The transformations of Special Schools for the Blind in times of inclusion: A French-Japanese perspective

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Abstract: Today's world is progressively shifting to inclusive education. Yet, special schools have not disappeared. Neither did they remain unchanged. This paper is aimed at exploring the evolution of special schools in times of inclusion, through a French-Japanese comparison. It focuses on the case of "special schools for the Blind", that were the historical cornerstone of special education. Arguing that those schools are undergoing deep transformations due to the general shift from an approach of disability based on categories of impairment (following the "medical model") to an approach based on individual needs, it analyzes the changes occurring in French and Japanese schools through the lens of special teachers' work. Using ethnographic data collected in both countries, it shows that the skills used by teachers in their daily work evolve: specific teaching techniques adapted to visual impairment are becoming less central in teachers' practices, while more and more relational know-how is necessary to conduct individualized teaching in a classroom context where this becomes increasingly difficult.

Keywords: special education, special schools, disability, visual impairment, France, Japan, comparison

1. Introduction

In Japan, inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream schools has significantly progressed over the last decades, especially after the reform of "special support education" that took place in 2006. However, MEXT[1]'s statistics reveal mixed results of the integration policy, with large variations between the different categories of impairments (MEXT, 2016). In the case of visual impairment, although mainstream schooling is developing, most students remain enrolled in special schools, especially in junior high and high school levels. In France, on the opposite, visually impaired students have a high rate of mainstream schooling and individual inclusion in a mainstream class is now the most frequent situation.

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[1] Ministry of Education, Sports, Culture and Technology

The schooling system for visually impaired children[2] is based on the same principles in both countries: after being identified as "disabled", the child can be streamed either towards a special school or towards an ordinary school close to his/her home (to attend either a special class or an ordinary one). In Japan, the choice of orientation is made by the Local Education Committee after consulting all stakeholders while, in France, the decision comes down to families.

Table 1 compares the current state of school enrollment of visually impaired students in both countries (primary and junior high school levels) in 2011 (latest data available for France)[3]:

	Ordinary school		Special school	Total
	Ordinary class	Special class		
Japan	141	322	1760	2223
	(6,3 %)	*(14,5%)*	*(79,2%)*	*(100%)*
France	2145	281	840	3266
	(65,7%)	*(8,6%)*	*(25,7%)*	*(100%)*

Table 1:

Number of visually impaired students by schooling structure

We can observe an inverse repartition of headcounts between both countries, with most students enrolled in mainstream schools in France / in special schools in Japan. Because of this difference, the academic literature is paying much more attention to Special Schools for visually impaired students in Japan than in France.

This literature, mainly pertaining to the field of education sciences, assesses the transformations that have been affecting special schools for the last thirty years, and reveals a clear trend: in parallel to the development of school inclusion (mainly for children with the fewest difficulties), we can observe an evolution of the profiles of students enrolled in special schools, towards an increasing proportion of students with more and more diversified impairments and more and more severe difficulties (Blanc, 2011: p.12; Kōseirōdōshō, 2006: p.3).

As a result, in schools that have been specializing in visual impairment, visual disability is no longer the core of educational actions; it appears rather as a source of educational needs among others that may be unrelated (learning difficulties, behavioral disorders, mental disability, hearing or physical

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[2] Let us mention that visual impairment is defined and diagnosed following the same medical criteria in both countries

[3] Sources: for France, BLANC P. (2011) and for Japan, MEXT (2011)

impairment, autism, chronic illness…). Therefore, just like ordinary schools, special schools too must adapt to catering for educational needs for which they did not originally have specialized skills and means. At the same time, they have to rethink their functioning so as to work hand in hand with mainstream schools, notably by developing special structures aimed at providing the latter with special support for disabled students' inclusion.

In France, even though special schools for the Blind have not disappeared, their situation is hardly analyzed[4]. This can be explained both by the dramatic decrease in the proportion of visually impaired children enrolled into special schools since the beginning of inclusive education policies (in the case of visual impairment, an actual "transfer" of students from special to ordinary schools has taken place) and by the relative rarity of visual impairment as compared to other categories of impairments. Yet, the case of these schools strikingly illustrates the evolution of special schools in parallel to the development of mainstream schooling. A French-Japanese comparison on the subject thus sheds light on some major issues concerning the future of special schools in an inclusion-oriented world.

How do special schools for visually impaired students evolve, following the shift to inclusive education?

In this paper, I present the results of my PhD research, conducted in France and Japan between 2011 and 2015. In France, I have worked for one year as a teaching assistant in a school, using the methodology of participant observation. In Japan, I could not be hired under the same conditions and I have conducted non-participant observations and interviewed teachers in six schools.

During this research, the issue of teachers' skills has appeared as central. I analyze here the transformations of special schools through the lens of teachers' work, focusing on the (re)construction of teachers' professional skills. I show that the evolution of special teachers' skills can be interpreted as embodying the shift from a "specialized" approach of disability to a one that can be called, by contrast, "generalist".

2. Education in times of inclusion: towards a "generalist" approach of disability

The field of education for children with disabilities is now facing dramatic changes resulting from a more general evolution in the social treatment of disability.

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[4] For example, in the special issue of La Nouvelle Revue de l'Adaptation et de la Scolarisation (the main French academic journal on special needs education) focusing on visually impaired students, in March 2007, only one short paper (Garapon, 2007) tackles the issue of special schools.

The recent history of disability policies has followed a similar pattern in France and in Japan: various types of "impairments" (blindness, limb loss…) have been subject to differentiated social treatment for centuries, but in the second half of the 20th century, a new approach has emerged, gathering former "invalidities" and "infirmities" as well as a broader set of situations, and unifying them under the general concept of "disability" (in French, *handicap* / in Japanese, *shōgai*).

