

Rethinking the concept of “Special Educational Needs” —an interactive model—

SANAGI Tomomi

Faculty of Education, Chiba University, Japan

Introduction

Everyone use the term “special educational needs” in the field of special needs education. However, the way of using or defining the concept is largely dependent on authors to authors and also country to country. This inconsistency of the concept of special educational needs makes some confusions in practice and some misunderstandings in discussions. And, for implementing the concept into inclusive practice, it is important and necessary to be understood this concept by all teachers.

The new education system named “Tokubetsu Shien Kyoiku (Special Support Education)” has recently been introduced in Japan. It is characterized by considerable intention to inclusive education, appointment of “Special Support Education Coordinator” in every primary, secondary and special school like as SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) in Britain, and development of new roles of special school as disability and special needs centre in community.

However, because of its initial phase, there are many confusion in schools. Especially, coordinators in mainstream schools are baffled by new roles and responsibilities of them. Although education authorities have launched to train many experienced teachers as coordinator, yet most of in-service training courses for coordinators consist of some methods for assessment of pupils’ difficulties and psychological character of disabilities, screening procedures of pupils, and making relationship between school and outside professional.

In consequence of that, as many teachers in mainstream schools have been untrained as professional for “special education” up to now, they have become to be interested in disabilities, especially in autism, learning disability, and AD/HD, as individual problems.

On the other hand, they have paid little attention to educational environment in their school.

Although it is the common sense that the concept of

handicap has been changed to consider inevitably its social aspects, we can still see such a tendency in the point of view of teachers whole the world.

The concept of special educational needs and practice of special needs education is different from one country to another.

However, can we develop effective special needs education without consideration of educational environment ?

OECD (1999) recognized that there were some types of using the term “special needs education.” Some European countries are using it as just about education for children with disabilities, on the other hand, it has very broad meanings in some countries. It is dependent not only on the differences on education system and status of population, but also on lack of the unified concept of special educational needs. As the application of the concept into practice is dependent on the context of education systems, traditions and cultures in each country, it is a natural outcome that the actual condition of “Special Needs Education” is different from country to country. However, we should make the concept of “Special Educational Needs” in unified definition.

It is well known that the concept of special educational needs was introduced as “combination” of individual and their environment (Gulliford, R. 1971). He pointed out the lack of view on educational environment was inadequate to understand educational needs of children with disabilities.

Warnock Report (1978) has also pointed out we should consider children’s educational needs not from the so-called “medical model” but from more educational aspects. They emphasised the term “special educational needs” as a wide range of disability or learning difficulties instead of the diagnostic categories. Then, the British government abolished the categories of disability in education field, and introduced the term “special educational needs” by the Law (the Education Act 1981).

Over the last two decades, there has been a great diffuse the term and concept of special educational needs whole the world. And, there has been drastic extension the concept of disability from social perspectives.

However, there are still not enough to be focused on the educational environmental of children with disabili-

Mr. Tomomi Sanagi, M. Ed.

Associate Professor

Department of Special Education, Chiba University

1-33, Yayoicho, Inage, Chiba, Japan 263-8522

ties and learning difficulties in schools. This tendency could be especially found out in teachers' view in regular classroom in mainstream schools.

Many teachers focus on disability and difficulty of pupils in detail. However, some of them would not take care of educational environment of pupils. We can find out such kind of tendency in IEPs (Individual Education Plans). There are many IEPs only focused and analyzed on pupils' "disabilities" and/or "difficulties" for making provisions.

Do you have IEPs which have analysing areas of environmental status of the pupils in the school? Is IEP that you have developed able to make it clear how the educational environment of pupils made positive/negative effect on pupils? Did you make assessments of the educational environment of pupils before? And, did you make IEP with taking account of pupils' special educational needs consisted of both individual and environment? Didn't you make the provisions only for pupils, and little for educational environment, did you?

Then, I would like to make a proposal of the concept of special educational needs here again with more considering the environmental factors and structure of it.

A definition of Special Educational Needs

Once I showed my original definition of the concept of "Special Educational Needs" as follows: (Sanagi, 2003)

Special Educational Needs :

It is defined as a result of the interaction of "Individual factors" and "Environmental factors." And, it is sustained in this dynamics. Students needs provisions in condition with a certain cost or different way for providing in allocation of budget, taking time, and work load to others, which added to regular provision for development, implement, and monitoring of suitable provision to meet pupils' educational needs. (Fig. 1)

The interaction of individual and environmental factors has spiral structure. (Fig. 2) In case there are negative interaction, that is, individual and environmental factors make effects negatively to each other, pupils' special educational needs will be enhanced more severely. On the other hand, in case there are positive interactive structure, it will be reduced. It must be sought to develop positive interaction in every schools. This is the main aim of assessment of structure that is the interaction between individual and environment.

