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Cultural sensitivity in the delivery of disability services to children: A case study of Japanese education and socialization

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examined beliefs about disability and related socialization and educational practices at a Japanese elementary school. Disability is a universal issue affecting child welfare and educational systems around the world. Yet, relatively little sociocultural research has focused on non-Western children with disabilities. This limitation restricts our understanding of the extent to which and how cultures vary in their responses to disability, and the impact of these variations on children's development. Public schools in Japan recently implemented formal special education services for children with "developmental disabilities," a new category used by educators to refer to "milder" difficulties in children's acquisition of social and academic skills, for example, learning disabilities, ADHD and Asperger's syndrome. This transition created a dilemma for educators: blending new requirements of providing individualized support with traditional Japanese socialization and educational practices of raising and educating children within peer groups. Participant observation, in-depth interviews, and longitudinal case studies of children with developmental disabilities addressed culturally- and developmentally-sensitive practices employed by educators. Educators were sensitive to stigma, involved peers in supporting one another, created home-like classrooms, guided children towards voluntary cooperation, and provided support and guidance to parents. Broad implications for the design of culturally-sensitive disability services are discussed.

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1. Introduction

This study examines cultural beliefs about disability and related socialization practices at a Japanese elementary school. Physical and mental conditions which impair children's functioning are universal issues impacting child welfare and educational systems around the world. In Japan, children with disabilities[1] are overrepresented in out-of-home, state care (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2009). In the U.S., children in foster care are overrepresented in special education, primarily because of learning disabilities and emotional disturbances (see Altshuler, 1997; Zetlin, 2006). In addition, children with disabilities are at increased risk of maltreatment, especially physical abuse (e.g., see Helton & Cross, 2011). Children with less severe disabilities of language, cognition, and attention can be especially vulnerable to certain types of maltreatment. In many respects, they appear to be typically functioning children. Unlike challenges faced by children with disabilities involving vision, hearing, and mobility, for instance, those experienced by children with less apparent disabilities can be difficult for others to understand. Their difficulties can be misinterpreted as laziness, disobedience or disrespect (e.g., McNulty, 2003; Portway & Johnson, 2005). Indeed, Helton and Cross (2011) found that among a national probability sample of families investigated for maltreatment, children with minor language deficits were at greater risk for parental physical assault than those with severe language impairments. Clearly, universal, biologically-based conditions that result in relatively subtle cognitive, language, and attention disorders also have profound social consequences.

Yet, how disabling conditions impact children's social and psychological functioning varies considerably and can be understood as a transaction with culturally shared beliefs and practices. Cultures differ in which physical and mental conditions are considered "disabling," how such conditions are grouped or categorized, societal responses deemed appropriate, and how individuals with disabilities are valued. For example, individuals with socially defined, "undesired differentness" (Goffman, 1963) may experience varying degrees of stigma which can impact them at both individual and interpersonal levels (Crystal, Watanabe, & Chen, 1999). This difference from "normal" affects not only others' attitudes and behaviors towards individuals with disabilities, but their own concepts of self in relation to others and, accordingly, their social interactions.

Relatively little sociocultural research in English, however, has focused on non-Western children with disabilities. This limited

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[1] Children's disabilities included: intellectual disabilities (9.4%), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders (2.5%), autism related disorders (2.6%), learning disabilities (1.1%), and other health impairments (2.4%).

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focus restricts our understanding of the extent to which and how cultures vary in their beliefs and responses to disability, as well as the impact of any differences on the developing child. By stepping outside of those sociocultural contexts which we take for granted to consider culturally diverse responses to disability, new dimensions of these complex experiences emerge. Understanding culturally diverse beliefs and responses to disability can stimulate reflection on how we might better serve children with disabilities and their families within our own pluralistic societies.

In one of the few sociocultural studies focusing on non-Western children with disabilities, Kasahara and Turnbull (2005) examined Japanese parents' perceptions of their relationships with educators providing support for their children with disabilities. Children's disabilities ranged from physical disabilities to Down syndrome and autism. Parents were willing to receive services from educators who enjoyed working with children and whose work was rooted in love and respect for children. They expressed willingness to work collaboratively with educators, but expected educators' commitment and empathy. This research highlighted Japanese cultural practices based on empathy (see also Kayama, 2010).

Jegatheesan, Miller, and Fowler (2010) examined parental beliefs about their children's autism in South Asian Muslim immigrants in the U.S. One of the primary goals for these parents was the full inclusion of their children in daily activities at home and in the community, including religious rituals. Parents' beliefs about how to support their children's development conflicted with those of educators, who emphasized a structured and controlled environment to facilitate their children's individual learning. As a result of these conflicts, parents were dissatisfied with schools and services for their children. Many parents conducted repeated, unsuccessful searches for service providers who understood their views of disability and with whom they could engage to support their children.