This concept encompasses various and variable situations. In France, the first law meant for all "disabled people", the Law of Orientation of June 30th, 1975, did not provide any definition of disability and made local committees responsible for deciding, case by case, who was recognized or not as a "disabled person" (and for evaluating the degree of disability of each individual).

The law of February 11th, 2005, reforming the general framework of disability policies, gave the first legal definition of disability:

"*In the sense of this law, can be called "disability" any limitation of activity or restriction of participation to social life suffered by a person in his/her environment because of a substantial alteration, lasting or permanent, of one or several physical, sensorial, mental, cognitive or psychical functions, of a multi-disability or an incapacitating health disorder*[5]"

In Japan, disability policies launched after 1945 have been for several decades differentiated by type of impairment, with separated laws like the Law on Social Welfare for People with Physical Impairments (1949) or the Law on Social Welfare for People with Mental Disability (1960). They were united for the first time under the same framework in 1993 by the Fundamental Law on Social Welfare for Disabled People (which is a revision of the Law on Social Welfare for People with Physical Impairment, with an extended scope). This legal frame was deeply transformed by the Law on Support to Disabled People's autonomy in 2005, anchored in the general neoliberal reform of the Japanese Welfare State. As this law was harshly criticized, it was in turn abrogated and, following Japan's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2014, major legal changes took place. The Law to Eliminate Disability-based Discrimination defines disability as follows:

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5 Loi du 11 février 2005, « pour l'égalité des droits et des chances, la participation et la citoyenneté des personnes handicapées » (loi n° 2005-102, JO n° 36 – February 12th 2005 p.2353)

"*People with disability are (defined as) people who have physical impairment, mental disability, psychic disorders (including developmental disorders) or other disorders affecting their body or mind, and who are continuously facing substantial limits in their daily life or social life, due to their impairment or to social barriers*"[6]

Therefore, we can observe in both countries a trend towards the extension of the scope of disability policies. This is part of a broader change in the conceptualization of disability promoted jointly by activists, international organizations and researchers in the field of *disability studies*: the shift from a medical to a social model of disability (Oliver, 1990; Ishikawa and Nagase, 1999). Even though, recently, the social model of disability is being criticized too (Shakespeare, 2013: p.217), this conceptual change has been key to promote disabled people's empowerment and social participation. In the social model, the disabled person is no longer defined as radically different from other people, but as a person facing difficulties and needing support in some daily life activities. The reference to a medical category of impairment is no longer central and the definition of disability gives way to a more fluid approach, in which individuals and situations may vary regardless of the usual categories (mental disability, hearing impairment, visual impairment…). As a result, the "specialized" discourse on disability (in which the disabled person him/herself is "special" and needs a special treatment performed by experts of his/her impairment) is progressively replaced by a discourse that can be called, by contrast, "generalist", in which the disabled person is first and foremost a person, who may in some situations need individualized support that can be different from one person to another even though they have the same type of impairment, or even be similar between people with distinct types of disabilities.

This general trend appears particularly clearly in the field of education, with the emergence of the notion of "special educational needs" (Warnock, 1978), which is the keyword of inclusive education, as opposed to special education. Reforms based on this notion have taken place worldwide in the last decade. In France and in Japan, respectively in 2005 and 2006, education systems have evolved, less with the aim of creating new structures (support structures for integrative education already existed since the 1980's) than with that of generalizing existing ones so as to offer to all children the possibility to attend ordinary schools. In fact, the number of children with disabilities attending an ordinary school has skyrocketed in the last years: +40% in France between 2004 and 2010 (Blanc, 2011), +130% in Japan between 2007 and 2012 (MEXT's statistics). However, those numbers conceal various situations (especially differences between categories of impairments), and in particular the creation of new

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[6] Law to Stop Disability-based Discrimination, paragraph 2, [Online] http://www8.cao.go.jp/shougai/suishin/law_h25-65.html

categories like developmental disorders, a category that accounts for most of the increase in the total number of children diagnosed as "disabled". This phenomenon cannot be interpreted as a "transfer" of students from special to ordinary schools, but rather pertains to the medicalization of school difficulties (Morel, 2014; Kimura, 2015).

This research focuses on the case of visual disability, a category that exists since the beginning of Welfare States and whose definition has been subject to no significant evolution in the last decades. It tackles a phenomenon that tends to be hidden when considering the evolution of education for disabled children at large, but reveals some underlying aspects of the shift to inclusive education. Indeed, even though special schools for the Blind did not disappear, they did not remain unchanged either: they were affected in some ways by the development of inclusive education. Firstly, they have to cooperate more with ordinary schools by becoming resource centers supporting inclusive education[7]. Secondly, the profile of their students is changing: as students with the fewest difficulties have now the possibility to attend ordinary schools, an increasing proportion of special school students have multiple disabilities or other difficulties like learning difficulties, in addition to visual impairment[8]. These are the main issues that "specialized" schools face in a world oriented towards "generalism". As a result, in practice, specialized professionals have to adapt to changing working conditions.

Table 2 summarizes the main transformations[9] that have occurred in special schools for the Blind since the 1990's in France and Japan, on three levels: lesson content, teaching methods, class management. It reveals that, although France and Japanese schools were in very similar situations in the 1990's, they have now adopted different strategies to face common challenges.

