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WORKING TOGETHER: INSIGHTS FROM A SPECIAL EDUCATION UNIT IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

The rapid international expansion of literature on Japanese lesson study in regular education does not apply to special education. Education in English-speaking countries values interpersonal relationships of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) but needs more research. The professional experience of Japanese special educators provides a natural laboratory to observe interpersonal relationships practice in everyday classroom activities. Short stories from a special education unit in a Japanese elementary school provide snapshots of three teachers' collaborative lesson study with colleagues and their approach to teaching groups of children including those with a dual diagnosis of ASD and intellectual disability.

INTRODUCTION

Australian special educators may be interested in stories about how Japanese special educators work collaboratively to teach interpersonal skills to children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in small classes. The prosocial alignment in one special needs education unit encourages these special educators to engage in interpersonal teaching with a whole class.

The school emphasises peer relationships, supported by its prefecture's focus on social-emotional skills as part of its whole-person educational philosophy. Within the unit, teachers scaffold interpersonal capabilities among children across the elementary years, supported by collaboration among teachers in the unit and school.

Several stories of actual practice illustrate these teachers' use of a long-term process of lesson study in continuously seeking ways to achieve an ideal lesson and their concurrent efforts to improve the children's interpersonal skills during teaching-and-learning activities. These stories show how a supportive school and classroom community facilitates the interpersonal skills of children with ASDs. These Japanese special educators acted on their expectation that children with ASDs can acquire an awareness of others and work together in group settings. Throughout this paper, some Japanese expressions that can not be translated directly are explained further in brackets.

School-wide lesson study approach

Japanese lesson study, or *jugyō-kenkyū*, is a long established practice of teacher-led

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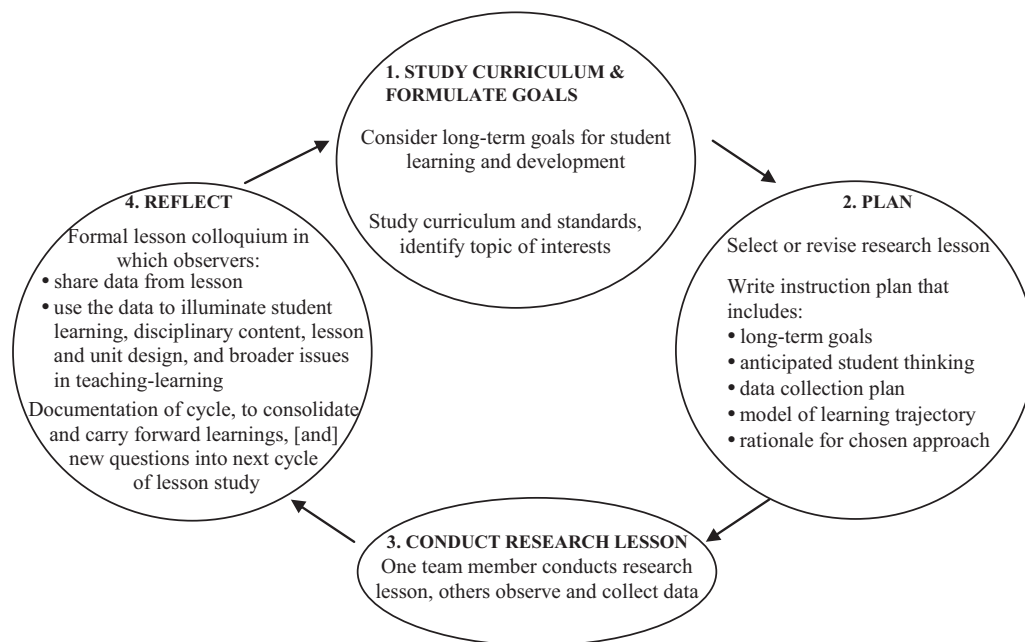
professional development in Japan. The cyclic process of lesson study as a kind of teacher action research (see Figure 1), described by American researchers, Lewis, Perry, and Friedkin (2009), is somewhat similar to the lesson planning process of planning, implementing, reflecting on, and modifying a lesson commonly employed in English-speaking countries. However, Japanese lesson study is distinctive in several aspects.

