Current Issues and Future Directions of Inclusive Education in Japan

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Abstract

Inclusive education in Japan was developed on the foundation of special needs education (SNE), which began in the early 2000s. There are various arguments as to whether the current multi-track system of SNE extending from segregated special needs schools to general education classrooms will lead to inclusive education, which is the goal of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This study focuses on the movement for system reform of the SNE and examines its current status and challenges. It also discusses recent policy trends in general education classrooms that have affected the promotion of inclusive education. Furthermore, while making a global comparison using Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data, this paper highlights Japan's advantages and challenges in achieving inclusive education. Finally, it examines the conditions for realizing a new Japanese-style inclusive education.

Keywords

inclusive education, Japan, special needs education, teacher education

Inclusive education in Japan was developed on the foundation of special needs education (SNE) launched in the early 2000s, marking a shift from conventional special education (SE) (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2012a). This shift was in response to issues regarding how to instruct students with learning disabilities (LD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and autism enrolled in general education classrooms (MEXT, 2003). SNE has brought about a major shift in the attitudes of teachers and parents regarding teaching and supporting students with disabilities in general education schools and classrooms. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) has also facilitated this process, and efforts toward inclusive education based on SNE, referred to as "Japanese-style inclusive education," have been gaining momentum in Japan (MEXT, 2012a). However, scholars are divided on whether the basic course of these current policies, the extension and expansion of SNE, will enable the realization of an inclusive society (Ochiai & Shimada, 2016). Developing a place of continuous and diverse learning has been advocated as support networks to meet such needs (MEXT, 2012a), but consensus on what this truly means is lacking. Although the awareness of disabilities such as LD, ADHD, and autism has increased in the general education classroom and the required support for them has improved (MEXT, 2022b), the infrastructure still remains insufficient. This is because of Japan's institutional frameworks and the pressures and stigmas attached to its unique national character and school culture, such as

conformity (Central Council of Education [CCE], 2021). The rapid increase in the number of students enrolled in special needs schools and classrooms, and the percentage of students using these schools and classrooms over the past 10 years (MEXT, 2022d), is evidence of the fact that general education classrooms lack sufficient support for students who require more substantial and personalized educational resources. For the development of inclusive education in Japan, it is important to take a proactive approach from the perspective of general education, which has hitherto been largely ignored. The newly proposed "individualized optimal learning" (CCE, 2021) and "GIGA school initiative" (MEXT, n.d.-b) to adapt to globalization and the information society are commendable efforts toward responding to the diversity of students. In addition, the principles and practices of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (the Center for Applied Special Technology [CAST], 2011) and Response to Intervention (RTI) (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003)—developed under SNE— are also attracting attention in terms of the general education side. This is because the program is not specific

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to any particular student, as it focuses on learning that targets all students. It is easier for educational administrators and teachers to explain this to students and their parents. Moreover, students accept support more easily because the program does not emphasize differences between them. This paper discusses the conditions for realizing a new Japanese-style inclusive education while reaping Japan's advantages despite challenges unique to Japan in achieving inclusive education.

Foundations of Inclusive Education in Japan: The Beginning of SNE

Japan's inclusive education system has been thoroughly examined, following the adoption of the CRPD by the United Nations in 2006. SNE was launched around the same time, at the core of this system. Table 1 outlines Japan's significant efforts toward inclusive education and education for children with disabilities.

This section provides an overview of the historical shift in education for children with disabilities—from traditional SE to SNE. It also explains the meaning and principles underlying the term "SNE."

Transition From SE to SNE

Before 2006, education for children with disabilities in Japan was referred to as SE. Schools and classrooms were developed for students with more severe disabilities, including sensory, intellectual and physical disabilities, and health impairments, to provide comprehensive and individualized education that considers the type and degree of disability (MEXT, 2003).

However, around 2000, with the increasing prominence of the normalization concept, discussions shifted toward the selection and determination of schools and the development of lifelong support systems beyond the confines of SE (MEXT, 2003). In addition, the existence of students who cannot be adequately supported within the framework of conventional SE came to be firmly recognized. In particular, there was widespread concern that students with high-incidence disabilities, such as LD, ADHD, and autisms, are not being adequately supported in general education classrooms. The nation's first "Survey on Students with Special Educational Needs in General Education Classrooms" revealed that 6.3% of the students in general education classrooms may have LD, ADHD, or autism (MEXT, 2003).