	1990's		2010's	
	France	Japan	France	Japan
Students' profiles	Mostly children with no other difficulties than visual impairment		Diversification of impairments: strong increase in the proportion of children with other impairments in addition to blindness or low vision	
			All students gathered in the same classes	Distinction between *tan'itsu* ("single impairment") and *chōfuku* ("multiple disabilities") classes.

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[7] Especially in Japan where this has officially become one of their missions

[8] Let us mention that, in Japan, special schools are no longer officially defined as "schools for the Blind" or "schools for the Deaf"…All of them are category-free "special support schools"

[9] This analysis was based video materials showing special school classes in the 1990's and my own in-class observations in the 2010's)

Lesson content	Same program as in ordinary schools, with teaching methods adapted to visual impairment	Progressive fall behind ordinary curriculum and adaptation of contents to students' real difficulties	Ordinary curriculum for *tan'itsu* classes ; completely individualized content for *chōfuku* classes
Teaching methods	Traditional teaching methods adapted to visual impairment, developed in schools for the Blind	Progressive shift from classical methods to more and more individualized work	Work with classical methods in *tan'itsu* classes ; use of teaching methods adapted to other disabilities and strong indiviualization of work in *chōfuku* classes
Class management	No structural difficulties: class homogeneity and small headcounts favours individualized teaching	Difficulties in managing increasingly heterogeneous groups	In both classes, situations verging on "private lessons"

Tableau 2:

French-Japanese comparison of the evolution of schools for the Blind (1990-2010)

In Japan, the evolution of special schools and the issue of *chōfukuka* (that is, the increase in the proportion of students with multiple or severe impairments) are analyzed and conceptualized. On the opposite, in France, even though this problem is mentioned as a side issue in official reports on the development of inclusive education (Blanc, 2011, p.12), it is paid little attention in academic literature. Therefore, by conducting a French-Japanese comparative research on the subject, I aimed at contributing to a French-Japanese dialogue combining data and sociological knowledge created in both countries.

3. Research methodology

This research focuses on French and Japanese special schools for the Blind. Hence it is based on the assumption that these schools are comparable between both countries.

On the administrative level, some major differences do appear. In Japan, special schools are managed by the MEXT in a way that is roughly similar to ordinary schools and employ teachers who are local government officers. Quite on the contrary, French special schools have historically been separated from ordinary ones and thus are supervised by the Ministry of Health rather than the Ministry of Education. Most of them are private schools managed by associations, employing either teachers with private law contracts (who are not civil servants) or teachers from the Ministry of Education on provisional assignment.

However, despite those differences, the content of teachers' work is quite similar in France and Japan and daily life in special schools raises the same questions.

I chose to focus this research on special schools for the Blind firstly because of my previous knowledge of visual impairment and related educational techniques (this knowledge enabled me to get hired in a French school) and secondly because visual impairment has a long tradition of special schooling and specialized care, using a variety of specific educational techniques (similar in France and Japan): therefore, it appears as a good pointer of the issues related to the shift to a generalist approach of disability.

I conducted a qualitative survey based on in-school observations and interviews with teachers and other professionals[10] working in special schools.

In France, I have observed a special school located in Paris during school year 2012-2013: I was hired as the assistant of a visually impaired teacher. I worked there two days a week, mostly with two classes: 13-15 year old students and 15-18 year old students, for French and oral communication lessons. In addition to this, I had the opportunity to observe all the other classes in various activities in and outside the school, and to interview the other teachers and professionals. Beforehand, I had conducted an exploratory survey combining interviews and observations in ten ordinary and special schools.

In Japan, I conducted this research thanks to a fellowship granted by the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science. I stayed in Hiroshima University for almost one year and, although I could not be hired under the same conditions as in France, I had the opportunity to visit about 20 schools, ordinary or specialized in all categories of impairments. As for schools for the Blind, which are the specific subject of this paper, I observed six schools in various areas, each for up to seven days. I tried to compensate the short length of observations by interviewing more teachers than in France (40 people in total). In addition to in-class observations and interviews, I took part in various events typical of the Japanese school year (school festivals, research days, graduation ceremonies), in schools for the Blind and other types of schools.

Indeed, during this research focusing on a tiny part of the educational system, I paid much attention to gaining a broader view of the general context of education for disabled children in both countries, so as to understand the background of which the situations I observed in special schools was part. I

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[10] In Japan, most people working in special schools are "teachers" but, in France, special schools employ people with many different statuses, "teacher" being only one of them. The "teacher" status is in principle reserved to people conducting activities related to academic curriculum, while "educators" are in charge of other activities like mobility training, training in daily-life activities or play-based activities. There are significant differences in qualifications and salary between both statuses.

conceived this research as a way to analyze to what extent phenomena taking place in special schools for the Blind reveal issues at stake in the educational system at large.

4. Special school teachers: experts with evolving skills

In special schools, the shift to a generalist approach of disability results in transformations on several levels: in the very purpose of "special education", in the organization of schools and in the daily work of special school professionals. Special teachers[11] are key actors in these transformations: their work is supposedly based on specialized skills and is thus deeply impacted by the emergence of the generalist approach of disability.

Using the theoretical background of work sociology, I analyze these transformations which, even though taking somehow different forms in France and Japan, follow some similar patterns:

- The official framework of special teachers' work is changing: qualifications required from aspiring special school teachers evolve, and so is the training system designed for them. This evolution embraces the shift from a focus on specialized skills (specific to visual impairment) to a focus on generalist skills (that is, especially relational skills).

- In practice, the content of special teachers' work is changing too, as daily life in special schools for the Blind is involving less and less use of educational techniques specific to visually impairment, while more and more pressure in put one teachers' relational skills in class management and individualized pedagogy.