Individual factors consist of disabilities, cognitive characters, language abilities and other specific properties of the individual.

Environmental factors consist of human resources (teachers, other pupils, parents/forsters, assistants, school psychologists, doctors, nurses, other professionals etc.), material resources (school architectures, classroom design, teaching materials, etc.), and educational condisions (school policy of special needs education, regular/special curriculum, teaching methods, group settings in learning, characteristic of individual teaching, etc.).

The theory of "Special Educational Needs" is a concept that the causes and the structure of learning difficulties of pupils will be analysed in dynamics of the interaction between "individual" and "environment", and develop the necessary provision to meet pupils' special educational needs.

The aim of the theory of special educational needs is to develop qualitative schools for all children. The qualitative school will be able to include each pupils diversity into their school environment and provide suitable provisions for them.

Whenever we are standing at this theory, we can improve learning context and develop excellent school for pupils more effectively.

Although we have taken account of some environmental factors of person with disability or special needs since 1980s, there are still a tendency to focus

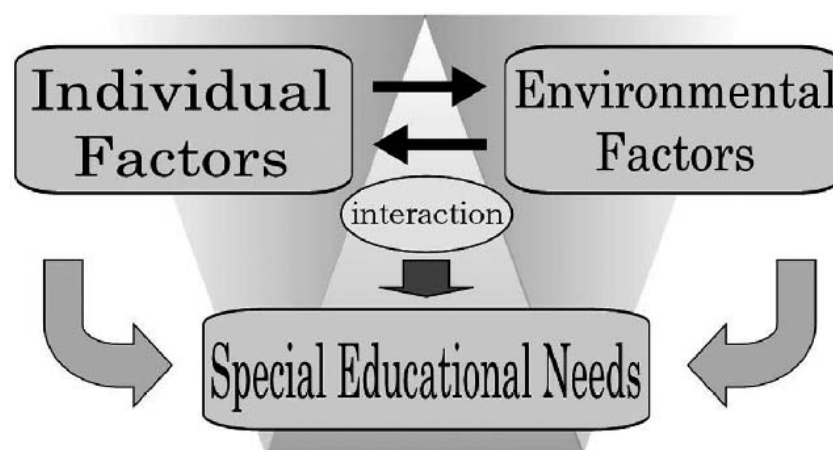


Fig. 1 "Special Educational Needs" is defined as interaction of individual and environmental factors

Sanagi, 2003. p. 51 (The original was in Japanese.)

only individual, especially in IEPs, as I mentioned above.

In my interactive model of the concept of special educational needs, we can make assessments both individual factors and environmental factors in fairly.

I show a sample figure for analysing SEN structure in practice. (Fig. 3) For using like as this figure, we do not forget to make an assessment of special educa-

tional needs focused on not only individual factors but also environmental factors certainly. Especially, it is important we should remember what factors contribute to reduce pupils' special educational needs currently.

Please try to make an assessment of pupils' special educational needs with this figure. I think you will find some points both it should be improved and there

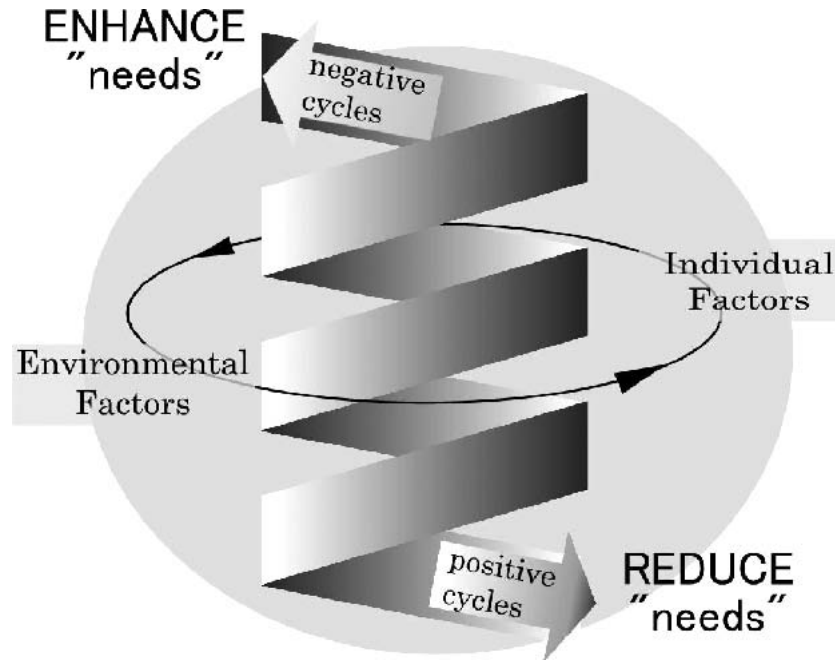


Fig. 2 Spiral Structure (interactive cycle) of Individual and Environmental Factors

Sanagi, 2003, p. 55 (The original was in Japanese.)

