

[Paper]

An Exploratory Study on Perspectives of International Educators on Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities in Japan

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Abstract

Based on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006 and entered into force in 2008, various efforts for inclusive education are being made in many countries. Japan ratified the Convention in 2014, and in August 2022, the Constructive Dialogue on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was held in Geneva, Switzerland, and in September of the same year, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was concerned about “the perpetuation of segregated special education of children with disabilities through medically based assessments” and issued recommendations to the Japanese government.

Since FY2014, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Yokohama Center has conducted the Knowledge Co-Creation Program (KCCP) on inclusive education for children with disabilities. By FY2023, the program had hosted 134 participants from 47 countries, primarily developing nations. The program aims to provide participants with insights into Japan's initiatives in inclusive education through lectures and observation tours, enabling them to formulate concrete action plans for implementation in their home countries.

The purpose of this study is to gain an exploratory perspective on Japan's inclusive education initiatives by analyzing action plans developed by international educators with reference to Japanese initiatives. After the Structural Analysis by Quantification Method III, four perspectives were organized, “Promotion of Understanding and Awareness”, “Development of Education System”, “Movement Toward Inclusion” and “Individual Support.”

The Educators frequently highlighted two key perspectives—“Promotion of Understanding and Awareness” and “Individual Support”—as defining features of inclusive education in Japan. These findings align closely with the policies outlined by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

It will be essential to build on these strengths by further advancing the “Movement Toward Inclusion” and “Development of Education Systems” in the future. By leveraging these strengths, Japan can continue to refine and expand its inclusive education initiatives to pursue increased equity and inclusion.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Children with Disabilities, International Perspectives

1. Introduction

Based on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006 and entered into force in 2008, various efforts for inclusive education are being made in various countries. Japan ratified the Convention in 2014, and in August 2022, the Constructive Dialogue on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was held in Geneva, Switzerland, and in September of the same year, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was concerned about “the perpetuation of segregated special education of children with disabilities through medically based assessments” and issued recommendations to the Japanese government.

While Japan has a long history of implementing special needs education, when the country was aiming to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities since 2012, it has been seeking to develop a flexible system that can provide “diverse places of learning” according to individual educational needs, while pursuing the same place for all children to learn.

Aoyama (2022) pointed out the current situation in Japan, where the term “inclusive education” has been used solely by itself without sorting out the differences between the orientations of special needs education and inclusive education, resulting in confusion. The study also points to the “fusion” of special needs education and regular education and the use of knowledge from other countries as future research issues.

While there have been studies that have explored the inclusive education initiatives of other countries, particularly Western countries, there have been few studies that have shown how Japan's initiatives are perceived by educators in other countries, and such an objective perspective will provide important insights for Japan to promote inclusive education in the future.

Since FY2014, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Yokohama Center has conducted the Knowledge Co-Creation Program (KCCP) on inclusive education for children with disabilities. By FY2023, the program had hosted 134 participants from 47 countries, primarily developing nations. The program aims to provide participants with insights into Japan's initiatives in inclusive education through lectures and observation tours, enabling them to formulate concrete action plans for implementation in their home countries.

The purpose of this study is to gain an exploratory perspective on Japan's inclusive education initiatives by analyzing action plans developed by international educators with reference to Japanese initiatives. Gaining an objective understanding of Japan's inclusive education efforts, as viewed by educators from other countries, will provide valuable insights to promote inclusive education within Japan further.

2. Method

2.1 Research period

May 2024 – December 2024

2.2 Participants

Of the 134 participants from 47 countries who attended the KCCP, 133 successfully completed the program and developed action plans. By region, the participants represented 14 African countries, 13 Asian countries, 10 Oceanic countries, 4 Middle Eastern countries, 4 Latin American and Caribbean countries, and 2 European countries. This study analyzed the action plans of all

133 participants. In some instances, multiple participants from the same country collaborated on a single action plan, resulting in 112 unique action plans. It is essential to note that the program was not conducted in FY 2019 due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the entire program was held in FY 2021 online.