In the following sections, I will analyze how, and with what kind of consequences, these phenomena appear in French and Japanese schools.

4.1 Special teachers' work: an evolving official framework

There is a clear similarity between France and Japan in special school teachers' work content, a similarity due to the necessity to meet visually impaired students' needs, which are analyzed in the same way in both countries.

This work can be described as pursuing two goals:

- An "academic" goal: transmitting knowledge to visually impaired children. This knowledge is usually the same as in mainstream curriculum, but it is transmitted through teaching methods adapted to visual impairment.

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[11] In this paper, I use indifferently the terms "special teachers", " special school teacher" and "teachers", always referring to "teachers in special schools for the Blind", who are the subject of this research.

- A goal specific to visual impairment: accompanying children in the development of their autonomy, by supporting them in their learning of techniques compensating for visual impairment in daily life activities.

Special school teachers' work thus includes a technical dimension (the teacher must have a good command a teaching methods specific to visually impaired students) and, at the same time, somehow pertains to *care* work (the teacher must guide the student so as to help him/her to become autonomous, a paradox that many professionals face in the field of *care* work).

However, as special schools shift from a special to a generalist approach of disability, the official framework of teachers' work (in terms of qualifications required to enter this profession) does evolve.

In France, we observe the shift from a closed job market (in which there exists only one way to enter the special teaching profession) to a dual one (in which there are two ways, resulting in two different statuses for teachers). In Japan, changes take place in an open job market (in which virtually any teacher can temporarily become, at some point in his/her career, a special school teacher), but a reform has occurred in the field of special teachers' training. In both cases, skills specific to visual impairment lose their centrality in special school teachers' qualifications: teachers are trained less to become experts of visual impairment than to be able to provide every child with individualized support meeting his/her educational needs.

In France, the profession of "teachers in School for the Blind" has developed as a monopoly, a closed job market reserved to holders of a specific license certifying their expertise in teaching adapted to visual impairment. Yet, today, the conditions for accessing this profession have changed and, even though holding a specific license remains in principle necessary, there exist in fact two competing licenses (the traditional one, delivered by the Ministry of Health, and a more recent one, created by the Ministry of Education). Therefore, "teaching in schools for the Blind" is a dual job market, marked by cooperation difficulties between both Ministries. The contents of both certifications are slightly different: the traditional license from the Ministry of Health remains based on an excellent command of adapted pedagogical techniques and an extended knowledge of visual impairment, while that from the Ministry of Education tends to emphasize more the ability to meet each child's individual needs with a broader range of methods. As the number of new holders of the traditional license is slowly decreasing and special schools hire more and more teachers with the second one (despite administrative difficulties related to their status as civil servants), this evolution shows a clear willingness to shift from a very technical approach of visual impairment to a more generalist one. However, this trend remains somehow ambiguous, as one system is training generalist teachers while the other trains specialists. Teachers' evaluation is by no means as developed in France as in Japan, and in the case of the observed school,

absolutely no formative evaluation was conducted (which means that teachers never received any official feedback from colleagues or hierarchy about their work). Therefore, in spite of the willingness to promote generalism in official texts, little supervision is conducted in schools. One can interpret this discrepancy between theory and practice as a reflection of the ambiguous position of the Ministry of Education regarding special schools, with a recent willingness to develop cooperation but no administrative supervision.

In Japan, even though holding a special license is in principle necessary, in practice it is not the most common case among currently employed special school teachers. This license, reformed in 2007, is clearly based on a generalist approach of disability: whereas there previously existed different licenses specialized in each category of impairment, licenses delivered after the reform are based on a training to at least three types of impairment. Therefore, teachers specialized in visual impairment are in fact teachers who chose this specialization at the same time as two (or sometimes more) others during their training.

Moreover, this evolution takes place in the broader context of school staff management, based on the principle of frequent staff replacement (which implies frequent job rotations for teachers). This system that often results in teachers' going back and forth between special and ordinary schools brings to special schools many teachers with no previous experience/knowledge of this impairment who must be trained on-the-job.

An extensive survey conducted in 2008 by the National Institute of Special Needs Education assessed teachers' skills in schools for the Blind and revealed that the actual level of knowledge specific of visual impairment was low or, at least, not high enough to be called an "expertise" of visual impairment, as table 3 shows.
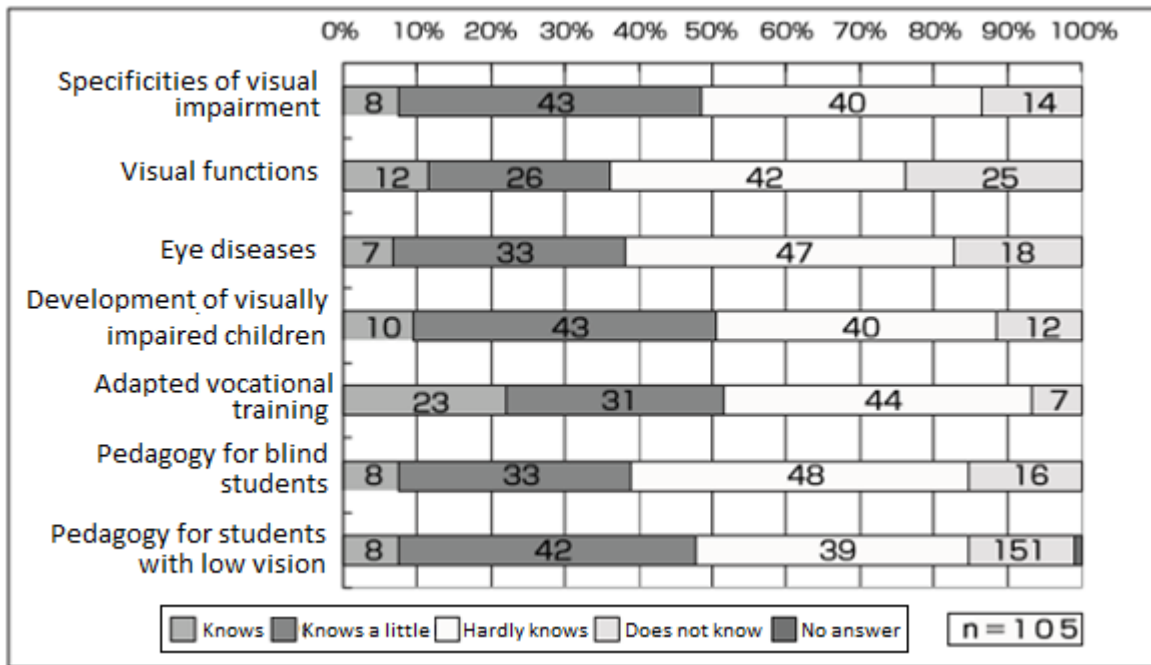
	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

