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Identifying Autism: Addressing Stigma Against Special Needs Students in Asia and America

Students all across the globe with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) face discrimination and alienation from their peers. In Asia, several countries place too much emphasis on being one entity or “one blood” rather than celebrating individuality and diversity (Ostendorf and Choi). In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires schools to provide for each special needs student. The cultural stigma against people with mental illnesses is a large barrier for many children from getting diagnosed with autism. While it is nearly impossible to change the minds of an entire nation, the level of stigma that was once existed in the US has decreased through awareness and advocacy. In Asia, many parents deny that their children has a mental illness to avoid judgement and hate from others (Kayama and Haight). This discrimination comes from the belief that individuals with mental illnesses are useless, stupid, or insignificant (Sarris). As a result, students with autism in Asia lack a proper learning environment. IDEA should be implemented in Asian countries because it is successful in the US, it would dispel stigma by raising awareness, encourage international implementation of special education programs, and it would increase opportunities for students’ brighter futures.

To commence, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) helps student in the United States receive help for their needs. Since the 1960s, the definition of autism has broadened to include a spectrum of behaviors from hand-flapping to body-rocking. Sometimes, autism is not noticeable (Assouline). Various signals make it more difficult to diagnose a

student. IDEA has accommodated to each student's needs based on their disability, mental illness, or specific behaviors. Once the child is identified as eligible for the Individualized Education Programs (IEP), he or she has a specialized plan for his or her need. The purpose of the plan is to increase student participation, involvement in both the general classroom, and outside of the classroom with their peers (Huefner).

The timing of the legislation in different countries also indicates the progressiveness of some countries over others. IDEA was first introduced as public law 94-142 in 1975 in the U.S. (US Department of Education). Decades later, special education in Japanese public school were introduced in 2007 (Kayama and Haight). The United States saw special education services for disabled students as a higher priority early on compared to Japan.

In addition, formulating an IEP begins with identification of ASD or other mental illnesses, then conferences between parents and teachers are held (US Congress GAO). The U.S. pushes for earlier identification of autism because children who are diagnosed later are more susceptible to developmental issues. Biomarkers are a measurable indicator of a disease or another physiological mental state. Usually, biomarkers are tracked through the patient's DNA. However, doctors cannot rely on a single biomarker for autism because there is no clear cause of the disorder. Ami Klin, an autism researcher and professor, developed methods for tracking autism through someone's eyes. An infant's eye contact is tracked as he or she watches a video of a woman singing the "Itsy Bitsy Spider". A baby who will develop autism is unfocused on one object in the video (Chung).

Once autism is detected, the child is evaluated to assess different aspects of the disability (Brian). A group of professionals and the parents decide if the student is eligible for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its services ("A Guide to the

Individualized Education Program”). Children who are qualified for special education must meet three requirements: they have a disability, their disability adversely affects academic performance, and their needs cannot be satisfied in general education classes alone (OSPI). From then on, an IEP meeting is scheduled to write the specialized plan and the school must provide the services indicated by the final IEP (Assouline). In the student’s team, the parent determines most of what the IEP is because they know their children the best (“A Guide to the Individualized Education Program”). The IEPs track student’s current performance, annual goals, participation with peers, test taking, etc (Assouline). Any progress is recorded and the plan is reviewed; additionally, the child is re-evaluated (US Congress GAO).

However, there is stronger stigma against individuals with mental illnesses in Asian countries. Parents in Japan avoid diagnosing their children with any kind of mental illness (Sarris). In a study with three students with a type of mental illness or learning disability; one of the students is named Yusuke. Yusuke’s father denied that he had a learning disability (Kayama and Haight). In Japan, there are only a few clinics that specialize in autism and there is no active autism community (Umagami). This suggests that mental illness is not addressed enough for individuals who have autism to feel safe and open about their needs. This feeling also negatively impacts the child’s family. A mother in Japan describes the stigma attached to autism: “If there is an incident, we often hear [the media] say something like ‘the darkness of *kokoro*’ (heart and mind) with autism” (Sarris). In addition, South Korea’s autism rate is one of the highest but only 1/3 of students with autism are diagnosed (Sarris). *Danil minjok* is Korean for “one blood;” this phrase comes from the idea that unity is preferable to diversity (Ostendorf and Choi). Extreme unity leads to conformity, which prevents autistic individuals from getting help. Some Asian American parents believe their child’s mental illness stems from some supernatural influences or

sins committed by the child's parents or ancestors (Wang and West). This suggests that the child's mental illness or disability is a curse, causing many parents to avoid special education for their children. On a darker note, Korea's suicide rate has remained the highest among the Organization for Economic Co-Operation (OECD) nations for 10 consecutive years; 29.1 people out of every 100,000 have committed suicide. Of those who had attempted suicide, 75.3 % experienced more than one mental disorder (Roh et. al). People with autism do not feel safe or have a stable support system and community.