2.3 Research Method

We analyzed outlines of the action plans in the KCCP's nine-year report.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Written permission to use the report was obtained from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Yokohama Center, the copyright holder of the report. The study was conducted with strict adherence to ethical guidelines, ensuring the protection of personal information. Additionally, this study received approval from the Ethics Committee of Tokyo Gakugei University (Approval Number: 817).

2.5 Methods of analysis

The data were analyzed qualitatively using the KJ method, with specific descriptions classified into major categories and subcategories. We then created sample codes for the major categories, and classification items for the subcategories based on the KJ method classifications. Hayashi's quantification Method-III (quantification method-III) and cluster analysis using the Ward method were conducted with the HAD Ver. 17 software to analyze the data structure further. The process was undertaken collaboratively by a university professor specializing in clinical psychology and a graduate student majoring in clinical psychology to minimize the risk of arbitrary or subjective data interpretation during the KJ method analysis.

3. Results

3.1 Classification of Action Plans for Promoting Inclusive Education

The analysis of the action plans revealed that the most frequently addressed category was "Activities to Promote Inclusive Education," with 149 descriptions (39.9%). This was followed by "Responding to the Educational Needs of Individuals" with 102 descriptions (27.3%), "Building Support Systems" with 45 descriptions (12.1%), "Raising Awareness" with 39 descriptions (10.5%), "Improving Teachers' Teaching Skills" with 22 descriptions (5.9%), and "Involving Parents" with 16 descriptions (4.3%). Some content overlapped across categories (Table 1).

Table 1 Classification of action plans for promoting inclusive education

	Classification of Action Plans	Descriptions	%
1	Activities to Promote Inclusive Education	149	39.9
2	Responding to the Educational Needs of Individuals	102	27.3
3	Building Support Systems	45	12.1
4	Raising Awareness	39	10.5
5	Improving Teachers' Teaching Skills	22	5.9
6	Involving Parents	16	4.3
Total		373	100.0

3.2 Sample Codes and Classification Items

To analyze the structure of the content of inclusive education in Japan as seen by educators from other countries, we then created sample codes for the major categories, and classification items for the subcategories. Table 2 shows that the analysis identified 18 items under “Activities to Promote Inclusive Education” (IE Promotion 1-18), 14 items under “Responding to the Educational Needs of Individuals” (Individual Needs 1-14), 8 items under “Building Support Systems” (Support System 1-8), 6 items under “Raising Awareness” (Raising Awareness 1-6), 5 items under “Improving Teachers’ Teaching Skills” (Teaching Skills 1-5), and 4 items under “Involving Parents” (Involving Parents 1-4).

3.3 Structural Analysis by Quantification Method III

We performed a quantification method-III analysis for each item listed in Table 2 by assigning each sample code a score of 0 (if not present) or 1 (if present). The analysis considered two axes as interpretative criteria. The correlation coefficients were .826 for the first axis and .790 for the second axis. Using the category scores calculated from the quantification Method III, the first axis was represented as the vertical axis and the second axis as the horizontal axis, producing a two-dimensional scatterplot of actions to promote inclusive education (Fig. 1).

Items related to the “Promotion of Understanding and Awareness” were predominant in the positive direction of the first axis. Examples include ‘Understanding of disability,’ ‘Understanding of Inclusive Education (IE),’ ‘Teachers’ awareness,’ and ‘Parents’ awareness.’

In the negative direction of the first axis, items associated with the “Development of Education System” were clustered, such as ‘Model making,’ ‘Acceptance in regular schools (RS),’ and ‘Cooperation and collaboration with related organizations.’

The positive direction of the second axis included items related to “Movement Toward Inclusion,” such as ‘Training/Workshop (WS) on IE,’ ‘Advice from special schools (SS) to regular schools,’ ‘Social Model,’ and ‘Early Intervention & Developmental Support.’

Items associated with “Individual Support” were concentrated in the negative direction of the second axis. These included ‘Provide education that meets individual needs,’ ‘Assessment,’ and ‘Promote school enrollment for children with disabilities (CWDs).’

