

Teachers' Expectation to the Role of Special Needs Coordinator in Japan A Comparison between Primary and Special Needs School

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Abstract

The special needs coordinator plays an essential role in development of effective schools for all pupils including children with disabilities. The author focused on the attitudes of both primary and special needs school teachers towards expectation of the roles of special needs coordinators. The purpose is to clarify some features in comparing teachers' attitudes towards the roles of special needs coordinator between primary schools and schools for special needs. In total 178 teachers participated. The findings indicated that primary school teachers have expected their special needs coordinator to fulfill mainly the roles of development of effective school for children with special needs through managing regular meetings, overseeing the daily practice and the records of children. On the other hand, the special needs coordinator who is working at school for special needs is highly expected in liaising with the outside agencies and providing support to other neighborhood mainstream schools in the local area.

Keywords: special needs coordinator, teachers' attitude

1. Introduction

The Role of special coordinator is one of the essential factors for progress of special needs education. (Cowne, Frankle and Gerschel; Fitzgerald, 2007; Garner, 2009; Hodkinson, 2016; Sanagi, 2005a; Sanagi, 2005b, and so on) Packer (2014) expressed that the school special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) has become pivotal to the success of every school. They have a heavy workload - a typical list contains over 30 separate areas of responsibility for a SENCO (Westwood, 2013). The first code of practice on special educational needs as listed the roles of SENCO has been issued in the United Kingdom in 1996, and the latest version of the code of practice for special educational needs in the United Kingdom is issued in 2015 (DfE,2015). And, now, the SENCO will be providing strategic direction and development, coordinating provision and tracking progress, along with leading and developing others in school improvement (Packer, 2014, p.20).

The Japanese government introduced a system of special support coordinator in the school system in 2007, at the same time of a shift the education system for pupils with disabilities from special education to special needs education. The special needs education system in Japan is just for pupils with disability that is legislated in School Education Law as partially amended in 2007. (MEXT, 2007) It is known that the special needs education system is much wider than a former special education system in their subject. Although the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the exact name of Japanese Ministry of Education, has changed the name of the education system from special education to special needs education (in precisely, it is called special "support" education), this system is for not pupils with special educational needs but just for pupils with disabilities. This is the point that we should remember for making sense the special needs education system in Japan. MEXT has introduced the special needs coordinator (SN coordinator) system that had reproduced Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) system in the United Kingdom in all compulsory primary and lower secondary schools and schools for pupil with special educational needs (in fact, just for pupils with disability). The MEXT has adopted the roles of special needs coordinator in Japan superficially as very similar to the roles of the SENCO in the United Kingdom, though the education system is quite different. Sanagi (2014) repeatedly and strongly emphasized that it should be taken deliberate introduce of the roles of special needs coordinator into the Japanese education system as the same contents as the roles of SENCO in the United Kingdom because there is a fundamental difference between those two countries.

During the last decade, many books about special needs coordinator has been issued and also each education authority has set some in-service training courses for special needs coordinators. Special needs coordinators have been nominated in special schools as the named person for providing support to neighborhood mainstream schools rather coordinating special needs in their special school. While the special needs coordinator in schools for special needs is nominated in 100%, special needs coordinator in mainstream compulsory schools has been designated 99.2% in public primary schools and 95.6% in public junior secondary schools in 2016. (MEXT, 2016) It shows that almost all compulsory schools have appointed special needs coordinator as a key promoter of special needs education in the school system.

The roles of the SENCO can vary significantly between settings (Fitzgerald, 2007). It indicates that the role of the special needs coordinator in Japan is also different between in mainstream school and school for special needs. The present study focused on the attitudes of both primary and special needs school teachers towards expectation of the roles of special needs coordinators. The author continuously conducted some investigations about teachers' attitudes towards major concepts in special needs education. (Sanagi, 2009; Sanagi and Matsumoto, 2015; Sanagi, 2016a; Sanagi, 2016b) In this study, the purpose is to clarify some features in comparing teachers' attitudes towards the roles of special needs coordinator between primary schools and schools for special needs.

2. Methods

Participants

- 119 teachers from mainstream primary schools and 59 teachers from schools for special needs who have joined a series of seminars to have a special teacher license in Japan. In total 178 teachers participated.