In response to this situation, MEXT published "Future of Special Needs Education" in 2003 and proposed a shift from conventional SE, in which places are set up according to the type and degree of disability, to SNE, which provides appropriate educational support according to the educational needs of each individual student (MEXT, 2003).

What Is SNE?

After thorough preparations and system designs, the School Education Law was partially revised in 2007, marking the earnest implementation of the SNE system (MEXT, 2007). SNE, as defined by MEXT (2003), provides necessary support through suitable education and instruction. This assistance extends not only to conventional SE students but also to those with high-incidence disabilities such as LD, ADHD, and autism. In essence, SNE ensures appropriate instruction tailored to the unique educational needs of each individual student with disabilities, encompassing those with the more traditionally recognized severe disabilities as well as those with high-incidence disabilities in general education classrooms of elementary and junior high schools.

Specifically, the following components were included: (a) formulation of "individualized education support plans" shared among various organizations (education, medical care, welfare, and other related organizations) involved with students with disabilities; (b) designation of "special needs education coordinators" to liaise and coordinate with schools, parents, welfare, medical care, and other related organizations; (c) establishment of a "school committee" to develop a school-wide support system; and (d) creation of a "multidisciplinary team" of school boards to identify disabilities and make specialized suggestions.

Furthermore, the reorganized special needs schools can now accommodate a variety of disabilities. In addition, they have been assigned the function of regional SNE centers, enabling them to offer support to elementary and junior high schools in their respective areas.

The introduction and development of the SNE system have brought about a significant change in the approach to supporting students with disabilities in general education. This has also resulted in a substantial shift in the attitudes of teachers, parents, and other stakeholders surrounding the students and increased momentum toward inclusive education for all students.

Efforts Toward Ratification of the CRPD

In parallel with the discussion of SNE, CRPD was adopted by the United Nations in 2006, initiating the study of inclusive education in Japan. Around this time, the term "inclusive education" began to permeate within the general public. Japan signed the Convention in September 2007 and ratified it in January 2014 (MFA, 2023). Between 2007 and 2014, Japan's education, welfare, medical care, labor, and other sectors conducted intensive research toward ratifying the convention and revised and enacted various laws. For example, in 2013, the Law on the Elimination of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities was promulgated. This law was the first in Japan to provide reasonable accommodation, as required by the CRPD (Cabinet Office [CO], 2013).

Table 1. Milestones of Education for Children With Disabilities and Inclusive Education in Japan.