A cluster analysis of category scores using Ward’s method was conducted but did not identify distinct clusters. Therefore, the scatterplot displays all categorical items (Fig. 1), with the classification items in the scatterplot matching those listed in Table 2.

The scatterplot revealed that many classification items were plotted in the second quadrant, where the first axis represents “Promotion of Understanding and Awareness” and the second axis represents “Individual Support.” These items included content related to understanding and raising awareness about disabilities and inclusive education, individualized education plans (IEPs), and support for CWDs.

In the first quadrant, where the first axis represents “Promotion of Understanding and Awareness” and the second axis represents “Movement Toward Inclusion,” items such as ‘Importance of IE’ and ‘Concrete actions for IE’ were plotted.

In the third quadrant, where the first axis represents “Development of Education System” and the second axis represents “Individual Support,” items such as ‘Provide education that meets individual needs’ and ‘Education for CWDs’ were located.

In the fourth quadrant, where the first axis represents “Development of Education System” and the second axis represents “Movement Toward Inclusion,” items such as ‘Teaching practice’ and ‘Curriculum’ were plotted.

Table 2 Sample codes and classification items

Sample Code	Classification Items	Description in the Fig. 1
IE Promotion1	Training/Workshop on IE	Training/WS
IE Promotion2	Environmental improvement	Environment
IE Promotion3	Concrete action for IE	Concrete action
IE Promotion4	Interaction among children	Interaction
IE Promotion5	Sharing learning from KCCP	Sharing
IE Promotion6	Monitoring & Evaluation	Monitoring
IE Promotion7	Curriculum	Curriculum
IE Promotion8	Understanding of IE	Understanding of IE
IE Promotion9	Cooperation and collaboration with related organizations	Related organizations
IE Promotion10	Monitoring and evaluation of training results	Training results
IE Promotion11	Early Intervention & Developmental Support	Early Intervention
IE Promotion12	Model making	Model making
IE Promotion13	Event	Event
IE Promotion14	Ensure accessibility	Accessibility
IE Promotion15	Importance of IE	Importance of IE
IE Promotion16	Social Model	Social Model
IE Promotion17	Reporting	Reporting
IE Promotion18	Advice from special schools to regular schools	Advice from SS
Individual Needs1	Reasonable accommodation	RA
Individual Needs2	Assessment	Assessment
Individual Needs3	Support for CWDs	Support for CWDs
Individual Needs4	Individualized education plans	IEP
Individual Needs5	Resource Room	Resource Room
Individual Needs6	Identification of CWDs	Identification
Individual Needs7	Education for CWDs	Education for CWDs
Individual Needs8	Provide education that meets individual needs	Individual needs
Individual Needs9	Promote school enrollment for CWDs	School enrollment
Individual Needs10	Teaching CWDs	Teaching CWDs
Individual Needs11	Understanding of disability	Understanding of disability
Individual Needs12	Data	Data
Individual Needs13	Case conference	Conference
Individual Needs14	Autism	Autism
Support System1	Strengthening of cooperation	Cooperation
Support System2	Support system development	Support system
Support System3	Policy	Policy
Support System4	Accepted in regular schools	Acceptance in RS
Support System5	Utilization of volunteers	Volunteers
Support System6	International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health:ICF	ICF
Support System7	Professional Staffing	Staffing
Support System8	Service	Service
Raising Awareness1	Community awareness	Community awareness
Raising Awareness2	Parents awareness	Parents awareness
Raising Awareness3	Educators awareness	Educators awareness
Raising Awareness4	Children awareness	Children awareness
Raising Awareness5	Promoting Community Understanding	Community Understanding
Raising Awareness6	Teachers awareness	Teachers awareness
Teaching Skills1	Teachers' teaching skills	Teaching skills
Teaching Skills2	Teaching material development	Teaching material
Teaching Skills3	Teaching practice	Teaching practice
Teaching Skills4	Using teaching materials and tools	Materials and tools
Teaching Skills5	Disability type guidebook	Guidebook
Involving Parents1	Promoting Parental Understanding	Parental Understanding
Involving Parents2	Support for parents	Support for parents
Involving Parents3	Hearing from parents	Hearing from parents
Involving Parents4	Working with Parents	Working with Parents