Mothers in Palestinian territories reported they were often blamed for their child's disability and often suffered shame and distress (Dababnah). A Palestinian mother says some people tell her to "get rid" of her child because his illness is "a waste of money" (Sarris). People with mental illnesses in the West Bank are face stigma and conflict through separation from their families and other pressures of life in the occupied Palestinian territory (Swan). In Palestinian territory, there is a lack of effective mental health research, and mental health services are underdeveloped (Marie et. al). Although Asia does have higher levels of stigma than in America, the data collected from the primary research revealed evidence of stigma present in the United States even with IDEA. The truth is, stigma is everywhere. Although students up to high school are supported by special education programs, it is difficult for students beyond high school, particularly those who are nonverbal. These students are trapped within a system that denies them acceptance from their first job interview simply because they lack the tools that were handed to them as a child. Society is blind to the epidemic of discrimination towards these individuals.

Finally, strict legislation, followed by awareness and advocacy for individuals with a mental illness, will allow more students to receive special needs. The Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act has broadened autism to include a spectrum of different behaviors, allowing more students to have access to special needs programs at a younger age (Chung). High risk children who are diagnosed later typically experience more social issues such as: orienting to name, responding to facial emotions, eye contact, transitions, reciprocal social smiling, reactivity, social interest and affect, motor control, emotional and social behaviors (Brian). Unfortunately, while most caregivers are familiar with core impairments of students with autism, most are not informed about the more complex and severe symptoms like eating difficulties and nonfunctional play. However, after these caregivers were given informational sessions, they improved in teaching their students good social skills (Brian). Because of its positive effects, federal agencies in the United States are pushing for early identification of autism and intervention services for young children with autism (US Congress GAO).

For instance, in Minnesota, the number of children diagnosed with ASD has risen dramatically since the 1960s because IDEA has defined autism in a broader sense and teachers are more educated on how to identify autism (Chung). This shows that IDEA allows more students to get their needs in schools. Parents and teachers are able to better understand the child's mental illness and how to handle it at home and classroom environment. Once parents of autistic students learned to be more accepting and supportive of their children and the autistic community and began to spread awareness and advocacy (Kayama and Haight).

As previously mentioned, some Asian countries have stronger stigmatization towards special behaviors from individuals with autism. First-generation Chinese American parents, educated in the United States, see disability with a more positive attitude. They accept the child's disability with a hopeful attitude, because of the rich resources and legal protections of the special education system in the United States (Wang and West). This implies that if a parent is

more exposed to special education programs in the United States or other countries with early implementation of special education legislation, he or she will be more supportive of their child's disability/mental illness because the laws create more opportunities for the child's success.

Therefore, parents who are more educated about special education systems are more likely to enroll their children in special education programs (Ostendorf and Choi). In South Korea, 17.3% of multicultural families had at least one child with a disability enrolled in public schools compared to 5.61% of Korean-born families (Ostendorf and Choi).

In a case study of special education in Japan, one of the interviewees was the mother of Yusuke, who reported that she learned to accept and take pride in her son instead of having *henken* after she learned that her son had a learning disability (Kayama and Haight). *Henken* means prejudice or narrow view. It is common towards individuals with autism or other mental illness. Parents experience *henken* because they are blamed for their child's mental illness (Sarris).

In addition, awareness is not enough to dispel stigma against autism; there must first be a law or laws that enforce schools to give special education services to disabled children. After IDEA was enforced, more children with autism in Minnesota were diagnosed (Chung). Because the law protects students with a mental illness, they feel more protected to receive special education. More people are concerned with mental health because there are laws promoting it. The US federal government has consistent reports on autism rates in the country and they are trying to promote earlier intervention for individuals with autism (US Congress GAO). There is still stigma against mental illness in the US; however, it has improved immensely from the past. From 2006 through 2015, the percentage of the resident population of infants and toddlers birth through age 2 served under IDEA, Part C, increased from 2.5 percent to 3 percent (US

Department of Education). The increase of diagnosed, younger autistic individuals suggests that IDEA is effective in early identification, which lowers the risk of developmental issues.

Ultimately, IDEA should be implemented in Asia because it increased identification in the US, it promotes awareness and advocacy, it could lead to the international implementation of special education programs, and it would increase opportunities for autistic students heading towards colleges and career paths. It is absolutely necessary for students with autism to be surrounded by a school environment which encourages academic achievement and equality. With IDEA, students in Asia will be free to express themselves. Without judgement from their peers and parents, these children will be able to gain a new perspective on their mental illness as a strength rather than a weakness.

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