Milestones	Details	Reference
Mandatory schooling for students with disabilities	In 1979, a mandatory schooling system was established for students with disabilities, leading to a mandatory education system of "school attendance for all," in which all children could attend school regardless of having a disability.	MEXT (n.d.-d)
Survey on students with special educational needs in general education classrooms	In 2002, the first nationwide survey was conducted to estimate the occurrence of students with significant learning and behavioral difficulties enrolled in general education classrooms, that is, those with possible LD, ADHD, and autism. Since then, the survey has been conducted three times every 10 years: in 2002, 2012, and 2022, the occurrence rates of those with special educational needs in general education classrooms were 6.3%, 6.5%, and 8.8%, respectively.	MEXT (2003) MEXT (2012b) MEXT (2022b)
Future of Special Needs Education (Final report)	In 2003, the report recommended a shift from special education to special needs education and provided a vision for special needs education. The term "special needs education" was used for the first time in this report.	MEXT (2003)
Adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by the United Nations	The adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by the United Nations in 2006 triggered discussions of an inclusive education system in Japan. Japan signed that the Convention in 2007 and ratified it in 2014.	MFA (2023)
Beginning of special needs education	In 2007, the School Education Act was partially revised, and the system of special needs support education began in earnest. Promoted the development of systems to support students with disabilities in elementary and junior high schools	MEXT (2007)
Promotion of Special Needs Education for Building an Inclusive Education System for the Formation of an Inclusive Society (Report)	In 2012, this report was compiled by the Subcommittee on Elementary and Secondary Education, established in 2010. This report was the first to propose a vision for building an inclusive education system in Japan, with special needs education at the center.	MEXT (2012a)
Provision of reasonable accommodation	In 2010, the Basic Act for Persons with Disabilities was revised to define the concept of reasonable accommodation. In 2013, the Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities was enacted, which stipulates the provision of reasonable accommodation. The provision of reasonable accommodation has been made "mandatory" in all areas since April 2004.	CO (2011) CO (2013)
Revision of the system for determining school placement	In 2013, the School Education Law Enforcement Order underwent revision, leading to a review of the school placement system. Initially, students with specific disabilities, as defined by the same law, were required to enroll in special needs schools. Following the revision, schooling destinations are determined by carefully considering the student's disability status, educational needs, opinions of the student, parents, experts, and the conditions of the school and community.	MEXT (2013)
Expansion of resource rooms	The resource room system was established in 1993. In 2006, eligibility for resource rooms was extended to students with LD, ADHD, and autism. In 2017, a basic quota of 13 students per resource room teacher was implemented to ensure a stable workforce across the country. In 2018, resource rooms were institutionalized in upper secondary schools to provide essential support for students who completed their compulsory education.	MEXT (2006) MEXT (2016) MEXT (2017a)
GIGA school initiative	In 2019, the Giga Schools Initiative began. Under the GIGA School Initiative, all schools at the compulsory education level have been equipped with a communication network environment and terminal environment for each student. ICT-based learning is spreading rapidly in Japanese school education.	MEXT (n.d.-b)
Toward the Construction of "Japanese-Style School Education in Reiwa Era" (Report)	In 2021, this report was released by the Central Council of Education. The term "Reiwa" is one of Japan's era that began in 2019. The need for "individualized optimal learning" in general education was proposed to guarantee that no one is left behind. Individualized optimal learning aims to achieve "individualization of instruction" by teachers and "individualization of learning," wherein students themselves optimize their learning.	CCE (2021)

Note. MEXT = Ministry of Education Culture, Sports, Science and Technology; LD = learning disabilities; ADHD = attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder; MFA = Ministry of Foreign Affairs; CO = Cabinet Office; CCE = Central Council of Education.

In the field of education, the Subcommittee on Elementary and Secondary Education was established in 2010. In 2012, it compiled a report titled "Promotion of Special Needs Education for Building an Inclusive Education System toward the Formation of an Inclusive Society" (MEXT, 2012a). This report presented a vision for inclusive education in Japan in the decade following the ratification of CRPD. Although the beginning of inclusive education in Japan has not been clearly defined, the publication of this report can be considered one of the critical turning points because it clearly defines the direction Japan is aiming for.

Characteristics of Japan's Inclusive Education System: Promoting Inclusive Education With a Focus on SNE

In Japan, the construction of an inclusive education system is currently underway in response to an MEXT (2012a) report. There are two major features of this system.

First, it positions the realization of an inclusive society as the most essential issue requiring active redressal in Japan. In this study, an inclusive society signifies one in which people with disabilities, who have not been able to participate in society, can actively participate and contribute and where everyone respects and supports each other's personality and individuality and recognizes the diversity of people (MEXT, 2012a). To achieve such a society, it is necessary to consider an inclusive education system embodying an arrangement for people with and without disabilities to learn together and the provision of reasonable accommodation, as described in the CRPD.

Second, SNE is at the core of considering such an inclusive education system. Table 2 presents four primary learning environments for students with disabilities in Japan: special needs schools, special needs classrooms, resource rooms, and general education classrooms. There are two major types of structures of education for students with disabilities or inclusive education around the world: the one-track system, in which general education classrooms are primary, and the multitrack system, in which general education classrooms and other educational settings are permitted (Ochiai & Shimada, 2016). Japan utilizes a multitrack system. Table 2 also includes the characteristics of each placement.

As in other countries with multitrack systems, such as the United Kingdom and Finland, the goal of inclusive education in Japan is to build on this structure to create a diverse and flexible system that allows classroom instruction to meet the student's educational needs (Powell, 2006). In other words, the goal is to build "a place of continuous and diverse learning" (MEXT, 2012a, p. 3) surrounding the SNE that flexibly provides a wide range of support and services within the continuum, from special needs schools to general education classrooms.

