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Special Education in Japan

The Last Message of Kazuo Itoga: “Let These Children be the Light of the World”: A Historic Perspective of “Guaranteeing the Right of Development to All”

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Introduction

In 1946, Kazuo Itoga (1914–68) co-established *Ohmi Gakuen*, an institution for children with special needs. 2014 marked the centenary year of Itoga’s birth, and is the same year in which the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* was ratified in Japan. It is said that war is the biggest contributor and cause of disabilities. 2014 also marked the Centenary of World War I, and 2015 marks the 70th anniversary since the end of World War II.

This paper examines the historic meaning and impacts of the thinking, works, and practices of Itoga—known as “the father of welfare for children with disabilities”—by sketching the post-war history on “the right to education” of children with disabilities in Japan.

Profile and Works of Kazuo Itoga

Itoga was born in 1914 in Tottori, a small coastal city facing the Sea of Japan. He used the pen-name, “*Inaba-Ippeki* (因幡一碧)”, a reference to “the blue sky and sea” of his hometown of Tottori. During his high school studies, Itoga fell ill and took a two-year leave, eventually being baptised in 1932 at the age of 18. Although his initial goal was to become a doctor, he thought “A doctor can save a life, but not the

soul!” He finally undertook studies in Philosophy, at Kyoto Imperial University in 1935. After his university graduation, he worked as a substitute teacher at an elementary school in Kyoto for a few years. In the lead-up to World War II, he was exempted from military service due to illness, and he instead started work for the Shiga Prefectural Government in 1940.

At the end of World War II, Itoga was Director of the Food Provision Division in the Shiga Prefectural Government. Food shortages in the Japanese post-war environment caused Itoga to work long hours and frequent overtimes. In 1946, he contracted tuberculosis due to physical exhaustion. When Itoga was worried about the future of his career, his close friends, Taro Ikeda and Ichiji Tamura, visited him and requested earnestly the establishment of a shelter to give provisions to the orphans and mentally disabled children that the war had left in its wake. He was motivated by faith and thus, between the three friends, *Ohmi Gakuen* was established, with Itoga serving as its Principal. In addition to *Ohmi Gakuen*, Itoga, Ikeda and Tamura founded several other welfare initiatives. Among these was *Biwako Gakuen* in 1963 for people suffering from serious mental and physical disabilities.

In 1968, while talking about “Let These Children be the Light of the World” in an induction lecture to new staff of the Shiga Prefecture Children’s Welfare Organisation, Itoga collapsed. He passed away the next day at the age of 54. His thinking, works, and practices are summarised in “*The Work by Kazuo Itoga in Three Volumes*” (1982–83). Commemorating the centenary of his birth, books such as Itoga (2013), The Executive Committee of Centenary Projects of the Birth of Kazuo Itoga (2014), Hachiya (2015), and Tominaga

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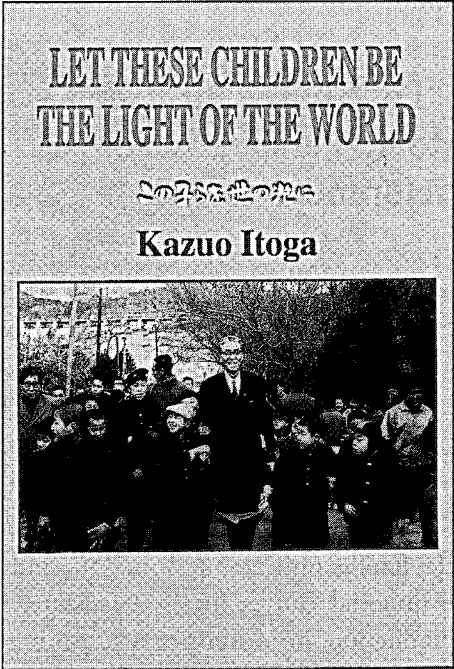


Fig. 1 Cover of the Book (2002)

(2015, 2nd Ed.) were published. Itoga (1965) was translated into English as “*Let These Children Be the Light of the World*” (2002) as shown in Fig. 1. Itoga (2009) is also available in Chinese (online).

Educational Administration and Access

The Constitution of Japan transferred the sovereign power of the nation to the people of Japan. Chapter 3 of the Constitution decrees rights to the Japanese people such as “respect as individuals”, “the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Article 13), “equality under the law” (Article 14), and “the right to education” (Article 26).

The Constitution of Japan (1947)
Article 26: All people shall have the right to receive an equal education correspondent to their ability, as provided by law.

The Fundamental Law of Education (1947)
Article 3: The people shall all be given equal opportunities of receiving education according to their ability, and they shall not be subject to educational discrimination on account of race, creed, sex, social status, economic position, or family origin.

