Inclusive Education:
Teacher’s Experiences in South Korean Eco-Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

In Korea, inclusive education will become compulsory from kindergarten to high school after 2010. However, most children have been hurried and put under the pressure of academic achievement and left emotional and socially immature; thus, this educational climate has made children who are not able to accept diverse and independent challenges. Eco-early childhood education (EECE), one of the new emerging movements which comes from the eco-centered world view, can help children grow to be confident and happy. This qualitative research participated and interviewed four teachers in two EECE institutes which focus on the inclusive educational environment in order to support children with special needs. The research investigated and described how and what teachers experience in EECE institutes. The findings of this study revealed: (a) the strengths of the EECE institutes for practicing inclusive education, (b) the challenges and solutions for practicing inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Children with Special Needs, Teachers in Early Childhood, Eco-Early Childhood Education (EECE)

Introduction

1. Current status of Korean inclusive education
Inclusive education intends that children with special needs attend kindergarten or a child care center with typically developing peers. Inclusion is not only about placement, but belonging to a community and considering human rights for children with special needs. An inclusive institution and all members supporting the children should meet their educational needs. Thus inclusive educational program must be sensitive to the diversity of children and their family needs (Stainback & Strainback, 1990 cited in Allen & Schwartz, 2001, pp. 3-4).

In Korea, the 'Law for the Development of Special Education', revised in 1994, states the admission of children with special needs to public schools should not be rejected and any disadvantages should not be given to them. The law led to increased inclusive education in the general education institutes (Hwang, 2000). The Korean government also introduced ‘Special Education Law (Including Disability)’ in May last year; therefore, inclusive education will become compulsory from kindergarten to high school after 2010. Currently, there are 1,494 kindergarten children with special needs placed in 903 general education schools as of April 2007. Compared to the 599 kindergarten students placed in 150 special education schools, the number of students with special needs in general classes are more than in special classes (Ministry of Education & Science Technology, 2007). Since special classrooms were established in 1971, the quantity of Korean inclusive education has been growing. In contrast, the qualitative preparation and support still have been insufficient (Kang, 2005; Son, 2005).

Education of students with disabilities changed in paradigm from “functional limitations” to “minority group” (Hahn, 1989 cited in Stainback, Stainback & Ayres, 1996, pp.33-34). In the old paradigm, the primary task of the educator was to fix the disability of students, and to fit them into the educational environment. But in the new paradigm, academic failure is considered to be not due to students but to the school environment, and schools require modification in order to meet the diverse needs of all students. Inclusive schools share similar characteristics based upon changing the paradigm. First of all, inclusive schools start with a philosophy that “all children belong” and the members have a “sense of community” that every member in a school community
supports each others needs. In this school environment, “diversity is valued” and provides greater opportunities for learning. This diversity also provides a “natural proportion” of students with disabilities and a “realistic” environment for all of the students. Furthermore, for the success of inclusive education, all of the members in the school community need to be active, adaptable and make the effort for: “services based on need rather than labels”, “support provided in general education classrooms”, “interdependence and support networks”, “support facilitators or collaborating teachers”, “curriculum adapted when needed”, and “resources combined” (Ibid.:pp.35-38).

2. Korean educational climate making it harder for inclusive education

Unfortunately, most Korean educational institutes tend to be a seriously competitive environment only for the pursuit of learning achievement. For instance, extracurricular activities in private kindergartens have been extended very widely. It has resulted in many children, even less than 3 years old, already having been put under the pressure of academic achievement and rushed to be mature too early, thus they become more dependent, selfish, stressed, and competitive. These educational climates have made children who are not able to accept diversity and independent challenges, and to consider others who especially are behind them.

From the research, so-called extracurricular activities were done in more than 90% of 1,700 private kindergarten cases. Most of the extracurricular activities were done outside of regular school hours as well as replacing regular activities in kindergartens. The increasing emphasis on the extracurricular activities in private kindergartens was related to the director, teachers', and parents' perception of extracurricular activities as necessary activities in kindergartens (Lee, Chung, & Lee, 2003). Extensive early childhood private education reveals a number of problems, such as symptoms of attention deficit, lack of patience, selfish behaviors, and being overly-conscious of others in their environment. In addition, they sometimes seem very
stressed and lacking in independence (Woo, Baek, & Kim, 2005). These educational climates cannot provide children the opportunity for understanding of diversity and taking independent challenges. Eco-centered early child education is one of the new movements that intend to change these educational climates.