In the context of Japan, it is important to consider the pursuit of inclusive learning spaces based on the principles of the CRPD (MEXT, 2012a). For example, "joint activity and joint learning" is promoted in Japan, to ensure that students enrolled in special needs schools and classrooms have opportunities to learn with those in general education classrooms (MEXT, n.d.-e). However, Japan is not trying to establish a form of full inclusion in general education classrooms, as in the one-track system. In fact, a multitrack system centered around SNE is being considered as the base.

The following major revisions have been introduced to the system and practice of SNE since the MEXT (2012a) report (for more information, see Table 1): (a) the school placement decision system, (b) the provision of reasonable accommodation, and (c) the expansion of the resource room system. All these contribute toward enhancing a place of continuous and diverse learning.

Current Status and Issues of Inclusive Education

Increase in the Number of Students in SNE

As described earlier, Japan's inclusive education system has been rapidly developed, driven in part by the CRPD. According to data from the World Policy Analysis Center (2023), Japan is recognized as a country that "guarantees students with disabilities access to mainstream general education schools" and "individualized supports and reasonable accommodations to support their education." These facts show that discussions on Japan's inclusive education system, especially at the administrative level, have produced specific results.

Nevertheless, there are various opinions on whether enhancing SNE will lead to the establishment of an inclusive education system. The CRPD states that children with and without disabilities should learn in the same place, and some scholars have critiqued that the current efforts centered on SNE will not transform school education as a whole—including both SNE and general education—into an inclusive one (Ochiai & Shimada, 2016).

It has also been noted that more attention needs to be paid to the efforts of general education classrooms (Ochiai & Shimada, 2016). It has been 15 years since SNE began, and since then, there has been an increase in the awareness of students with LD, ADHD, and autism. However, the status of support in general education classrooms has not improved as expected in the past decade (MEXT, 2012a, 2022b). For example, 28.7% of students with special educational needs in elementary and junior high school classrooms went up to the school committee, 21.4% had individualized education programs, and 18.1% had an individualized education support plan compared to the previous survey results from 10 years ago (18.4%, 9.9%, and 7.9%,

Table 2. Essential Learning Environments for Students With Disabilities in Japan.

Environment 1: Special needs schools	General education schools		
	Environment 2: Special needs classrooms	Environment 3: Resource rooms	Environment 4: General education classrooms
Characteristics of the learning environment[a]			
Specialized support and instruction tailored to each need.	Specialized support and instruction tailored to each need. Classrooms are organized by disability type.	Students spend most of their time in general education classrooms. Students receive additional one-on-one or small-group instruction several hours a week.	Individualized support and instruction.
Characteristics of curriculum			
The school aims to provide the knowledge and skills necessary to overcome difficulties in learning or living and achieve independence. The school can organize flexible curricula according to the needs of the students.	The classroom aims to overcome learning or living difficulties. The classroom can organize flexible curricula according to the needs of the students.	The room aims to provide special instruction to students in general education classrooms. Special curricula can be organized in addition to or as a partial modification of the general curriculum.	Students study the general curriculum. The content and methods of instruction are devised according to the needs of each student. Reasonable accommodations are made as needed.
Target disability type[b]			
Students with relatively severe disabilities • VI • HI • PD • HthI • ID	Students with relatively moderate or mild disabilities • LV • HH • PD • HthI • ID • S&L • Autism/ED	Students with milder disabilities • LV • HH • PD • HthI • S&L • ED • Autism • LD • ADHD	Students with disabilities in general education classrooms • High incidence disabilities such as LD, ADHD, autism • Other disabilities[c]
Total number of students[d]			
About 148,600	About 353,400	About 183,900	–
Occurrence rates of students[e]			
0.9%	3.8%	1.9%	8.8%

Notes. VI = visual impairment; HI = hearing impairment; PD = physical disabilities; HI = health impairment; ID = intellectual disability; LV = low vision; HH = hard of hearing; S&L = speech and language disorders; ED = emotional disturbance; LD = learning disabilities; ADHD = attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder; ASD = autism spectrum disorder.