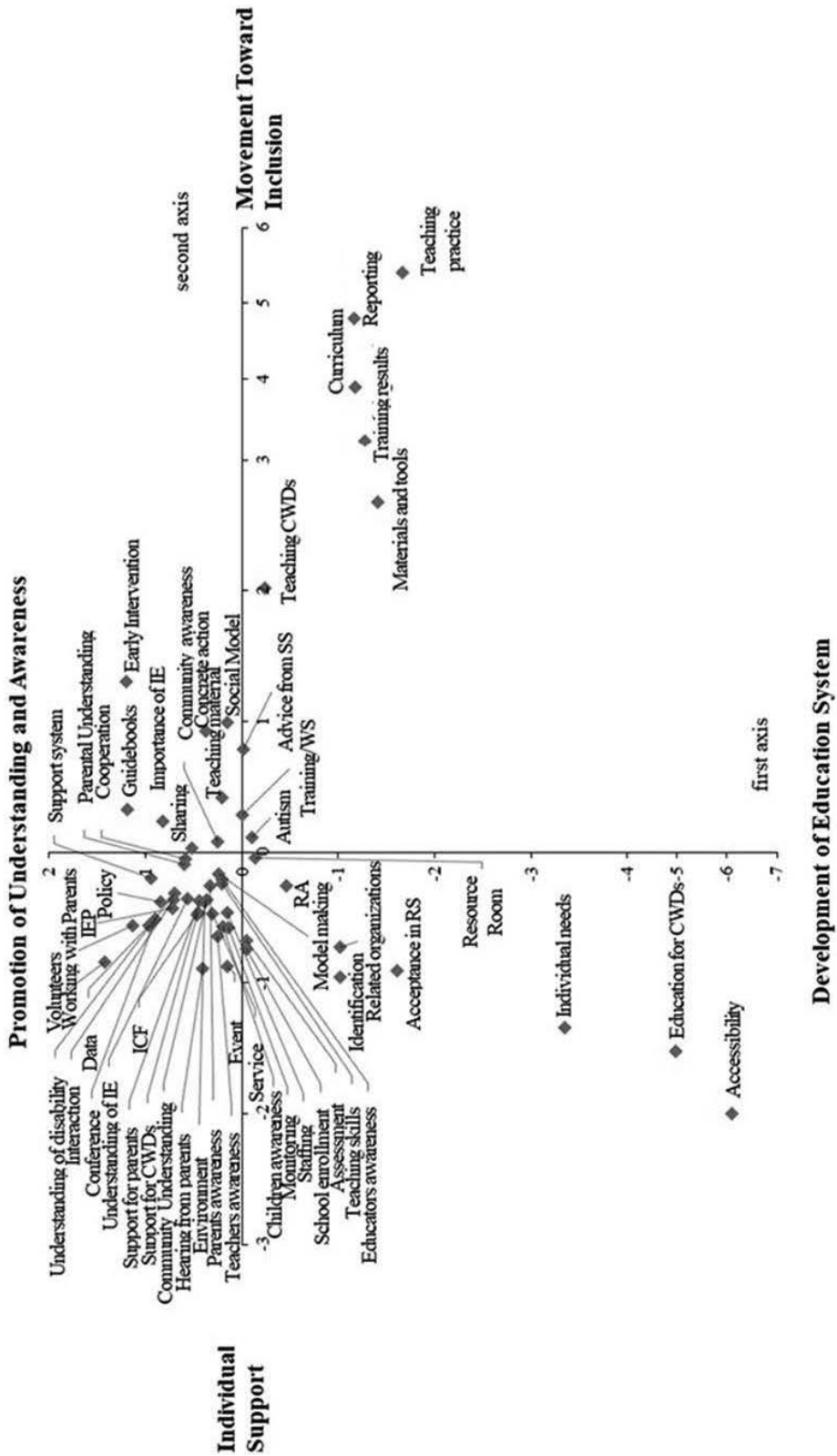


Figure 1 Perspectives of inclusive education in Japan as seen by international educators