Specificities of visual impairment: 8 | 43 | 40 | 14

Visual functions: 12 | 26 | 42 | 25

Eye diseases: 7 | 33 | 47 | 18

Development of visually impaired children: 10 | 43 | 40 | 12

Adapted vocational training: 23 | 31 | 44 | 7

Pedagogy for blind students: 8 | 33 | 48 | 16

Pedagogy for students with low vision: 8 | 42 | 39 | 151

Legend: ☐ Knows ■ Knows a little ☐ Hardly knows ☐ Does not know ■ No answer   n=105

Table 3:
State of teachers' general knowledge of visual impairment in Japanese schools for the Blinds
(Ouchi, 2008, p.48)

Therefore, in Japan, there is no such thing as a closed job market for expert teachers in schools for the Blind. The access to such jobs is open to virtually any teacher with no specific requirements and most of the time working in a school for the Blind is only a temporary step in a teacher's career. For head teachers, this phenomenon is not only a logical consequence of policies aimed at removing the partitions between categories of impairments/special schools in order to promote inclusive education; it is also seen as an effect of an administrative system failing to take into account the needs of special schools, and it is therefore criticized (Research group on education for visually impaired children, 2009: pp.10-13). However, this evolution is clearly supervised through an evaluation system which is at the same time meant to monitor teachers' performances and to support them through on-the-job training, towards the development of new generalist skills.

In this section, I have shown that, following different modalities, the official framework of special school teachers' work in France and Japan evolve in a way that matches the shift from a expertise-based approach of visual disability to a generalist approach focusing on meeting each student's individual needs.

This raises two questions. Firstly, to what extent is the political/administrative evolution described here visible in facts? Secondly, do official qualifications match actual skills used by teachers in their daily life at work?

4.2 Teachers at work: practicing generalism

This section is aimed at analyzing skills used by special school teachers in their daily routine in class. As the format of this paper does not allow me to write in-depth descriptions, I will present two scenes, one observed in France, the other in Japan, that appear as typical of the daily class life in schools for the Blind in both countries[12].

4.2.1 In France: The geometry class, or individualization in a heterogeneous group

The lesson analyzed here involves a class of 12 to 14 year old students. However, as in all classes in the school, the content of lessons does not necessarily match the ordinary curriculum for students of the same age: here, the lesson is based on the ordinary curriculum for fourth or fifth graders (in primary schools). There usually are eight students in the class but, for the geometry lessons, they are split into two groups (based on their level). While one group is studying geometry with the teacher, the other has an art class with an educator (see note 10), and they exchange their activities after one hour. The group I observed in this case was that with the lowest level. It consists of four students:
- Medhi: a blind boy with no other difficulties
- Julie: a girl with low vision who just has arrived in the school; she has learning difficulties and difficulties to bond with other students
- Mathilde: a girl with low vision and a rare disease involving diction problems and hyperactivity, especially under the shape of sudden and uncontrollable movements
- Yaël: a blind girl with physical disability (she uses a wheelchair or sometimes a medical walker). She has no sense of touch, except with her lips: traditional methods of education for the Blind are therefore not adapted for her. However, she has no difficulties for learning, expression or socialization.

The teacher in this class, Marie-Thérèse, is a woman in her sixties (she will retire at the end of school year) who has been working in the school for more than forty years. She entered the school immediately after graduating from high school, as an intern while taking her special license (following the training system that existed at that time) and was hired afterwards. Education of visually impaired children (that is, young girls, as the school was not mixed at that time) then appeared to her as a calling, in a sense

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[12] More details available in my PhD dissertation: Mithout (2015) (in French).

somehow tinged with religious meaning (until the 1980's, the school was managed by a catholic congregation). She is seen as the "cornerstone" of the school. She clearly makes a point of honour to transmit to her students the same knowledge as in the ordinary curriculum: she particularly insists on grammar and orthograph, by regularly quizzing students on grammar rules and spelling, and her lessons have a very "traditionalist" aspect (yet, indeed, her students do have a very good command of grammar and spelling). Marie-Thérèse thus appears as a specialist of education for the Blind, whose main goal is to teach the ordinary curriculum through methods adapted to visual impairment.