[a]The curriculum guidelines state that individualized education programs and individualized education support plans should be developed for all eligible students in Environments 1–3 and that Environment 4 should strive to develop these programs and plans. Individualized education programs are developed to meet the needs of individual students, provide instruction in each subject, and so on. Individualized educational support plans are developed to provide support to students from a long-term perspective, in cooperation with the family, the community, and related organizations that provide medical, welfare, health, and labor party services (MEXT, n.d.-c).

[b]The disability types in Environments 1–3 are based on the extant official disability classifications in the education sector (MEXT, 2006, 2007).

[c]Many students with disabilities learn in general education classrooms with students without disabilities. "Joint activity and joint learning" are specified in the curriculum guidelines in Japan. Many schools have educational programs for "joint activity and joint learning," in which students with and without disabilities learn together.

[d]Environments 1–3 reveal the total number of students registered in each school or classroom. For Environment 4, the total number of students receiving support is unknown. All figures are reported for 2022 (MEXT, 2022b, 2022d, 2023a).

[e]Environments 1–3 reveal the percentage of students in compulsory education. Environment 4 reveals the occurrence of students with significant learning or behavior difficulties in elementary and junior high school. All figures are reported for 2022 (MEXT, 2022b, 2022d, 2023a).

respectively). While improvements have been made, it is clear that they have not reached the desired level.

The increase in the number of students receiving SNE must also be considered when providing support in general education classrooms. While the number of students in compulsory education has decreased by about 8% over the past 10 years (partly due to the declining birthrate), the number of SNE students has doubled. In special needs schools, special needs classrooms, and resource rooms, the number is approximately 1.2, 2.0, and 2.3 times greater, respectively (Table 2). Thus, the overall number of students in need of SNE, including elementary, junior high, and special needs

schools, is increasing yearly, and the situation appears to be going against the state of learning together in general education classrooms. Although the reason for this is not specific, students with insufficient support in general education classrooms may have been affected by the transition from general education courses, in search of more enhanced and individualized educational resources (Ochiai & Shimada, 2016).

Diversification of Students' Needs

There are also challenges to the diversification of students' needs. As the social environment surrounding Japan undergoes drastic changes, including accelerating globalization, the impact of and concerns about large-scale disasters, accelerating aging of the population, declining birthrate, and increasing fiscal debt, social and educational disparities are also widening. Consequently, there is a growing awareness of students requiring special support. For instance, the percentage of students with special educational needs in general education classrooms has risen from 6.5% a decade ago to 8.8% (MEXT, 2012b, 2022b). The number of students who require Japanese language instruction, including both foreign and Japanese students, has exceeded 50,000 (58,307 in 2021), approximately 1.8 times the number from 10 years ago (MEXT, 2022e). Many students lack educational opportunities and experiences owing to economic deprivation. The relative poverty rate for students under the age of 18 has been reported to be 12%–16% over the past decade (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2022). The number of students who do not attend school (244,940 in 2021 and 117,458 in 2011) is rising (MEXT, 2022c). The presence of sexual minority students (MEXT, n.d.-a) and students with unique talents in certain areas (CCE, 2021) is also being increasingly recognized.

A critical challenge for inclusive education in Japan is that SNE primarily targets students with disabilities despite the growing diversity and increased number of students with special needs (Shinkawa & Ii, 2018). Considering the original meaning of inclusive education, it should guarantee support for the needs of all students, regardless of their disabilities. Of course, developing "a place of continuous and diverse learning" or a support network is advocated as the recipient of such needs. However, the current situation may only mean that, in principle, students can choose one place of education among several different options, including general education classrooms, resource rooms, special needs classrooms, and special needs schools.

School Culture and National Character

Understanding Japanese school culture and national character becomes crucial to comprehend the reality of support in the general education classroom. For a prolonged period, Japanese schools had adhered to a culture emphasizing uniformity, where "everyone does the same thing in the same way" (CCE, 2021, p. 8). This cultural norm, shaped by societal demands during Japan's postwar era of rapid economic growth, had supported the country's economic development. However, it has been argued that a conformist culture can be a barrier to inclusive education. Recent suggestions indicate that this culture is manifesting itself in schools that cannot keep up with the diversification of society, causing problems such as bullying and threats to students' well-being, and contributing to a school culture of irrational spiritualism, effort-oriented education, and cramming that puts undue pressure on students (CCE, 2021).