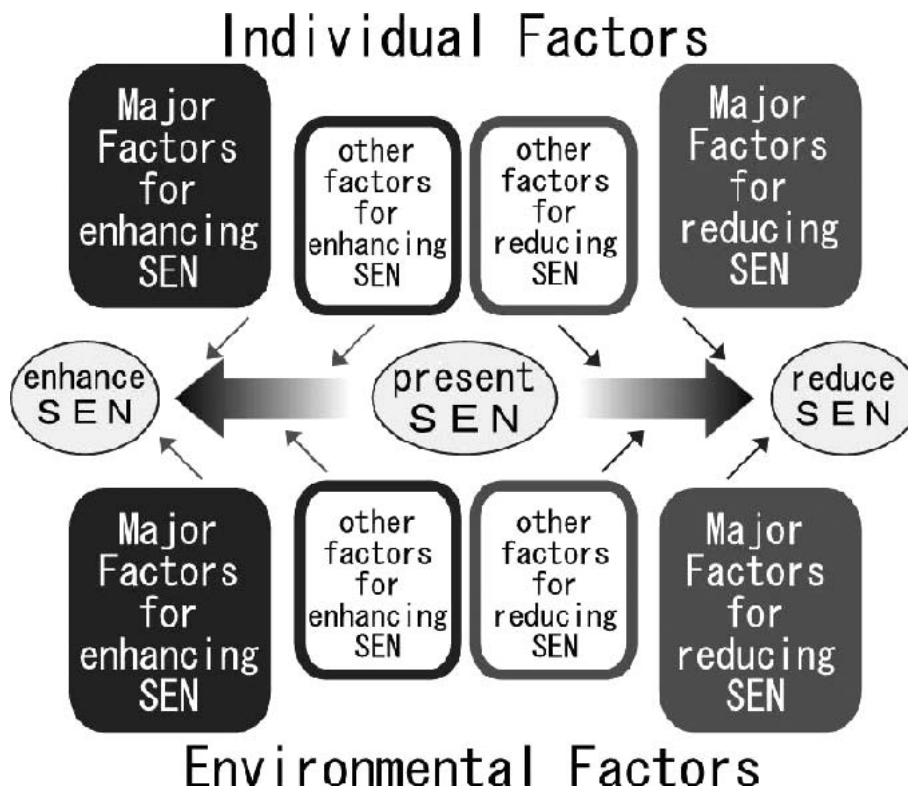


Fig. 3 Fill boxes for analyzing of SEN structure

Sanagi, 2003, p. 150 (The original was in Japanese.)

were already suitable effects on pupils for environmental condition in your school.

Then, the condition of special educational needs shift continuously with having some effects from individual factors and environmental factors. If one of the factor has changed, then the condition of special educational needs shift its aspect dynamically.

Again, in the interactive model, it is essential both individual and environmental factors.

What problems will be expected to resolve with this theory model ?

The purpose and task in the theory of special educational needs should involve policy and obvious way to improve the quality of both mainstream and special schools. This theory bring an sophisticated analysing way into practice.

It is not the aim of this theory that criticize schools which had not made good provisions for pupils with special educational needs, much less blame teachers in those schools. Instead of strictures, we should seek the way to develop qualitative schools with this interactive model.

For instance, attitudes of peer pupils of children with disabilities or learning difficulties in the classroom are one of the factor that make considerable effects to pupils with special educational needs. In some cases, those are negative element as exclusive environment, and in other cases, those are very positive element for inclusive classroom. In using the analysis of interactive model, we can make it clear such a conditions of pupils' attitudes with interaction between individual (= pupil with special educational needs) and environment (= peer pupils), and decide on next policy to do in the classroom in fairly. I mean, we should clarify not only negative element that enhance pupils special educational needs but also positive element that reduce the needs in peer pupils attitudes. When we analyse the structure of what individual and environmental factors make effects to pupils with special educational needs and the interaction of them, then, we can regard the attitudes of peer pupils objectively and make proper action in the classroom. It will improve the environment in the school.

The interactive model of special educational needs can lead schools to make suitable provisions for pupils with clarifying the structure of the interaction of factors.

