East Asia, despite differences in our timeline of special education reform (Kayama et al., 2020).

4.2 Solutions

While we may have recognized the need for special education at different times in our respective histories, our solutions to these persistent problems share some common ground. In terms of educational reform, the US, Japan, and other East Asian countries largely spearheaded their changes using advocacy and political and social activism (Blanchett et al., 2005; Kayama & Haight, 2013). As part of our shared educational reform, both the United States and Japan utilized compulsory education laws to increase educational access for students with extensive support needs (Kayama & Haight, 2013). Historically, these reforms enacted at a national level in the US, Japan, and many other large geographically diverse countries are bound by the individual implementation of special education services, with the availability and quality of programs varying significantly in different parts of each respective region (Imada, 2022; Kayama & Haight, 2013). In analyzing the problems and solutions from a global perspective, we may provide relevant perspectives that otherwise would not have been considered.

To that end, Kayama and colleagues (2016) followed up their educator perspectives study with an analysis towards solving the common problem of stigmatization shared by educators in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the US alike. While the individual practices may differ from one region to another, they found that effective socialization practices were key across all regions to reduce the stigmatization of students with disabilities. Similarities like promoting empathy and understanding in all students and creating a supportive and accepting classroom and school culture were shared by all of the cultural groups, even if the methods of eliciting this empathy and supportive environment varied. Sharing these cultural cases can help educators from across the globe create solutions to reduce this stigmatization in school and society at large (Kayama et al., 2016).

5. Conclusion

The history of special education for students with ESN is a sordid one in many parts of the world. Though the timing of special education reform in each of these regions differ, and cultural influences on societal proclivities toward people with disabilities vary based on a number of factors (Kayama et al., 2020), many parts of our educational systems mirror one another. With the continued globalization of the world, none of our educational systems exist in a vacuum; our systems have and will continue to influence one-another. The level of achievement exhibited by students in Japanese schools has resulted in changes to the US educational system, and the influence of the US occupation of Japan after WWII directly influenced the reform of the Japanese education system (Kayama & Haight, 2013). What we all share is a common goal of reducing the stigmatization of students with disabilities in our schools and societies, and we will only achieve that through a global shift toward presumed

competence and the least dangerous assumption: all students, regardless of disability, belong in the classroom and are capable of learning (Jorgenson, 2005).

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