The international comparative survey on the attitudes of young people aged 13–29 years, conducted by the Japanese CO, affirms that this conformism has taken root in Japanese national character (CO, 2019). For instance, 42.2% of Japanese youth responded with "I agree" or "I kind of agree" to the statement "People are free to do as they please as long as they are not disturbing others," which was significantly lower than it is in Sweden, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and South Korea (76.6%–81.7%) (CO, 2019). Similar results were consistently obtained 5 years earlier in the 2013 survey, indicating that this trend is a unique characteristic of Japan.

This school culture and national character make it difficult to provide SNE in general education classrooms. Overlooking or being indifferent to this issue may contribute to "the dilemma of difference" (Warnock & Norwich, 2010). Students with high-incidence disabilities such as LD, ADHD, and autism often fear prejudice and labeling and are resistant to being considered different or receiving special treatment. Consequently, there may be many cases where necessary support, such as reasonable accommodation, is not provided. Thus, breaking away from the traditional culture of conformity and establishing a school culture that recognizes diversity is essential for promoting inclusive education in Japan.

Promoting an Inclusive Education Through Initiatives in General Education Classrooms

In 2021, the CCE (2021) released a report on school education in Japan in the new era, titled "Toward the Construction of 'Japanese-Style School Education in Reiwa Era'." The report addressed the significant impact that global advances in information technology, such as artificial intelligence, big data, and the internet of Things, will have on Japanese and other societies. The report emphasized the need for "individualized optimal learning" to ensure no child is left behind in education. This concept was proposed, especially considering the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, there was a renewed focus on ensuring that students with diverse needs could continue to learn independently during emergencies.

Enhancing individualized optimal learning aligns with Japan's goal of inclusive education, respecting diversity, and aiming to maximize individual abilities (MEXT, 2012a). Inclusive education, especially in general education classrooms, could transform learning if it permeates school education.

Based on the philosophy of individualized optimal learning, approaches to learning that emphasize the student's own will and initiative are expanding at the municipal level, in practice (MEXT, 2023b; National Institute of Special Needs Education, 2023). These practices suggest that by examining optimal individualized learning, students understand their learning process and become aware of diverse values. The continuation of such practices emphasizes that each individual has a different learning style, challenges the conformity culture rooted in schooling, and fosters a new learning culture.

Another recent trend closely related to promoting inclusive education systems is the GIGA school initiative, which began in 2019 (MEXT, n.d.-b). Japanese school education has lagged behind international information and communication technology (ICT) standards. However, the GIGA school initiative has led to the development of a communication network environment, specific school LAN, and a terminal environment, by ensuring tablet devices for each student in all schools at the compulsory education level (MEXT, n.d.-b).

ICT utilization has become a standard in school education and is no longer something special. This effort has two positive effects on inclusive education. One, using ICT guarantees different means of learning for students, providing an opportunity for students and teachers to understand the diversity of learning (CCE, 2021). Second, a growing understanding of the diversity of learning has fostered school environments that are more receptive to the use of ICT and its reasonable accommodations. Before the GIGA School Initiative, ICT utilization was considered a special privilege, and students and teachers were sometimes reluctant to embrace it. However, now that all students have access to ICT, this sense of specialness is gradually diminishing. The use of ICT and its reasonable accommodations are being naturalized as a means of learning.

Implications for Inclusive Education Based on Japan's Advantages

Given the aforementioned national character and school culture, it has been emotionally challenging for students to receive individualized instruction and support in the general education classroom. Under such circumstances, CAST's (2011) UDL and RTI (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003) models have been attracting attention. Multilayer Instruction Model (MIM; Kaizu et al., 2008) is based on RTI and was developed in consideration of the

Japanese national character and school culture, which has been adopted as an educational policy in many municipalities (Kaizu, 2017).

These ideas are more accessible as a framework to develop an inclusive education system in general education classrooms because they (a) primarily focus on access to learning and (b) consider the status of all the students as the first step.

Ito et al. (2023) also cited the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and UDL as key for promoting practices for Japan's inclusive education system. The reason for this is that UDL focuses on minimal proactive teaching strategies that support most existing needs in the classroom. Thus, MTSS can be applied in Japan through the prevention paradox, to support underserved students with special needs in general education classrooms. However, while Ito et al. (2023) lauded the tiered support provided across settings, such as general education classrooms, resource rooms, special needs classrooms, and special needs schools, we believe that the multilayered support provided within general education classrooms is more valuable.