In her classroom, desks are arranged in O-shape and one student is sitting in front of each side of the square with his/her material: a pen and a notebook for students with low vision (plus a personal lamp for Julie), tracing paper and a pen without ink for Medhi (this is the usual material for geometry lessons for blind students: it enables them to draw embossed shapes that they can identify by touch), plastic geometrical shapes for Yaël. Marie-Thérèse is standing and goes from one student to the other to give individualized explanations and advice.

The following scene is an extract from my fieldwork notes:

Marie-Thérèse distribues plastic rectangles. Students must draw their shapes.
They have difficulties because they shake the rectangle when they move the pen around it. Marie-Thérèse is strict with the two girls who can see, she erases their lines when their drawing is wrong, she says "No, you moved, try to make it look pretty." She insists on precision and care. With Medhi, she puts scotch tape under the rectangle so that it moves less. With Yaël, it is different because she cannot draw with a pen. Marie-Thérèse asks her to raise the plastic shape to her lips so that she learns how to identify it.
They all ask for a lot of help. They have troubles in finding by themselves how to place their tools to do what they want. The rectangle moves, or the pen deviates, or the sheet moves, it's hard to find a stable position. They call Marie-Thérèse all at the same time. Cacophony of "Miss! Madam! Come! Can you come? Can you help me?". Of course Marie-Thérèse cannot be everywhere. Every time she helps one of them, the three others start calling for her, they all seem angry at her because she does not come fast enough. She keeps repeating: "Wait, five minutes, I'm helping the others, you're not alone". It is especially difficult for her to work with Yaël who does need a very individualized support. She cannot pay sustained attention to one student without hearing the others expressing their need for help. She looks tired but keeps moving from one to the other and asking each of them to calm down. She does not shout, does not get angry, but she repeats "Wait, I'm helping the others". I try to catch her eyes to see if there is something I can do, but she seems not to want me to interfere with her lesson. Mathilde tries to start a conversation with me; I tell her we will talk during the break.
When they are done with drawing the rectangle, Marie-Thérèse asks them to draw shapes following oral instructions ("please draw a square of side length 10cm"). Before they start, they make oral revisions of some properties of quadrilaterals (right angles, parallel and perpendicular sides…what are the characteristics of square, rectangle, diamond…). Yaël talks a lot; oral work enables her to participate as actively as the others.

They all go to the cupboard to fetch their rulers and set squares, except Yaël who continues to learn how to identify plastic shapes. She participates in oral exercises, and then takes back the shapes to raise them to her lips.

Mathilde is very agitated, she calls a lot for Marie-Thérèse and, as the teacher is busy with Medhi who has troubles with his set square, she starts humming. Julie tells her to shut up and they start arguing. Marie-Thérèse silences them, comes to see what did not work out for Mathilde. Since Mathilde is agitated, her diction is even more difficult. Marie-Thérèse makes her calm down, tells her to speak slowly and articulate. In fact Mathilde just wanted to know whether what she had done was correct. She has correctly drawn the first two sides, now she has to draw the two others. It is more difficult, she does not know how to make parallel and perpendicular sides. During that time, Marie-Thérèse is back to Medhi who has trouble placing his set square to make right angles. She must be very focused not to lose the thread of what she is doing while she is called away by someone every ten seconds! And also to manage "who's turn it is". None of them seems at ease with geometry tools. Yaël mumbles because Marie-Thérèse is no longer with her. End of class.

This scene is typical of special school teachers' daily life and difficulties in France. As for the analysis of their qualifications and skills, several elements seem of importance here:

- Marie-Thérèse is a specialist of education for the Blind. She holds all the qualifications specific to teaching geometry to visually impaired students. In particular, she has a long experience of teaching blind children how to draw embossed shapes. Yet, in this group, this skill is useful only to one student: Medhi, the only blind student with no other impairment. Julie's and Mathilde's difficulties result more from learning difficulties for one and from a difficulty to command her own movements for the other, rather than from visual disability itself. In their case, there is actually little need for special qualifications in visual impairment. For Yaël, traditional methods of adapted teaching are not relevant either, even though she is blind. In her case, the issue is not unnecessary qualifications in visual impairment, but the necessity of even more specialized qualifications concerning visual impairment combined with the absence of touch. Therefore, in this group, there is a discrepancy between Marie-Thérèse's qualifications and the actual needs of three students out of four. The problem is at the same time an excess of specialized qualifications (to work with students for whom visual impairment is not the main learning difficulty) and a lack of more specialized qualifications (to work with a student with multiple impairments that prevent the use of traditional teaching methods).

- Marie-Thérèse's work is not a direct implementation of her qualifications. She aims at conducting individualized teaching adapted to each student's needs. The lesson is entirely based on this principle which is central in special education: she asks every student to do some individual work (which is not the same for all) and provide each of them with individualized support depending on the difficulties they face.

- Yet, implementing her individualization skills is not easy in Marie-Thérèse's working conditions. More than a problem of knowledge or skills, more than a difficulty to adapt the lesson to everyone's needs, Marie-Thérèse's difficulty in this scene lies in the management of individual claims for attention, that is, in reconciling the individualization goal and the necessities of group management. Marie-Thérèse solves this problem by two means. On the one hand, she asks each student to try to be patient and think that he/she is not the only one needing help. Even though this technique does temporarily succeed in soothing students, its efficiency is in fact limited: after a few seconds/minutes, the student expresses some anger and calls again for attention. On the other hand, Marie-Thérèse introduces some group exercises in this lesson based on individual work. During this time, all students can participate orally, especially Yaël whose participation to other activities is more limited than the others'. Marie-Thérèse thus enables everyone to express themselves during oral work, and this enables her both to channel all students' claims for attention and to increase Yaël's participation. This technique is more efficient than the other to bring calm back in the classroom in a constructive way, but it soon faces its own limit: it is a group work, and no longer an individual one. Therefore, due to her current teaching conditions, Marie-Thérèse must search by trial and error for new techniques to meet the needs of all and every student. She must invent ways of solving the quandary of individualized teaching in a collective situation.