Eco-early childhood education (EECE) is one of the new emerging movements which insist on a paradigm shift from the current Korean educational climate to an alternative (Kim & Lim, 2003). The educational principle of the EECE, which comes from the eco-centered world view emphasizing the relationships between all living things in an ecosystem, focuses on children's own values and their characteristics as valuable creatures. This view of the EECE can help children grow to be happy and joyful and help to solve current early childhood education problems of the 'sooner, more, earlier' syndrome in Korea (Kim, 2004).

In the program based on these principles, the body, mind, and spirit of children can thrive. Children can be renewed in a relation to nature, the ability to play, and a sense of wonder. The educational contents include: going for walks; meditation; vegetable gardening; fingertip handicraft; traditional Korean physical exercise; learning recycling, thriftiness and reuse; interactions between elders and children; and interchange between urban and rural communities (Ha, 2004).

EECE has been influenced by Dong-hak (meaning Eastern Learning) which is composed of the most representative characters of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity as well in terms of concerning a life based on indigenous Korean common people's traditional thought - reconciliation, harmony, and symbiotic holism. Dong-hak emphasized Hanwulnim, an organic cosmology from the perspective of nature. Hanwulnim is the creator of everything and a true being who dwells within everything in the universe. Children are also treated and respected as Hanwulnim. Hence, children are not competitive and independent beings rather they are cooperative and encouraged to show love of all beings. These characteristics of EECE
will give opportunity to children with special needs to ideally mingle with peers in the schools.

The aim of this study was to investigate and describe teachers’ experiences in seeking an inclusive educational climate shaped for children with special needs in Korean EECE institutes. This paper will present the findings from the cases and will address the following questions: What are the practical strengths of inclusive education for children with special needs in EECE institutes? What are the practical challenges and solutions of inclusiveness in EECE institutes?

**Methods**

This study carried out in-depth interviews and participant observation based on qualitative research methods. It took place in two EECE institutes focusing on the inclusive educational environment in order to support children with special needs. Four EECE teachers participated in the in-depth interviews that investigate and describe how and what teachers experience in the EECE institutes.

**Participants**

These teachers have worked in a private kindergarten and the Child Care Center at Pusan National University. The teachers’ years of service in the EECE institutes varied from 5 to 9 years, and for children with special needs, varied from 1 to 4 years.

The information of participants in this research is tabulated as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Years of service taught</th>
<th>Years of service in EECE institute</th>
<th>Years of service for children with special needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
The information of children whom the teacher served in this research is tabulated as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Type of disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dong</td>
<td>Autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Reactive Attachment Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sung</td>
<td>Reactive Attachment Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min</td>
<td>Developmental Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chai</td>
<td>Mental Retardation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joo</td>
<td>Developmental Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woo</td>
<td>Autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hung</td>
<td>Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gyun</td>
<td>Mental Retardation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yung</td>
<td>Physical Impairment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyun</td>
<td>Characteristics of ADHD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interviews**

The study was conducted as semi-structured interviews in the early-years teachers' work place. The researcher described the aims of the study and rules for participation in every interview. The content of the interviews was based on the following areas: teachers' years of service and the information of the needs of family
and children; teachers’ beliefs on EECE and special education; teachers’ efforts and difficulties with children with special needs; practices of the EECE program and support of the EECE institutions for children with special needs.

The teachers were interviewed more than twice and the interviews were recorded on MP3 file and each lasted about 60 minutes. The interviews were transcribed on the same day.

**Analysis**

The procedure during the analysis embodied qualitative research tradition. In the coding process, researchers developed a set of codes and identified teachers’ experiences. Then the researcher repeatedly read each transcript and applied the codes, identified categories based upon the codes, and decided themes within the categories.

To confirm results, one researcher visited the teachers’ workplace several times to observe teachers’ practice and asked to check results. Researchers also met numerous times with each other to discuss review results.