All these approaches originate from a holistic perspective; however, they go through a process of identifying underachieving students through periodic assessments. In other words, it aligns with the philosophy of inclusive education, in that it ultimately approaches the needs of individual students (Kawai, 2018). Notably, the educational policies of municipalities that have introduced these frameworks have shown improvement in academic achievements, rather than inclusive education, at the forefront. This is because the program is not specific to any particular student since it focuses on learning that targets all students. It is easier for educational administrators and teachers to explain this to students and their parents. Moreover, students accept support more easily because the program does not emphasize differences between students.

In this context, in Japan, 47.6% of elementary school teachers and 43.5% of junior high school teachers report stress in dealing with parents' concerns, which is higher than the average of 32.0% in other countries (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). Therefore, such frameworks are beneficial for reducing stress faced by teachers as well.

Research on MIM, which was developed based on RTI but adapted to Japan's national character and current educational situation, has shown that teachers use diverse methods to provide access to learning for students with learning difficulties, owing to various factors such as disabilities, socioeconomic challenges, second language problems, and so on (Kaizu et al., 2008). In addition, monitoring all students' learning progress has been implemented to detect learning difficulties early and prevent them (Kaizu & Tamaki, 2024). Thus, it has been shown that teachers in general education classrooms regularly conduct assessments and use the results

to identify low-performing students and consequently provide support to them (Kaizu et al., 2008). After 1 year of implementing MIM and continuing to teach courses that offered various approaches, it was found that both academically at-risk as well as high-achieving students showed more outstanding academic achievement and self-esteem development than the control group (Kaizu et al., 2008).

It has been highlighted that the construction of an inclusive education system for the formation of an inclusive society requires the promotion and active integration of SNE and general education (Ochiai & Shimada, 2016). Consequently, such efforts are promising for promoting inclusive education.

The maximum number of students in a class is 35 at the compulsory education level in Japan in the first year of elementary school and 40 from the second year onward, and the average number of students per class is the largest in the OECD (2016). However, the OECD's (2020) Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018 stated that Japanese teachers are skilled in teaching and generally take good care of their students—a factor that indicates a teacher's ability to provide effective overall education. Similarly, the OECD (2020) stated that Japan has several strengths that contribute to its high performance in education: a high level of education, student care, and education for all students. Specifically, education is a priority in Japan, with high enrollment rates at all levels. In addition to conscientious teachers, parents have increased financial investment in education, and the local community is also supportive. These factors enable schools to provide a holistic education.

Furthermore, the OECD (2020) examined the utility of feedback to teachers, defined as involvement in the teacher's work (e.g., classroom observation, discussion among teachers, and so on) and communication about the teacher's teaching. According to the results, the average percentage of respondents who answered that "feedback to teachers has a positive impact on their ability to teach subjects and other subjects" was 72.8% and 79.8% in Japanese junior high and elementary schools, respectively, compared with the average of 61.4% in the participating countries (junior high schools). In addition, 41.8% and 63.7% of Japanese junior high and elementary schools, respectively, reported that feedback to teachers had a positive impact on the way they taught students with special needs compared with an average of 37.2% in the participating countries (junior high schools).

Individualized instruction is required in RTI, on which MIM is based, as educational needs increase from Tier 2 to Tier 3; Tier 2 is often associated with pull-out instruction (Wanzek et al., 2016). However, in most cases in Japan, the MIM does not require teachers to pull out Tier 2 students but support them simultaneously while teaching Tier 1 students in general education classrooms. This form of instruction is influenced by issues such as syncretism, national character, and school culture. This may indicate teacher

staffing issues and teachers' resistance to pulling out certain students. In the Tier 2 method, the general education classroom teacher gives clear instructions to the whole class at first, provides high-level tasks for students who have mastered Tier 1, and gives frequent feedback and individualized instruction to Tier 2 students. It has been proven effective for both Tier 1 and Tier 2 students (Kaizu et al., 2008).