By analyzing this lesson, I have shown the links existing between qualifications, skills and know-hows in French schools for the Blind. Teaching conditions (the necessity to teach at the same time to students with very different difficulties and a strong need for individual attention) lead Marie-Thérèse to develop a new know-how that amounts neither to expertise in terms of teaching methods for visually impaired students nor to personal skills in listening to every child's needs and individualizing pedagogy. It rather consists in inventing a balance between implementing these skills and solving the difficulties related to the management of individualization in a collective context.

4.2.2 In Japan: the Japanese lesson, or learning communication in a context of extreme individualization

In Japan, schools for the Blind are organized so that only children of the same age will be gathered in the same class (following the same principle as in ordinary schools). Moreover, students with no other difficulties than visual impairment are enrolled in classes separated from students with multiple disabilities. Therefore, classes are much more homogeneous than in France, and the number of students in a class is much lower (on average 2 students in a class, against 9 in France). One may think that this situation turns out as an asset for individualizing pedagogy. Yet, when compared with their French

counterparts, Japanese teachers actually face the opposite problem: they must manage the absence of a group and its potential counter-productive effects on education.

I have observed the following scene in school A. It is a Japanese lesson conducted in a fifth-grade class labelled as "single disability" (*tan'itsu*), that is, with only children having no severe impairment in addition to visual disability. In fact, there is only one student in the class: Okada. Okada is a boy with low vision who can read on the black board with a magnifying lens. He has learning and communication difficulties: his elocution is difficult and he talks with short sentences, only when the teacher asks him to.

The teacher, M. Honda, is a 35 year old man who has been working in the school for 3 years, after beginning his career in an ordinary school. He holds only the ordinary primary school teaching license and has learnt about visual impairment on-the-job, during his first year in the school.

My field notes describe the lesson as follows:

Greetings.
Mr. Honda announces the program: they will work on the text that Okada wrote last time. He had to tell about a moment when he felt a strong emotion. Then, since Mr. Honda too has written a text, they will also discuss it.
Okada stands up and reads his text in a low voice: "I went to Adventureland. I had a fight with my little brother. I drove the car. I had an ice cream. It was fun.
Mr. Honda says it is good but there are also some things he did not understand. He starts asking questions.
Honda – You went to Adventureland with whom?
Okada – With my family.
Honda – How many people were you?
Okada – Four people.
Honda – Then who were these four people? Okada-kun and who?
Okada – My father...and my mother...and my little brother.
Honda - Oh yes, your little brother was there too, you mention him later. So the four of you went to Adventureland, Okada-kun, your father, your mother and your little brother. Should we write this in the text ?
Okada - Yes.
Honda – What do we write?
Okada – I went to Adventureland with my family.
Honda – Yes, we can write that. But we can also write with whom you went, with your father, your mother, your little brother. How do I do if I don't know how many people there are in your family. I can't understand, right? So it's better if you write who there is in your family.
Okada - Yes.
Honda – So what do you write?
Okada – I went to Adventureland with my father, my mother and my little brother.
He writes on another paper.
They resume oral work. You had a fight with your little brother, why? Okada explains the fight, they both wanted to sit at the driver's seat in the car in the merry-go-round. Every time, Mr. Honda asks questions

so that Okada answers more precisely. What car, your mother and father's car? And you stayed upset all the time? How did it feel when you were upset? Very halting conversation. They talk very slowly, they are facing each other in the large empty room. Every time they build a new explanative sentence, Okada writes it on the new paper. Finally, Okada read out loud his first text, then the second one: "I went to Adventureland with my father, my mother and my little brother. I wanted to drive the car in the merry-go-round. As my brother wanted to drive it too, we had a fight. I was sad. So I apologized and we made up. Then we had ice creams. It was fun. I would like to go there again."
Honda asks which one is easier to understand. The second one, says Okada.
Honda says that he has prepared a text too, about something he did when he was Okada's age. So he will read it and then Okada will say what he thinks about it.
"I was part of the football team. On that day, I scored a goal. I was sad."
Honda asks Okada what he thinks. Silence. Honda asks again what he thinks about this story. Okada asks why Honda was sad. Honda says: "Yes, I had scored a goal, but I was sad…". Okada asks again why Honda was sad. Honda explains that he was glad to have scored a goal, but he was sad because his parents were not there to see it. Okada seems interested by the story. Asks why they were not there. Honda says they were busy with his little brother. Okada says Honda must have felt lonely.
Honda – Yes, I felt lonely. But the week after, they came.
Okada – And the week after you scored a goal too?
Honda – No, unfortunately the week after, I didn't score.
Break time. Honda says that next time they will write this story together.
Greetings. End of class.

It is noteworthy that, in this scene, Mr. Honda does not use any knowledge specific to visual impairment. Except for the fact that texts are written in large characters, the content of the lesson could be the same in an ordinary class.

However, the form of this class is very typical of Japanese schools for the Blind. The most striking element, in this scene, is undoubtedly the paradox of teaching self-expression and communication in a room where there is only one other person. After the class, Mr. Honda himself acknowledges:

"This is really a class we should do as a group. So that children can talk to each other, say "I understand" or "I didn't understand", so they asks for explanations, so that there is a group discussion…I think it is very important in order to learn how to communicate. You have seen, Okada-kun, when I was telling the story, he was shy, it was difficult for him to ask questions. After some time it was better, but…It would really have helped him if there had been other children asking questions with him. I know it is not good for him to be alone with me all the time. He feels lonely. I try my best to talk with him. I told my own story, so that there would be some discussion. But it is difficult. Sometimes I feel lonely too. But that's the way it is."