In this process the school community identifies one aspect of learning as a whole-school long-term goal that is usually relevant to national emphases of education (e.g., problem-solving skills). Each teacher joins one lesson study group focusing on one area of curricula related to their specialist subject (e.g., mathematics, literacy), and each group defines a specific subject goal to address the school goal and meets several times to draft a plan for

an ideal lesson. The group progressively improves the lesson plan to make ideal learning happen in classrooms: They observe a lesson implemented by a team member, hold post-observation discussion about the lesson, and consider how to improve it before the teacher teaches this lesson again, with modifications, to the class; sometimes, another teacher in the team teaches the lesson to a different class. Some Japanese schools are attached to universities and all of these schools as well as some others are nominated as research schools to hold open conferences on intensive lesson study practice. At these whole-school lesson study conferences, held every year, teachers at these research schools stay after school to prepare for open lessons that are delivered in the presence of public visitors.

Much of the work on this practice is published in Japanese and is not accessible

Figure 1. An American view of the Japanese lesson study cycle (from Lewis, Perry & Friedkin, 2009, p.143).



to an international audience. However, Japanese lesson study has been used in regular education in English-speaking countries such as Australia (e.g., Kriewaldt, 2012; White, 2007) and the USA (e.g., Lewis, 2009) and in non-English speaking countries such as China (e.g., Lee, 2006; Yang & Ricks, 2012) and Indonesia (e.g., Saito, Harun, Kuboki, & Tachibana, 2006). While lesson study forms a natural part of special education inside Japan through preservice teacher education and inservice professional development, little is known about how lesson study helps special educators teach children with ASDs in their classrooms.

Interpersonal approach for teaching children with ASDs

Difficulties in learning interpersonal skills are well recognised in children with ASDs (Bowler, 2007). Several English-language programs such as Floortime (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006), Early Start Denver Model (Rogers & Dawson, 2010), and Pivotal Response Training (Koegel & Koegel, 2006) offer promising interpersonal practice for teachers in English-speaking countries (Simpson, Myles, & Ganz, 2008). However, skill-based practice is better established in global education, because its principles of applied behaviour analysis have been accepted as evidence-based practice for teaching children with ASDs (e.g., Odom, Boyd, Hall, & Hume, 2010) and for training of special educators (Barnhill, Polloway, & Sumutka, 2011). Hence, special educators in English-speaking countries may train children with ASDs in specific social skills rather than directly facilitate group interactions among these children.

Interpersonal focus in curriculum

Interpersonal skills are highlighted in changes to national curriculum and policy for children with disabilities both in Australia and Japan. Australian curriculum now allows for instruction

focused on personal and social capability: “Recognising and regulating emotions, developing empathy for others and understanding relationships, establishing and building positive relationships, making responsible decisions, working effectively in teams, handling challenging situations constructively and developing leadership skills” (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority: ACARA, 2013, p. 82). Similarly a new Japanese curriculum for special education includes children’s independence as a new key learning area (Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology: MEXT, 2009a), enabling children with special needs to achieve “zest for life.” In the regular curriculum (MEXT, 2009b), this zest for life refers to a traditional focus on whole-person education (e.g., Holloway, 1988; Lewis, 1995) and a balance of three elements in individual children (i.e., academic abilities, richness in humanity, and health and physical strengths).

Dual diagnosis of ASD with ID

In Japan, ASD is recently added to the categories eligible for special education service (MEXT, 2006), and, as in Australia, children with ASDs are often placed in special schools or classrooms designed for those with ID. Dual diagnosis of autism co-occurring with ID is the most studied subtype of this heterogeneous disability (Matson & Nebel-Schwalm, 2007). Hence, special educators have often responded to the unique social and communicative needs of these children within the provision for life skills learning for children with IDs.

Life-skill learning unit and lesson study

Japanese special education for children with ID is focused on learning from everyday experience rather than from instruction in separate subjects (e.g., mathematics, science). Flexible curriculum requires special educators to create and innovate in planning a lesson around the children’s learning needs (Japanese National Institute

of Special Needs Education, 2006), which, in turn, often shapes the focus on lesson study for a group of special educators. The Japanese Course of Study for children with ID recommends four learning forms: (a) Life-skill learning unit, *seikatsu-tangen-gakushū*; (b) instruction in routine daily life skills across a day; (c) play; and (d) prevocational learning (NISE, 2006).