Data collection

- Using a questionnaire for the analysis that consists of nine items of the roles of special needs coordinator. It consists of eight items from the roles of SENCO in the former Code of Practice in the United Kingdom (2001), and in addition to the items, the role of managing regular meetings for special educational needs. Although the latest Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice has issued in 2015 (DfE and DoH, 2015), the roles listed in the former Special Educational Needs Code of Practice were adopted in this study because there is more difference in the education system for children with special needs after the new regulation in the United Kingdom in 2014. (DfE, 2014) The items for questionnaire show in Table 1 as below.

		Mean	t	p	Effect Size (r)
Overseeing the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy	primary	4.43	2.411	p<.05	0.18
	special	4.15			
Liaising with and advising fellow teachers	primary	4.52	1.391	n.s.	-
	special	4.39			
Managing the special provision team including fellow teachers, teaching assistants, school counselors, and other relevant staffs	primary	4.40	0.566	n.s.	-
	special	4.34			
Coordinating provision for children with special educational needs	primary	4.53	-0.277	n.s.	-
	special	4.56			
Overseeing the records of all children with special educational needs	primary	4.29	5.455	p<.01	0.50
	special	3.55			
Liaising with parents of pupils with special educational needs	primary	4.24	-0.378	n.s.	-
	special	4.29			
Contributing to the in-service training of staff	primary	4.09	1.759	n.s.	-
	special	3.83			
Liaising with the local authorities, early years providers, other schools, educational psychologists, health and social care professionals, and independent or voluntary bodies	primary	4.45	-3.272	p<.01	0.27
	special	4.75			
Managing regular meetings for SEN	primary	4.46	3.207	p<.01	0.33
	special	4.00			

- Data collection had conducted on an in-service training course for teacher license of special needs education in August 2016.

Procedure

- Questioning

Participants were asked items as “What do you think the extent of the importance that special needs coordinators should take this role in your school?”

- Analysis

The responded data were analyzed statistically using t-test for comparison between teachers from primary and special needs schools.

3. Results

Table 1 shows that the result of t-test between teachers from primary and special needs schools. It seems in general that there is a high expectation of the roles of special needs coordinator in both primary and special needs schools.

Among the items, the highest expectation to their special needs coordinator at primary school was the item about "Coordinating provision for children with SEN" with following item as "liaising with and advising fellow teachers". On the other hand, teachers who are from schools for special needs expected the role of "Liaising with outside agencies". There are some differences between primary and special needs teachers in comparing statistically the items with t-test. Four items among all items has shown the statistical significance between two groups, "Overseeing the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy", "Overseeing the records of all children with SEN", "Managing regular meeting for SEN", and "Liaising with outside agencies". In the first three of those four items, teachers from primary schools had much higher expectations to the special needs coordinator than teachers from school for special needs. Teachers from special needs school have estimated in the item of "Liaising with outside agencies" as the highest importance towards the role of special needs coordinator. However, effect size indicated that there are not so big differences between two groups.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

For development of effective schools, all teachers should be regarded as having responsibility to support and encourage not only pupils with special educational needs or disabilities but also all pupils in their school. In the theory of an interactive model of the concept of special educational needs, Sanagi (2003) and Sanagi (2007) emphasized that all staffs including special needs coordinator should be recognized as an element of environmental factor which may perform mutual interaction with individual factors. Most books about developing effective schools and discussing the roles of SENCO in the United Kingdom, like as Cowne, Frankl and Gerschel (2014), pointed out in common that effective school policies depend on good communication systems between the SENCO and other staffs. There is no mention about special needs coordinator directly in the amendment of the school education law in Japan. However, since the amendment towards special needs education the roles of special needs coordinator were extended to include much wider educational needs not only at special schools but also rather at mainstream schools. That is the reason why primary school teachers expressed their expectation highly to the special needs coordinator to take the roles about overseeing and managing special provision in their school. During the last decade, the roles of school for special needs was also extended to provide their professional resources for children with disabilities not only who are schooling special schools but also their neighborhood mainstream schools as giving advices and providing itinerant services.

In conclusion, primary school teachers have expected their special needs coordinator to fulfill mainly the roles of development of effective school for children with special needs through managing regular meetings, overseeing the daily practice and the records of children. On the other hand, the special needs coordinator who is working at school for special needs is highly expected in liaising with the outside agencies and providing support to other neighborhood mainstream schools in the local area. It seems that this difference between primary and special needs schools was involved in the extension of the provision for children with disabilities in each. That is, in the last decade in Japan, primary schools have a much broader responsibility for children with disabilities than ever before, and special needs schools have extended their roles in special needs education not only for the pupils who are schooling special schools but also in the neighborhood mainstream schools as a center for special needs in the local area.

Conflicts of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest directly relevant to the content of this article.

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