

Research Proposal  
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**Identifying Autism: Addressing Stigma Against Special Needs Students in Foreign  
Countries**

**Overview of Research**

My topic focuses on the special education programs in South Korea and Japan and the cultural stigma that exists in these countries. In the United States, students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have an Individualized Education Plan that is tailored to their needs and behaviors. Whereas, parents in many other countries may ignore their child's need for these plans because they are afraid of being judged by others. In this research project, I will investigate the stigma behind special education services and the cause of higher autism rates. I will apply this knowledge into possible proposals for an improved special education system in other countries that dispel the assumption that mental illness is synonymous with useless.

**Background and History of the Issue**

Autism was first identified in 1943 by Leo Kanner, an American psychiatrist. This discovery dramatically changed the life of Eustacia Cutler, an advocate and author for her autistic child in the 1950s. During her time, mental illnesses were misunderstood as a hindrance to society. Mr. Cutler wanted to send his daughter away to an asylum because he believed her unusual behavior was "retarded" or "insane". Until the 1960s, scientists believed that poor parenting was the primary cause of autism. Since then, research on the causes of autism have changed dramatically.

Now, people are beginning to understand the causes of autism and the

importance of education for students with mental illnesses. In 1975, public law 94-142 enforced legislation for teachers and parents to come together to formulate a plan of each child's own needs. Currently known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the United States redefined autism to include a spectrum of behaviors. Japan studied IDEA in the 1980s, yet schools did not implement special education programs until 2007. In a 2011 South Korean study, Drs. Young Shin Kim and Roy R. Grinker found the autism rate to be 2.6 %, the highest reported in any country; however, two-thirds of children are undiagnosed. This shocking statistic comes from the cultural stigma against individuals with mental illnesses. Outside of East Asia, parents in Great Britain are also fearful of how others will think of them and their children. British researchers, Ginny Russell and Brahm Norwich, conducted a study on the parents of children with autism. They found that parents admitted their child may have ASD, but refused to label their children as "different" from other children.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Question and Hypothesis**

- How can teaching methods under new policies be improved to implement a structured system of education (like the IDEA Act for students in the United States) in foreign countries with stigma against individuals with autism?
- Individualized Education Plans in foreign countries will improve students' chances for a higher education and better job opportunities over other education systems for student with autism.

### **Basis of Hypothesis**

I focused my research on foreign countries because America already has effective policies for special education in place. As mentioned in the background, Japanese public schools included

special education programs over three decades after the United States created public law 94-192 (IDEA). Even with special needs, several countries, particularly in Asia, students remain undiagnosed because their parents are afraid to label their child with a mental illness and alienate him or her from their peers. This issue led me to the question of how students should receive the help they need without feeling isolated from the cultural stigma against mental illnesses.

### **Research Design**

I will be conducting causal-comparative research by observing how a classroom operates and what teaching methods teachers use when teaching to students with autism. I will also be conducting interviews with teachers and special educators to ask questions about how they manage a classroom while also providing for the special needs of a student with a mental illness. I will gain knowledge about the challenges of teaching a child with ASD to provide insight about how much more difficult teaching autistic children is in a country with negative assumptions on autism. From this information, I will learn how to dispel cultural stigma. My research will include qualitative research from scholarly articles, case studies, and interviews.

### **Operational Definitions**

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): A condition that includes a wide spectrum of behaviors including inability to socialize, sensitivity to sounds, and body rocking or hand flapping. Sometimes, it is completely invisible.
- Individualized Education Act (IDEA): Legislation for schools to recognize students for Individualized Education Plans (IEP) and form specialized plans for each student in meeting between the parent and teacher.

- Individualized Education Plans (IEP): Plans that help students get their needs mostly academically in schools.
- Cultural Stigma: The assumption of a group of people, such as an entire nation, that people with mental illnesses are dishonorable or useless.

### **Product Overview**

I plan on creating a final presentation to share with policymakers, special educator team members, and teachers in order to promote laws to bring attention to the stigma that autistic students face. The goal of the final presentation is to raise awareness for the issues that autistic individuals face, including after graduating from college. There is not enough attention placed on the programs that support students with disabilities in pursuing their dream careers. Especially if he or she is nonverbal, it is extremely difficult for them to be employed. This presentation is meant to spread this data to more people in order to gain advocates.

### **Logistical Considerations**

It would be more difficult to share this presentation to a policymaker, but it could more easily be shared with the Howard High School Special Education Team. Also, since the topic itself includes different countries, I will keep it organized with good transitions between South Korea, Japan, and the United States.