Although all four forms are implemented with a whole class, the life-skill learning unit employs well-defined group activities focused specifically on peer interaction and relationships. Because this unit is based on the idea that positive experience of doing activities with peers enhances social-emotional capabilities in the children, Japanese special educators spend a lot of time creating a better lesson with a group activity in which children can practise interpersonal skills with peers (T. Ôta, 2006). Also, in this unit, these activities are constructed around children's everyday lives and individual learning needs and interests, so that children can experience working independently and making their own decisions.

Create a good lesson—"lesson skills"—is a primary professional role of teachers in the Japanese special education sector especially for children with ID (Ôta, 2005; M. Ôta, 2006). A good lesson is defined as one that provides an activity that responds to children's "actual condition", which includes everything about the children; their age or developmental stage, type of disabilities, past experience, current abilities and learning interests, cognitive perspectives or logical thoughts, peer relationship, and so on. This condition can change every day. In a good lesson, teachers strive to provide the children with an adequate amount and level of tasks, so that the children successfully complete the lesson activity with some challenges. The role of Japanese special educators in the unit is to be learning facilitators, who encourage every child to feel satisfaction and achievement. Therefore, formulation

of an holistic understanding of the children and interpretation of children's responses to their learning experience are core aims for teachers with good lesson skills.

Close observation is then used to establish learning goals, to create a lesson by either using available materials or making their own materials needed for children to complete the tasks independently, and to "embody" (i.e., make concrete and real) the ideal lesson through explicit and reflective articulation of interaction and responses (M. Ôta, 2006) within a teaching team approach (Kimura, 2006). In relation to lesson skills, it is important that each teacher mentally visualises every single "scene" of their own lesson, its sequence of activities, and children's interaction and responses to their learning experience (M. Ôta, 2006). Prior to implementation of this lesson, therefore, they are expected to provide a written plan explaining how they actually teach, how the children view the learning activity, and how the children respond to the learning activity or comprehend the learning content. Unlike in Australian special education, Japanese special educators repeat the same but revised lesson across weeks in a life-skill learning unit until the class and the children reach the expected learning experiences.

METHOD

Themes involving how this school, its teachers, and children work together emerged from data analysis. Ten weeks of field research in a Japanese special needs education unit (i.e., *yougo gakkyu*; SNEU, hereafter) within an elementary school involved series of semi-structured interviews about teaching practice, end-of-week reflection interviews about lessons and the learning of children with ASDs in lessons and other social situations, observations of classroom lessons and teacher meetings, and the researcher's personal daily reflections. Ethical consents were obtained from the school and then from the participating teachers and parents of the children enrolled in SNEU.

School context

This research school is attached to a national university. The SNEU located within the school shares routine interactive activities but not academic sessions with regular education classes. The school is similar to many public schools in Japan in that it has a large playground for all children. There is a school rule that everyone plays together in the playground when the weather is good. All children come to the playground during breaks and during other regular whole school activities (e.g., morning activities). Many teachers also come to the playground, not only to supervise but also to play together with the children.

The school and all of its teachers put much time and effort into their traditional lesson study process of improving a lesson and of holding an annual open conference. The school invites teachers from other schools, other educational professionals and academics, and other members of the community to observe their lessons and hold post-lesson group. This year was the second year of their 3-year lesson study period, and the conference was held in the 6th week of the fieldwork. Therefore, preparation for the conference, implementation of lessons and group discussions at the conference, and post-conference debriefing among the special educators in the unit could be observed.

Classes

Three classrooms in the unit are arranged into three chronologically based age groups of children (Year 1-2: SNEU1, Year 3-4: SNEU2, Year 5-6: SNEU3). Each classroom has a small number of children (i.e., $c = 6$ in SNEU1, $c = 5$ in SNEU2, $c = 4$ in SNEU3). The primary category of disability is ID, and each classroom has two children with a formal diagnosis of ASDs/ID.

Participants

Three classroom teachers with alphabetically constructed pseudonymous (SNEU1: Ms Ando, SNEU2: Mr Banba, SNEU3: Ms Chiba), a head of SNEU, and a part-time support teacher comprise the staff. These teachers are qualified special educators who had previous experiences in teaching regular education classrooms, preservice training in lesson study and who were also qualified in teaching specialised secondary curriculum areas. These teachers implemented lessons in the life-skill learning unit for their own class and instructed the children about daily life skills (e.g., from changing clothes and toileting to building peer relationships). They aimed to deliver the ideal lesson designed in their unit plan on the conference day.