The another reason why I emphasise the structure of special educational needs is that this interactive model of the concept of special educational needs can apply not only mainstream schools but also special schools. This theory is effective to both mainstream and special schools. And, because of its point of view in

assessment of educational environment in schools, the interactive model makes considerable benefits both for pupils and schools.

In mainstream schools, it will develop more inclusive environment. And, in special schools, it will develop more high quality and sophisticated resources.

Inclusion and Special Educational Needs

There are some mainstream schools that they would pick pupils with special educational needs up to special resource units or special classroom outside regular classroom. If teachers recognize only individual factors without careful thought of educational environment of the pupil, there must be made segregated environment in the school. Because, although it is important that we should recognize some pupils need individualized teaching in suitable condition, if we do not take account of environmental factors such as the perception to have special teaching of pupils with special educational needs, attitude of peer pupils in the classroom, effects of separate learning place and teaching method or materials on the pupil, and other teacher's attitudes to the pupil etc., the lack of consideration of environmental factors will make negative effects on pupils with special educational needs. The most serious negative effect on pupils is to diffuse the notice that segregation is the best or the only one way to meet pupils' special educational needs among teachers in mainstream school, or regular classroom is not suitable for special educational provision.

Avramidis, E. and Norwich, B. have pointed out that the successful implementation of inclusive policy is largely dependent on educators being. However, some teachers still misunderstand to meet pupils' special educational needs as only concentrated to provide special "professionalised" teaching to pupils directly. On the other hand, they make little of learning environment of pupils or conditions of inclusive policy in the schools.

As I mentioned, there are some rationality for setting of special units in mainstream schools. However, it is an option of the schools that they have made the best effort to make provisions in inclusive policy and sought a improvement of learning environment for all pupils in the school. It does not apply for schools without making such efforts.

For development of inclusive mainstream schools, we have to keep carefully recognize any kind of "diversity" of pupils. One of the important nature in inclusion policy is continuously to extend the capacity of diversity of pupils' needs in the schools.

If it is assigned individual teaching or special resource unit to pupils with special educational needs without careful concern for their social position in the

school, those schools are regarded as being segregated or exclusive, because there are high possibility that these educational provision is in itself very special for disadvantaged.

However, if we develop individual teaching, special resource units, or small group settings as the resource units for all pupils who are "in need", and at the same time we also include the needs of pupils who are gifted or high performance in learning as well, those schools will be able to make well organised and suitable provisions for all pupils in need.

In the interactive model of special educational needs, even if a pupil has disability, the pupil is not always as having special educational needs because of its dynamics. On the other hand, pupils who are very gifted or advance in learning also have possibility to need certain provision in special resource units or individual settings.

Then, we should develop a school with including a wide range of pupils' diversity so that we can make a school more inclusive.

The theory of interactive model of special educational needs contributes for making such a inclusive policy in mainstream schools.

It is not to normalize special provisions in schools but to include a diversity of pupils' needs.

One of the important thing we should understand is that individual teaching and special resource units are not the symbol of exclusive environment in itself. Special schools can take considerable roles as resources for inclusive education until mainstream schools provide well developed resources for meeting pupils' educational needs.

In analysing the factors which make considerable positive/negative effects on learning of pupils in any kind of schools, classrooms, or units, if some structures that should be improved or facilitated have been clarified, we should make suitable provisions for pupils with considering the structure of those individual and environmental factors and interactions of them.

This is the interactive model of the concept of special educational needs that contribute for all pupils with ceaseless school improvement and create inclusive school resources.

Conclusion

There are about 1.4% of pupils in segregated settings in special schools and special units (ie. special classroom and resource room in mainstream schools), and it is estimated that about 6-10% of pupils with

special educational needs are in regular classroom in mainstream schools in Japan.

It seems that this figure is similar to other contries such as Denmark. And, "in practice", it is not so popular notion of the interactive model of special educational needs among nordic and western European countries, though there are many teachers and researchers are struggling to develop qualitative inclusive education system with the same direction and aims.

Unfortunately, because of some reasons such as language and geographical distance and the small numbers who studies the concept of special educational needs, there are a few collaborative work in this field between European countries and Japan.

However, we have also the field of disability research and special needs education. Especially, nordic contries is well known as its advance of disability research. And, there is an academic association that is very specialized in special needs education research in Japan as well. Then, there are many possibilities to make opportunities for discussion and collaborative project.

I hope collaborative works will be increased in research and practice among not only European and nordic countries, but also Asian countries in the future.

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<Acknowledgment>

I have discussed with and got some advices from Prof. Jesper Holst and Prof. Niels Egelund at DPU when my visiting as a researcher at DPU (from Sep.-Dec. 2005) was supported by the Danish Rectors' Conference and Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science.