4. Discussion

4.1 “Movement Toward Inclusion” and “Individual Support”

Perspectives of inclusive education in Japan as seen by international educators were organized into four quadrants based on two axes: the first axis, “Promotion of Understanding and Awareness” and “Development of Education System,” and the second axis, “Movement Toward Inclusion” and “Individual Support.” The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2012) defines an “Inclusive Education System” as one in which children with and without disabilities learn together. Within such a system, it is crucial to promote learning in shared environments while developing a diverse and flexible framework that provides instruction tailored to the specific educational needs of individual children, ultimately supporting their independence and social participation.

The second axis of the four quadrants—“Movement Toward Inclusion” and “Individual Support”—aligns with Japanese educational policies. The structure observed in the scatterplot reflects this alignment, and the correlation coefficients for the axes support the validity of this interpretation.

4.2 “Promotion of Understanding and Awareness”

As noted above, the contents of the scatterplot included items related to “Movement Toward Inclusion,” such as ‘Training/Workshop on Inclusive Education (IE)’ and ‘Social Model,’ as well as items related to “Individual Support,” such as ‘Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)’ and ‘Providing education that meets individual needs.’ These findings align with the “Inclusive Education System” principles outlined by MEXT.

Furthermore, when international educators examined Japan’s inclusive education initiatives, one of the prominent perspectives they identified was the emphasis on “Promotion of Understanding and Awareness” among teachers, parents, children, and the community.

In Japan, the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games provided an opportunity to advance public infrastructure and transportation systems with universal design principles on a global scale, alongside efforts to foster “barrier-free minds.” The Japanese government formalized the “Universal Design 2020 Action Plan” in February 2017, which promotes initiatives to cultivate “barrier-free minds.” This focus on “Promotion of Understanding and Awareness” is a unique feature of Japan’s inclusive education efforts.

Additionally, among the disorder classifications, only “Autism” appeared explicitly. This finding may reflect the significant challenges in promoting inclusive education for children with autism in other countries. Educators from these countries seem to have drawn inspiration from Japan’s initiatives to address these challenges.

5. Conclusion

The United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, establishing a shared global philosophy of inclusion. However, efforts to implement inclusive education vary across countries, shaped by their unique historical backgrounds and cultural contexts. UNESCO (2024) has called on national ministries of education to convene stakeholders, lead cross-sectoral collaboration, and engage school leaders and influential community members to drive change at the local level in support of inclusive education.

This study explored educators’ perspectives regarding Japan’s inclusive education system from

diverse international contexts. While the number of program participants and action plans analyzed may not fully represent the global population of educators, the analysis of action plans developed by those who visited educational sites and studied educational policies in Japan provided valuable insights. The study identified what these educators aimed to incorporate into their own countries' initiatives and classified the key perspectives of Japan's inclusive education system as seen by international educators. These findings contribute to an objective understanding of Japan's efforts in inclusive education and offer guidance for further improvements.

Educators frequently highlighted two key perspectives—"Promotion of Understanding and Awareness" and "Individual Support"—as defining features of inclusive education in Japan. These findings align closely with the policies outlined by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

It will be essential to build on these strengths by further advancing the "Movement Toward Inclusion" and "Development of Education Systems" in the future. By leveraging these strengths, Japan can continue to refine and expand its inclusive education initiatives to pursue increased equity and inclusion.

Note

This study builds upon and summarizes the work presented by the authors in the following reference: Moriya, K., & Hashimoto, S. (2024). Characteristics of Japan's inclusive education from educators' perspectives in other countries. The Program and Abstract of the 59th Conference, Japanese Association for the Study of Developmental Disabilities,135. (in Japanese)

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