In this study, we address the broad issue of how to deliver culturally-sensitive disability services; specifically, we examine how Japanese adults integrate traditional socialization and educational practices with new, formal special education services for children with developmental disabilities. "Developmental disabilities" is a new term used by Japanese educators to categorize a variety of relatively subtle social and cognitive conditions caused by neurologically-based deficits: learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD), and Asperger's syndrome (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2004). In Japan, children with developmental disabilities traditionally were considered to be among any number of children who were "difficult" or "slow learners," and were socialized within general education classrooms without special services. Instead, classroom teachers and peers provided individual support as needed. Children with more severe cognitive, mobility and sensory disabilities were provided with services in special education schools or classrooms separated from their typically developing peers (e.g., Abe, 1998; Mogi, 1992). Currently, the Japanese education system is in transition, as public schools implement formal special education services for children with developmental disabilities within general education classrooms (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2007). This transition provided a context for adults to reflect on beliefs about "disability," and appropriate responses to such children, that might otherwise have remained unexamined.

1.1. The dilemma presented by Japanese children with developmental disabilities

Understanding the challenges of implementing culturally-sensitive, formal systems of support for children with disabilities requires an understanding of broader, interrelated socialization goals and practices. In Japan, adults typically focus on socialization practices that are largely indirect and non-coercive. These practices frequently create social ecologies that support children's emerging sense of place, autonomy and relationships. The basic belief is that children are naturally good and sensible and will voluntarily acquire socially acceptable attitudes and behaviors through their close interpersonal relationships (Walsh, 2004). Bamba and Haight (2007, 2009, 2011), for example, examined some socialization beliefs and practices experienced by maltreated children at residential child care institutions in Japan. Adults believed that "*Ibasho*" creation is necessary for psychological well being. *Ibasho* is a place where one enjoys positive interpersonal relationships and feels safe, accepted, and free to express oneself fully. *Ibasho* can form a basis from which to face challenges and to which one can return for comfort and strength. Children who are maltreated may not have their *Ibasho* at home. Part of their recovery from maltreatment involves finding their *Ibasho* within their substitute homes. Adults supported children's development and recovery from maltreatment, including *Ibasho* creation, largely through the practice of *mimamori*: they watched over children with affection and empathy as protective figures. Their guidance primarily was indirect and involved creating opportunities for children to contribute to peer groups, for example, by serving food, planning and engaging in enjoyable activities, and developing positive relationships with others. Adults did not force compliance, nor did they attempt to "create" *Ibasho* for the child. Autonomous individuals voluntarily create their own *Ibasho*, a process which is facilitated through close, accepting interpersonal relationships.

That children's relationships with peers and adults are central contexts for Japanese socialization is apparent in diverse settings such as homes, residential child care institutions and schools. Japanese socialization emphasizes sensitivity and caring for other's feelings (e.g., Azuma, 1994; Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). For Japanese people, empathy involves sensing, anticipating, and responding to other people's needs (Lebra, 1976), and is critical to establishing trusting relationships (Kayama, 2010). The responsibility of the individual is to sense what others are feeling and thinking more than to express his or her own emotions and thoughts. This sensitivity and ability to attend to other people's feelings and thoughts is referred to as *omoiyari* (Bamba & Haight, 2011). Japanese teachers, for example, emphasize the importance of children's skills in listening over speaking (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). In addition, they have been found to be generally more sensitive than U.S. teachers to children's behavioral cues indicating, for instance, interpersonal struggles (Haynes et al., 2000). At home, where parents prioritize children's abilities to avoid disturbing other people, for example by controlling their feelings, Japanese children are exposed to opportunities to guess and sense what other people feel and think (Azuma, 1994).

Integrating traditional Japanese socialization and educational practices with formal, individualized special education programs can pose significant challenges. Within Japan, the peer group is a central context of socialization and development. Children's relationships with their peers and educators are clearly recognized in the National Curriculum Standard for elementary schools (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2008) as a primary means of teaching academic skills as well as the social skills and moral attitudes necessary to function successfully as a Japanese adult. Through elementary school, Japanese education is generally viewed as "raising children" in partnership with parents. Parents expect educators to assume broad roles in their children's development, not only teaching academic skills, but also providing opportunities for children to learn basic life skills, manners, discipline, and morality. Japanese education emphasizes the spiritual function of education, including the development of personality and mind, and emotional and social well-being. Okamoto (2006) explains this emphasis through the Japanese notion of "*kokoro*":

> "*Kokoro*" is a concept with a wide range of connotations including heart, mind, soul, spirit, attitude, value system and humanity. As witnessed by the frequent use of slogans extolling the virtues of "education for *kokoro*," it can be said that the fundamental purpose of education in Japan is surprisingly defined in nothing but

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