STORIES FROM A JAPANESE SCHOOL AND ITS SNEU CLASSROOMS

Stories from this site reveal the Japanese special educators' lesson planning process and their group expectations for working together in the class, unit, and school. All of these stories represent some key insights into the focus on interpersonal relationships in this school and its SNEU classrooms (e.g., peer acceptance, awareness of others). The stories also show how the lesson study process was embedded in this school's system and culture and demonstrate that creating a "good lesson" is the primary focus of these Japanese special educators. An example of social situations involving well-defined learning themes also demonstrates how the activity helps the children become aware that they are working together.

In each story, one Japanese term is used to illustrate an aspect of practice, and an English keyword describes the approximate meaning. For example, the way in which the Japanese teachers viewed their children as a whole was evident in their talk about their practice and their use of the term, *bamen*, or whole scene. These Japanese teachers tried

to capture what is happening in the class and to describe the whole scene in words. When they tried to interpret children's responses in their learning experience, their focus was not only particular behaviours but also the scene in which child responses happened. The Japanese teachers also imagined the scene of their future lesson and tried to detail the children's interaction and their responses to learning materials that embody the ideal lesson. The process of spelling out these details during lesson study meetings had an important role in their approach to improving a lesson and creating social situations in which the children work together with their peers.

Story 1. Hero Cartoon: Everyone Is My Friend

All of the Japanese participating teachers repeatedly referred to the children "sharing the same image" as a part of lesson creation: The children can understand or imagine the same goal, flow of activities through the lesson, and overall outcomes of the ideal lesson. They insisted that it was the first step for the children to engage in the lesson as a class. Ms Ando used free play for her life-skill learning unit. She wanted to make a group work activity in which the children could feel self-satisfaction and enjoy being with friends. She tried to make a story in which the children were able to share the same image of the activity.

For the children to share the same image, Ms Ando used a popular hero cartoon for young children, called "Let's go, Anpanman", and she developed her play-based lesson with this cartoon theme. She named the activity "Baikinman Land", which used a favourite character of one child with ASD. There were six children in the class, and each child and Ms Ando chose their personal hero character and pretended to be that hero during the activity. She divided the children and herself into three peer groups according to the characters' role in the cartoon. The role play encouraged children

to interact with each other. After the class performed the same role play several times, Ms Ando added a group activity: An enemy in the cartoon (i.e., Sandman) visited the playroom during their lesson, and the class tried to defeat Sandman collaboratively. Ms Ando asked the part-time support teacher to pretend to be Sandman. The first time that Sandman visited to their lesson, the children were scared and cried. Because the children's reaction was more intense than what Ms Ando expected, she asked the support teacher to leave the room.

After the lesson, Ms Ando and the support teacher discussed what happened in the lesson and how they would improve the lesson to encourage the children to have a "fun" experience of making a group effort. Ms Ando had established an ideal lesson story in which the children were able to complete some group work to defeat Sandman at the end of the story, but she was not sure how she could make it happen. She brought her struggle to a lesson study meeting held later in the same week in the SNEU staff room with other SNEU classroom teachers, the head, and a university professor as their supervisor. The meeting was held after the professor and head of unit observed each teacher's lesson from their respective life-skill learning unit.

During the meeting, Ms Ando talked about what happened in the lesson, what she wanted to achieve, and what she needed to improve more with respect to her image for her ideal lesson. Each person at the meeting shared their opinions and past experiences in relation to improving this lesson. When Ms Ando told the team that she was thinking about how to end the lesson story, Mr Banba, the SNEU2 teacher, suggested a story in which Sandman actually wanted to play with the children and the children were going to become friends with Sandman. Everyone liked the story, and Ms Ando commented that she had wondered whether her original story of defeating Sandman at the end was not ideal. Their discussion, after this moment, moved to the topic of how Ms

Ando would make the new story happen, and they talked about learning materials to help create the scene.