**Results**

1. **The strengths of the EECE institutes for practicing inclusive education**

1.1. Wide and open character of EECE creates an accepting and inclusive environment.

Participated teachers expressed that an open and free climate would be one of EECE’s merits. The EECE program institutes put more emphasis and practice on outdoor practices and play. Children also were allowed to act freely.
I had no troubles at all for symbiosis thanks to the absence of formal learning activities here……. Children with special needs were, rather, of help to me that they were more competent at cooperative works than other children. (4. 7. H)

In my previous working place, in the apartment complexes, children were not able to play outdoors. The principal made an announcement through a loudspeaker that children go into their classrooms because their parents worry about children not studying but playing. Five-year-old children spent their time studying in a large group i.e. group talking time and English extracurricular activities. The extracurricular activities demanded a higher level of educational performance and the teachers had to teach them closely but it is too demanding. In the school, the materials were various and almost all educational activities demanded academic achievement. (4. 7. M)

K and M made a comparison of the educational practices between the EECE institutions and others thanks to their experiences in both types of institutions. They reported that children in EECE need not to be busy to achieve goals set by the teacher. They commonly reported the achievement-oriented activities planned by the teacher in the classroom rather reinforced problems of children’s behaviors and ignored their unique personality and autonomy. Teachers also reported that children in EECE can show their strengths on the activities respecting their autonomy.

1.2. Co-operative relationships among children offer betterment

EECE teachers reported the results that could help to practice inclusive education were: peers not in competitive positions with each other, good-tempered children, co-operative activity, and communality. All these details create cooperative educational climate.
There was no envious child in my class. His peers perceived the special feature of Hyun, but did not take issue with him... They did not complain that it was unfair to take more care of Hyun than others. There was no child hurting Hyun. They were all good. (4. 11. Y)

Children had good relationship with each other and spoke slowly to him. They did not ask me any questions such as ‘why does only Hyun...?’... Nobody pushes their way, but they all go well with each other due to the communality EECE is pursuing. Children spent the majority of their time playing outdoors. There was very little watching them in conflict there, while they sometimes fight with each other in a classroom. It seemed that children were more relaxed and behaved as friends of the special needs children. Especially, they preferred to play together more and more, and that everyone including Gyun participated in the traditional play like hide-and-seek and chasing games. (4. 18. H)

H especially accentuated the communality of EECE. She reported children became accepting of a handicap as a unique feature of a child with special needs, in this atmosphere of freedom and acceptance, and then they also became generally open and cooperative.

1.3. An educational program based on the respect of various lives offers positive effects

Teachers reported EECE programs positively served the children with special needs. M who took charge of children with autism and reactive attachment disorder said that it was helpful for them to have contact with various people and natural objects near the school. And the principal of the school said that M's gentle personality seemed to bring a positive impact on children. In addition, her teaching experience had built up her confidence to take charge of children with special needs.
There is no class in EECE. EECE programs included taking a walk in the village and meeting with neighbors or the person on a wheelchair. There were many meetings on a walk. I think it was meaningful that the children met different types of people from those occasions… ‘Sesi’ activities (traditional neighborhood activities through the year) are good chances for children to meet others. Interactions between elders and children especially exerted a favorable influence upon Gyun. An old man and a woman in the village told children fairy tales in my class. And the next week, children showed them a play dramatizing the story. Gyun’s mother was extremely delighted at his role in a play. The elderly also taught Korean traditional dance and calligraphy to children and their parents. Gyun was very pleased that he learned about it with his mother. (4. 18. H)

1.4 Philosophy of Mosim and Salim

The Korean eco-philosophy of ‘Mosim’, means place someone or something with respect, and ‘Salim’, means care the all beings, reveal children’s merits. Mosim tends to be a child-centered view point; at the same time, children are respected as part of the whole web of life and they also have to respect other lives and their uniqueness. The fact is that life itself must be respected and this Mosim follows Salim.

EECE teachers said that almost all children with special needs were more doted on than other children. Since those children greeted teachers warmly and friendly, teachers regarded their special needs as a strength. When teachers practice Mosim and Salim philosophy in this way, children could express their individual characteristics by virtue of the permissive atmosphere of their school.

Gyun, nicknamed as Dr. Greeting because of his affectionate greetings… He often hugged and was more affectionate to teachers… And he frequently shouted with joy and ran through the playground, but he was not noticeable and was not regarded as a problem child. (4. 18. H)
Min had a remarkable memory and learned songs and dances easily. When the teacher did not remember the dance move and the song lyrics, he became a peers’ model… And Min often tried to help Chai who needs more special care than him. Whenever the teachers witnessed him helping his friend eating food and packing bags, they were very impressed. (4. 14. M)

Hyun’s parents said that the Principle of the former kindergarten asked that he leave their school and be checked for a developmental disability. But in this school, teachers encourage individual activity with the children’s interests rather than the teacher’s intention. Thus children seem to show their originality… Hyun preferred his own unique observations on the natural objects and explained them fully. I had the impression he is very smart on all such occasions. (4. 11. Y)

In Y’s case, her opinion suggests that the concept of intelligence can differ from community to community for members that apparently use the same concept.