However, compared to their peers, many children with disabilities and special needs were not given equal opportunity and access to the school education system. This was due to the interpretation of *The Constitution of Japan* and *The Fundamental Law of Education*, which conditions the education available to an individual based on their “ability”.

With the enactment of the School Education Act (1947), a nine-year compulsory education system comprising of elementary school and junior high school was introduced in Japan. In 1948, compulsory education for deaf and blind children was gradually introduced.

Since the mid-1950s onwards, Japan’s post-war economic boom had led to an intensification of meritocratic education standards. A revision to the School Education Act in 1961 and the Distinction Standard of School Attendance (1962) saw children with mild disability attend special classes at standard public schools; children with medium level of disability attend special schools; and children with severe level of disability were excused from attending school altogether (despite the compulsory requirement of education in the School Education Act). The tracking approach to children with disabilities, and the exclusion of some from the education system, spread throughout the post-war years.

The Change in Definition of “Ability” and “Development”

Itoga dedicated himself to integrating welfare, education and medical care. At *Ohmi Gakuen*, which was initially a welfare institution, he opened a medical office in 1948, and an official elementary and junior high school section in 1949. *Ohmi Gakuen* represented a unique environment where orphans from the war, mentally disabled children and children of the institution’s staff were all fellow peers. Itoga was aware, however, that children with severe disabilities required constant supervision and permanent protection, and that there was a limit to what one could learn depending on the severity of their disability.

An oriental proverb “Mental training based on facts (事上練磨)” was Itoga’s personal motto to live and work, continuously challenging what he deemed possible or true. At *Ohmi Gakuen*, Itoga witnessed that children with severe disabilities could learn and adapt to change. Furthermore, inspired by what he

saw on a field trip to Europe in 1960 to 1961, Itoga took interest in the idea and activities of the normalization of disabled children. In 1961, “Guaranteeing the Right of Development to All” was proposed after a collective discussion at *Ohmi Gakuen*.

In his book published in 1965 (2002 in English), Itoga mentions:

The fact is that in Biwako Gakuen, children are growing up by reaching those levels of development very slowly, but steadily, in such extreme situations where they are faced with death. They give us enormous strength and a glimmer of hope. It is important to mobilize the powers of country and society for them to realize the development of their minds.
(Itoga, 2002: p. 295)

We must remove such an illusion of efficiency, too. We can't tell how much children are being undermined by those blind beliefs in intelligence and the gospel of efficiency. If we realize that mentally retarded children and severely handicapped children are able to develop themselves fully as humans, then we have to reflect on the meaning of education.
(Itoga, 2002: p. 296)

This qualitative change in our way of thinking is putting us on the starting point to realize the fundamental principle that the development of all, literally all people's lives must be guaranteed for its sake./Ohmi Gakuen, other facilities for many purposes and Biwako Gakuen...are small but concrete appeals in order to support the right to development of all people to truly construct Japan's social programs. They are also one of the social resources that support sound human development. They are no more and no less, there is nothing special about them.
(Itoga, 2002: p. 298)

Conclusion: Guaranteeing the Right of Development to All

The practices at *Ohmi Gakuen* challenged the classic view that children with mental and physical disabilities could not be educated, and proved that education can change and develop the innate ability of an individual child.

The concept “Guaranteeing the Right of Development to All” proposed by Itoga and the staff of *Ohmi Gakuen* in the 1960s, led to a change in the interpretation of *The Constitution of Japan* and *The Funda-*

mental Law of Education in the 1970s. In 1979, access to the compulsory education system including visiting education programs was granted to all children with disabilities. This represented a paradigm shift, where education access was provided on the basis of “developmental needs”, not of “ability”.

Japan's current education system is compulsory for all children (with or without a disability) aged between 6 and 15 years old, and a significant majority of students continue their studies through to high school. Since the year 2000, students with disabilities who hope to continue education are able to enter an upper secondary division of special schools without screening. In 2004, a nationwide guideline targeting medical care in schools was established which saw an expansion of school nurse appointments. Today, almost all the children with disabilities, including those suffering severe and/or multiple disabilities which require special health care, receive school education from elementary school through to high school level.

Itoga's messages and ideas are important to consider, not just in the context of providing education and support to children with disabilities, but also to extend the access and availability of education to children who are bullied or withdrawn from school, have low socio-economic backgrounds, suffered from crises such as earthquakes, and the children of immigrants.

The author hopes that the centenary anniversary of Kazuo Itoga's birth presents an opportunity to promote studies into the impacts of his thinking, works, and practices. Since his ideas were formed at the intersection of various beliefs and disciplines such as Christianity, Buddhism, Western and Oriental thought, philosophy, welfare studies, pedagogy, medical science and psychology, further analysis should be conducted with the cooperation of researchers from both within and outside of Japan.

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