Mr. Honda thus highlights the main difficulty he faces in his work: managing the fact that he is continuously alone with the same child. It is the reverse situation of that observed in France. The problem is not about group management, but about managing the absence of a group. Here, individualized teaching is not only a reality, it is also taken to such an extreme that it becomes difficult to live for the teacher and unproductive for the student. When preparing classes, Mr. Honda has to commit himself to finding pedagogical techniques leading the student to communicate and breaking the loneliness resulting from their constant one-on-one.

The bond that is necessarily created between teacher and student under such conditions is a related issue. Knowing and understanding the student, creating a climate of mutual trust are key factors for special needs education, but a relationship made of constant one-on-one also has negative effects. Firstly, as the teacher has only one single student to care about in the classroom, he must be very careful about giving him/her enough space to develop his/her autonomy. That is, he must not "pay attention" to the child in a way that would prevent him/her to make his/her own trials and errors. In the case of Mr. Honda's class, Okada-kun had spent some time, during a previous class, preparing his own text, and the observed class is a more interactive follow-up of this individual work session.

Secondly, as the teacher understands well the student and his difficulties, the student may somehow take for granted that the teacher will understand what he says. Therefore, to foster Okada's progress in communication, Mr. Honda must try to imagine what questions would ask other children or people who would not know Okada as well as he does. Even though he understands very well what Okada is saying, he keeps showing him that he could be clearer or more precise. He thus must find a balance between a supportive and encouraging attitude and a level of demand stimulating for Okada. Finding this balance is particularly difficult in the "private lesson" situation of this class.

This case reveals three aspects of special school teachers' work in Japan:

- the limited use (necessity?) of methods specific to visual impairment (of which most teachers are no experts, as mentioned earlier),

- the implementation of relational skills consisting mostly in individualized pedagogy and attention to each student's educational needs,

- the development of a new know-how (a new expertise?): adapting practices to the difficulties resulting from the teaching conditions in Japanese schools for the Blind (the "private lesson" situation).

Therefore, we can observe that, in both countries, the reality of special teachers' work in schools for the Blind is based less on the use of pedagogical techniques specific to visual impairment than of a

relational know-how. This phenomenon has several consequences that raise concern among professionals.

Cooperation in schools has become a crucial issue: 1) in Japan, because experienced teachers must train newcomers and transmit them basic knowledge of visual impairment so that schools have skilled staff, and 2) in France because the cohabitation of teachers with different statuses, different backgrounds and somehow different approaches of special needs education can generate tensions and dysfunctions in school organization.

Moreover, in a world where expertise in visual disability is no longer special school teachers' key skill, isn't there a decrease in the supposed added-value of special schooling for children? All the more so that, in Japan, special schooling is at the same time synonym of isolation and, in France, special school teachers end up facing the same troubles in managing heterogeneous classes as teachers in ordinary schools.

Finally, cooperation between special and ordinary schools is essential, as a growing number of visually impaired children are attending ordinary classes, and special schools have a central role to play in transferring their expertise of visual impairment to ordinary schools. In Japan, this is the new mission that has been assigned to special schools since the reform of special support education, even though the proportion of students attending ordinary schools is still quite low. On the opposite, in France where most of visually impaired students are enrolled into ordinary schools, organizing the transfer of knowledge and know-how from special to ordinary schools remains very difficult, due to administrative compartmentalization.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that the shift to inclusive education has impacted special schools for the Blind in France and Japan. I have analyzed changes occurring in special schools as part of the general change in the conception of disability and special education, but more specifically as a result of the shift from a category-based approach of disability (anchored in the "medical model", in which a specifically identified impairment must be treated in a specifically identified way) to a generalist approach (that is, based on individual needs rather than categories). I have investigated these changes through the lens of special teachers' work on two levels: 1) in official texts framing the special teaching profession and 2) in practice, through in-class observations. Even though significant differences can be found between France and Japan, a similar pattern appears in both cases: skills and knowledge specific to visual impairment are becoming less and less central in special teachers' activities, while most of their work consists in establishing balanced relationships with students, in teaching conditions that, in one case,

strongly discourage the individualization of teaching, and in the other, reinforce special school students' isolation. Therefore, even though the transformations taking place in France and Japan since 2005-2006 have, on the bright side, contributed to the development of structures supporting inclusive education, they have also, as a collateral effect, amplified the difficulties of special schools and reinforced their isolation and their falling behind mainstream schooling.

"What should be the position of special schools in a world oriented towards inclusion?" and "What are the real needs of visually impaired children in terms of specialized pedagogical skills?" are two central questions in today's special needs education system. Yet, in a world where special schools do still exist, it is important to question the consequences of the situation described here.

It seems that, in both countries the special education system is progressively splitting into two types of special schools. On one side, a national school (in France, the National Institute of Young Blind, and in Japan the school for the Blind attached to Tsukuba University) with a long history, which still stands out as a "model school of education for the Blind" and combines ordinary curriculum with highly specialized methods in classes conducted by expert teachers for students with no other difficulties that visual impairment. On the other side, other special schools facing increasingly complex situations and whose graduates rarely access ordinary vocational training or universities.

This paper is limited in scope, as it addresses only the case of special schools for the Blind, and further research will be necessary to assess whether other special schools are facing the same issues.

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