2. The challenges for practicing inclusive education

2.1 Challenges: Prejudice and fear of teachers

Teachers commonly said that one of the most important attitudes of a teacher was not to prejudice against children with special needs because teachers have a strong influence on the peers of the children. All teachers said that in the beginning they worried about caring for the children with special needs and had prejudices about them; however, teachers have changed their attitudes after meeting the children in person. Teachers confessed that there are more children who need constant attention due to frequent fights and crying than children with special needs.
When my Principal asked me if I minded being in charge of children with special needs, I replied it had been fine with me… I have a child who really makes it hard to deal with. Rather, a child with special needs was a better child with special good points… The latter change the former positively. After inclusion, I have seen children took care of the child with special needs and younger children… It seemed that they exerted a favorable influence on each other. (4. 7. M)

At first, I was afraid to care for the children with special needs. But after I had first hand experience in caring them, I found they had more good points than others and they were not much different from a managing point of view. Well, then, my prejudice against the children with special needs disappeared… the children, who were alone in my class because of their negative traits, preferred caring for Gyun and exercised leadership. I was very proud of them. (4. 7. H)

Also, teachers commonly reported that their sensitivity is required for the needs of children. They found that as they became more experienced in these situations their sensitivity also developed. For instance, H signed up for the special education evening course and has been certified. She said her experience in the course was very useful in her understanding of the children's characters. Another teacher mentioned that:

At first, I did not know how to behave and what they wanted… I would come to understand what they wanted gradually, and could deal with that quickly. (4. 7. K)

There were differences among teachers in the skills they emphasized they needed apart from lack of prejudice and sensitivity. For example, contact with the child was stressed by K, following social rules by M, encouraging the child's strength by Y, understanding of the child and teacher’s sincerity by H. K usually took care of the children with RAD or autism, M's children were just before elementary enrollment, Y's student preferred to observe natural objects and she thought much of it, and H tried to
understand her student for 3 years. These differences seemed to be affected by the different characteristics of the particular special needs children, of the teachers and of the EECE’s.

2.2 Practice: Meet the needs of children

Family needs vary with the children’s disabilities and ages. K, caring for most of the children showing symptoms of autism, insisted that social relationship was a top priority to them. M who took care of preschool (5-year-old) children was asked by the parents to prepare children for attending elementary school. However, there were no teachers apart from H who had tried to access systemic education for children with special needs. Here are the challenges H explained:

Sue and Sung who had been in a state of parental neglect are RAD boys and exhibit symptoms resembling autism… In Dong’s case, their parents have appealed to me to improve their son’s peer relationships. (4. 7. K)

Min has been nonsocial and sometimes has been presenting the hand motions of autism. His parents worried about Min’s peer relationships and also sitting still at school because Min will go to elementary school soon. (4. 7. M)

Gyun’s mother said, “Please, scold my son for his noisiness”… and she wanted her son to be able to write and color. (4. 7. H)

Parents considered the social adjustment of their child to be of the highest importance, and especially expected them to acquire the skills to be prepared for advanced school. However, teachers had difficulty meeting the needs of parents. Teachers argued that they had to understand each individual’s developmental characteristics and to suggest the appropriate activity and environment for those characters. To do so, they insisted
on the need for systematic supports for institutions and professionals i.e. special education teachers.

**Conclusion: Future of EECE for inclusion education**

Korean Inclusive education has begun on the basis that children have the right not to be discriminated against for different needs; therefore, the most urgent condition for the introduction of inclusive education must be to create the environment that respects and embraces diversity. However, it is hard to deny that the current Korean early childhood education emphasis is on satisfying parents’ excessive expectation of their children’s learning achievement. Hence, the very basic condition of inclusive education has been frightening. The practical points of the EECE could show an alternative ways of how and what inclusive education ought to be.

To do this, teachers insist that there should be more support in the form of human resources and environmental improvement for the wider practice. Teachers want more professional help with full information, communication among their community members and others, and additional teaching assistants, especially, special education teachers. Inclusive education in EECE would be much improved when the suggestions mentioned above are reflected.

The program improvement for children with special needs in the EECE will be carried out in further research. We hope this study will contribute to find out the ways in which to put into practice Korean inclusive education by understanding teachers’ experiences in inclusive education in the EECE institutes.
REFERENCES