Ms Ando prepared for the ideal episode (i.e., the children become friends with Sandman) to happen during the lesson study conference. First, she discussed with the children what they wanted to do when Sandman came in. Some children said that they were scared and wanted to hide from Sandman, while others suggested having a water device to defeat him because water was his weakness in the original hero cartoon. Second, Ms Ando created resource materials (e.g., a huge curtain to hide behind), and the children practised the lesson story four times more before the conference and progressively developed the story through class discussions. Ms Ando wanted the children to be brave to fight with Sandman and complete group work together. Some younger children still cried or hid behind the curtain until they became brave enough. Ms Ando expected that these children would become able to be brave because their friends were there and would try hard to fight with Sandman. Ms Ando also planned with the support teacher how Sandman would act in the lesson.

At the lesson study conference, while there were a lot of visitors in the playroom, the children enjoyed their “Baikinman Land” activities. The lesson flow was the same until the very end. When they defeated Sandman through group work as they had practised, Sandman did not run away from the playroom as expected. Instead, he cried, and Ms Ando prompted the children to see what was happening in their Baikinman Land. Ms Ando said, “Look! Something strange. Oh dear, Sandman seems to be crying, doesn’t he?” The children said, “True! Why is he crying?” Ms Ando replied, “We are not sure. Well, let’s ask him why he is crying!”

The children asked Sandman and found that he wanted to play with them because everyone looked so happy. Ms Ando asked the children, “What should we do? He wants

to be a friend with us. What do you think?” Some of the children said, “No, I don’t want to [be his friend]!” Ms Ando asked everyone one by one again if they could forgive Sandman and become his friend. One girl said, “I can!” Ms Ando picked up the comment and said, “Wow, can you be his friend? You are wonderful!” After this interaction, everyone started saying that they could be his friend. Sandman thanked everyone, promised not to be mean to the children anymore, and left the Baikinman Land.

At the end of the story, the class gathered and debriefed what had happened. While making a toast with a cup of green tea, Aiko, a girl with ASD, said, “It was our making-up anniversary!” (i.e., anniversary for being a friend of Sandman). Ms Ando praised what she said and verbalised how wonderful everyone was because they forgave Sandman and became his friend. Later on the day, the first author asked Ms Ando about the meaning of Aiko’s comment. Her interpretation of Aiko’s choice of the phrase, making-up anniversary, was that the children thought that being a friend was a wonderful thing. Ms Ando said that the term “anniversary” could become a keyword for her class (i.e., the class making a lot of anniversaries whenever they had wonderful experiences).

The role of Ms Ando in the lesson was to create the lesson story and to prompt the children to realise what was happening in front of them and to think what they should do to respond to the scene. In the episode, being a friend of Sandman became a process of sharing experience among children. Through interaction with other children, they shared explicit knowledge that forgiving and becoming a friend of an enemy was a wonderful thing to do.

The notion that “everyone is your friend” was consistently observed during the daily living scenes at the school and also appeared in teacher talk. For example, the teachers and children called other children “friends”, either *tomodachi* or *nakama*. These terms

indicated an emotional bond in the class and in the school community. Moreover, Ms Ando used the process of group reflection with the class at the end of every lesson, which encouraged the children to plan and create the lesson world together. Therefore, the children felt that they made the lesson story by themselves and became very proud of their Baikinman Land.

Story 2. Group Responsibilities: Children Plan, Implement, and Evaluate Their Activities

At the beginning of the school year, the children in each class held a classroom meeting and created the duties for their own role in the school. Peer groups were often used in various school situations, and these small peer groups were responsible as a team that performed various duties. The peer group, called *han*, was used in this school as it has been traditionally used in Japanese education (Lewis, 1995). Across the field research, the first author often saw typically developing children in regular education classrooms come to SNEU classrooms either for their group duty or for playing together. In various school activities, all children and teachers of the school engaged in activities together (e.g., tag games). The children usually planned and delivered these activities, and then, evaluated their efforts.

