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A study of occupational therapy intervention in regular classrooms of elementary schools in Japan

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Introduction: In Japan, very few occupational therapists (OTs) work at special schools and boards of education. Those OTs mainly see children with physical handicap and not with "mild" developmental disabilities who generally enroll in regular schools. In 2006, the Japanese School Education Law was revised, and students who have special needs and enrolling in regular classes have to be supported by an individualized program collaborating with professionals. By this Law, OTs have obtained the chance to work in regular classes as a specialist. However for OTs who work in hospital settings, working in regular school is still quite challenging. Only volunteer OTs or University-employed OTs are able to work in regular schools.

Objectives and Methods: The purpose of this study was to investigate how pioneer OTs intervene in regular classes of elementary school, and to propose methods of school-based occupational therapy in regular classes. Ten OTs who have experience of working in regular classes were interviewed by the author. They were asked about the content and focus of their intervention.

Results: The results showed that all of them provided services in a natural classroom setting, and intervened with the teacher. They also provided mainly indirect services; intervening in students' environments and tasks. Four features of school-based OT were identified: possession of specialized knowledge - medical and developmental; possession of clinical experience, using indirect intervention methods, intervening in the environment around the student and their occupation; and focusing on the total life of the student. Four factors emerged for successful intervention; capability of adequate evaluation, assisting the teacher to understand the student's needs, respecting the teacher's policy, and suggesting strategies which teachers can implement easily. But some of them reported that the effectiveness of intervention was not clear because of the limited number of school visits.

Conclusion and Contribution to Practice: These results suggest that it is necessary for school-based OTs to collaborate with teachers and provide services in a natural education setting. And the development of recommendations is necessary to build up systems whereby OTs are able to work in school settings on a regular basis.