Some peer groups from regular education classrooms, for example, came to the SNEU1 to help younger children to complete their morning preparation (i.e., changing clothes, unpacking their bags), and they also accompanied the SNEU children to morning activities on the playground. Other peer groups visited all classrooms (i.e., regular education and SNEU classrooms) and sang a song together every morning. The children decided which songs they sang every month, taught the songs, and prepared a poster of song lyrics for all classes. In these group situations, peer praise or positive feedback was

often used to foster peer acceptance (i.e., “befriending”). The peer group in charge for the activity announced what everyone did well and often named the “friend” who was most excellent at the end of the activity. Ms Chiba specifically asked a peer group to name each child in her class when they gave positive feedback to the SNEU children at the end of an activity, because it made them happy.

In this story, children from regular education classrooms determined class duty and planned group activities to interact with other children as a whole class, implemented their activity, and gave positive feedback on the event and praised their friends. All children treated everyone in the school as their friends. Peer praise appeared to be used to encourage positive peer acceptance.

Story 3. Child’s Behaviour: Class Becomes Community

These special educators often emphasised the interpersonal meaning in children’s action. For example, Mr Banba interpreted the children’s imitation of the repetitive behaviours of Daichi, a boy with ASD, as other children accepting Daichi as an important member of SNEU2. When Daichi was absent for the day, one classmate tried to switch on and off the air-conditioning, and another classmate made a strange noise when eating lunch. Mr Banba believed that, based on his close relationship and everyday experiences with the class, they behaved like Daichi because they missed Daichi.

These Japanese teachers sometimes took the role of “bad model” to encourage the children to think and solve problems without teachers’ direct instructions and trusted that the children would respond to what they expected. For example, Ms Chiba used one child’s inappropriate behaviour as a group learning opportunity. At the end of the first playtime of the day, Ms Chiba came back to the classroom from the playground.

She did not direct the children to come back to the classroom but waited for them to come back independently when the school bell rang. All children except for one boy with Down syndrome, Osamu, came back and prepared for a lesson from a life-skill learning unit.¹ She said to the classmates, “Osamu has not come back here yet. I cannot wait anymore. Do you mind if we start making cakes without Osamu?” She called each child’s name and confirmed each child’s response to her question. When one boy with ASD, Ēji, was asked if he did not mind if they started their activity without Osamu, Ēji stood up and left the classroom. Ms Chiba and the first author followed him and saw him calling Osamu’s name loudly and pulling his hand to come to the classroom. Osamu responded to Ēji’s prompt and came back to the classroom with him.

Ms Chiba scolded Osamu about his inappropriate behaviour that interrupted what other children wanted to do. Osamu cried and said sorry to the class. Ms Chiba encouraged him to apologise to the class with a more specific sentence (i.e., that he was sorry because he did not come back to classroom and his behaviour caused other children to wait). Osamu prepared for the activity, and the other children watched as he finished his preparation. While waiting for him to get ready, Ms Chiba asked Ēji why he went to call Osamu. He responded to her by reading the classroom goal: “Trying my best, for myself, for my friends.” Ms Chiba was surprised (touched and nearly cried) and confirmed that he did it for the class. Ēji nodded, and Ms Chiba gave him a “big praise” in front of the class. After this episode, Osamu repeated the same behaviour again 3 weeks later. Ms Chiba said only, “Oh, Osamu is not here”, and Ēji and another boy went out to call Osamu. This time, Ēji did not pull Osamu’s hand and, instead, verbally encouraged

Osamu to come back. After Osamu cried about being scolded, other children tried to help him to prepare for the next lesson (e.g., washing hands, wearing his apron) without any prompting. Ms Chiba also reported this episode when she was asked about her reflection on the week and also, at the end of the field research period, when she was asked about outcomes of her practice. Her interpretation of the episode was that Ēji became thoughtful about his friends, that peers become more supportive, and that the class had become a community.

Story 4. Duck Tale: School Solves a Problem Together

An administrator announced to the whole school that “I understand that every class is doing your morning activity. However, I would like you to stop what you are doing now and to listen to me carefully.” When Ms Chiba heard the loudspeaker, she stopped her lesson and prompted her class to focus on the message. The announcer continued to speak very slowly and gently to all children in the school. “This morning, we had such a sad story. I would like everyone to listen to me carefully and think hard about what I am going to tell you and solve the problem together.”

The administrator explained that one of the Year 4 classes encountered an issue. Their pet duck had a new born baby, and the class had asked everyone to place a suggestion for the baby’s name in the voting box located at the school entrance. In the morning, they found one paper saying something unpleasant. The administrator said that the children of Year 4C were very sad when they found it and that he was very worried about the “kokoro” (i.e., heart) of the “friends” of this class and also worried about that of the person who put the note into the voting box. The administrator also said that they were not going to find who did such a heartless thing but that he would

1. Some studies show poor persistence and a stubborn temperament in children with Down syndrome, e.g. Fidler (2006).

Table 1. Four Japanese Stories: Keywords, Story Topic, and Description of Practice

Japanese word used in stories	Keyword	Story topic	Description of practice
Story 1. Lesson study in teaching approach			
<i>Tomodachi or Nakama</i>	“Friends”	Hero cartoon	Ms Ando created a lesson world by using hero cartoon with her lesson study group members. In the lesson, enemy became “our friend.” The idea that <u>everyone is my friend</u> also reflects in the way that teachers call peers “friends” when talking to the children about classes or peers.
Story 2. Lesson study in children’s learning			
<i>Han</i>	“Peer group”	Group responsibilities	The school owned a huge playground for everyone to play together, and children worked as a team. Children said what friends did well, and teachers said what they did well in front of everyone. The process of giving positive feedback to each other facilitated <u>peer acceptance</u> .
Story 3. Classroom community			
<i>Bamen</i>	“Scenes”	Daichi’s absence	When Daichi was absent, all children copied what Daichi usually did (i.e., behaviours or talk). Mr Banba considered it as <u>group acceptance</u> . Combination with teachers’ talk about children’s behaviours during their meetings, they seem to view a child’s behaviours as a personal characteristic.
		Osamu’s behaviour	Teachers tried to see whole scenes and use one child’s behaviour as learning opportunity. <u>Osamu’s problem was everyone’s issue, not only his issue</u> . Children were also expected to think about what they can do for “friends.”
Story 4. School community			
<i>Kokoro</i>	“Heart”	Duck tale	A whole-school interpersonal approach led children to <u>solve the problem of one class (i.e., “sad” event) together</u> . Children considered friends’ sad feelings and cheered up the friends.

like the children to think how the Year 4C friends felt and how they were going to help these friends.

The head of SNEU explained the purpose of the announcement to Ms Chiba who was new to this school. That is, the children were being encouraged to think about how their friends felt and about what they would be able to do for their friends. The head also suggested that her class, as the oldest class, visit all other SNEU classes to discuss what they could do for their friends, and then visit the Year 4C classroom to cheer up them as representatives of SNEU. Ms Chiba talked to the children and asked them to think about how the Year 4C friends felt and what they should do as SNEU3. The two oldest children in SNEU3, both with ASDs, left their classroom and talked to other

SNEU children, with Ms Chiba’s verbal prompting, while the other SNEU teachers also prompted their own classes. The solution adopted after this group discussion was “cheering up our Year 4C friends.” Then, these two children of SNEU3 went to the Year 4 class to give comfort. Later on the same day, the Year 4C children used a school announcement to say thank you to all “friends” in the school for visiting, and feeling the same sadness as us, and cheering us up (ouen).

Awareness of others has been recognised as a difficulty for children with ASDs. Progressive improvements in this awareness were linked to the SNEU’s developmental emphasis on group participation, cooperation, and contribution in each class. The older children with ASDs demonstrated

more improved consideration of their peers than the younger children with ASDs.

INSIGHTS FROM THESE STORIES

Table 1 summarises the four stories from this Japanese school and its SNEU classrooms. Through working together, interpersonal values were addressed in a SNEU class, among classes, and within the school. Children with ASDs acquired peer acceptance and established interpersonal relationships with peers, and the school and individual classes became a supportive community in which the children with ASDs were able to learn interpersonal skills through real-life experiences. Children with ASDs, through teachers' scaffolding of these abilities throughout 6 years of elementary school, gradually built positive experiences with peers and demonstrated social-emotional learning outcomes in this school.

These stories in this specific school may provide some insights into interpersonal learning activities for children with ASDs. As teaching is culturally situated practice (e.g., Dall'Alba, 2009), this site-specific practice may vary in other parts of Japan and also may not be directly applicable to Australian contexts. However, these stories show one way to facilitate peer interactions that enhance interpersonal relationships and skills in children with ASDs and that encourage everyone work together on inclusive community.

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