The Tier 3 method is applied not only in the class but also during breaks and after school. It is undertaken by teachers in the resource room and special needs classrooms as well as sometimes by administrators and others. Using an explicit package illustrating what and how to instruct, teachers who are available (meaning, not teaching a general education classroom at the time) may cater to Tier 3 students. Schools with a well-developed in-school support system have improved the percentage of students at risk (Kaizu & Tamaki, 2022).

Even if Japan's national character and school culture are barriers to achieving inclusive education, these results indicate that it may be possible to achieve a new Japanese inclusive education by using the advantages of its school culture, such as effective and dedicated support for the whole class and a high level of awareness of the need to improve academic achievement.

A Future Path Toward Realizing Truly Inclusive Education

Enhancement of Expertise in SNE in General Education Schools and Creation of Licenses

According to the "Survey on Students with Special Educational Needs in General Education Classrooms" (MEXT, 2022b), 8.8% of elementary and junior high school students have significant learning or behavioral difficulties, while only 10.6% of those students use resource rooms. These results indicate that support for students with special educational needs is still insufficient in Japan.

To provide such support, it is first necessary to discuss the issue at a school committee meeting headed by the principal. However, according to a report by the MEXT (2022a), 70.6% and 75.4% of principals in elementary and junior high schools, respectively, have no experience of teaching in special needs classrooms. This implies that most schools that implement SNE are also run by principals who are not experienced with teaching special needs classrooms. Therefore, the MEXT recommends that principals be appointed with an emphasis on their experience with SNE.

In addition, the OECD's (2020) comparison of principals' leadership behaviors, such as transformational, managerial, and system leadership, shows that the percentage of Japanese principals who engaged in these behaviors "frequently" or "very frequently" was 30 points lower than that of their counterparts in other countries.

Furthermore, Japan does not have a teacher licensing system that guarantees their expertise in resource rooms and special needs classrooms. The only license for SNE is the special needs school-teacher license. OECD (2020) also highlighted this issue. Specifically, the shortage of qualified and competent teachers was found to be 79.7% in Japan compared with 38.4% on average in participating countries. Furthermore, the shortage of teachers with the ability to teach students with special needs was 76.0% in Japan compared with 48.0% on average in the participating countries.

With the rapid increase in special needs classrooms and resource rooms, Ochiai and Shimada (2016) noted that the teachers in charge may be part-time or nonregularly hired. These problems with the licensing system naturally affect the teacher training stage as well. Japanese universities, unlike special needs schools, lack an educational training system for resource rooms or special-needs classrooms. Thus, university students who wish to become teachers in resource rooms or special needs classrooms in general education schools do not have a direct career path.

MEXT has informed the OECD that there have been proposals from the CCE to reduce work pressures on teachers by adding more teachers, promoting work efficiency, and using external staff (OECD, 2018). While increasing the number of teachers and hiring external personnel is essential, ensuring expertise within schools is an urgent issue.

In 2017, regulations regarding teaching licenses were revised (MEXT, 2017b). For the first time in about 20 years, the items included in the teaching curriculum were revised entirely. Acquiring at least one credit in a subject related to SNE is mandatory, with the aim of understanding students with special needs. Consequently, all universities with teaching courses were now obligated to offer courses related to the enhancement of SNE by 2019. However, "at least one credit" is insufficient for students to be professionally involved in SNE within general education schools. Several research papers that point out issues related to inclusive education and teacher training have been published, and they discuss how the development of curricula for inclusive education and teacher training at universities is still in its infancy (Shimizu et al., 2022).

We believe that Japan should start considering a licensing system to connect the demand for teachers who can professionally teach special needs classrooms and resource rooms in schools with students who want to work in such positions in the future.

Financial Support for the Realization of Inclusive Education in General Education Schools

An economic perspective is also essential in promoting inclusive education. In Japan, there is a disparity between the cost per pupil enrolled in special needs schools and that in elementary schools. For example, according to the 2020 statistics, the per-pupil budget for special needs schools was approximately 7.2 times that for elementary schools (MEXT, 2023a).

For example, even if a student is identified as LD by the board of education and assigned the use of a resource room, the general education classroom where the student spends most of their time is often devoid of the budget to directly provide specific support staff, materials, equipment, or other supporting resources. It can be inferred that the classrooms where students spend most of their time are likely to be beneficial not only for students with LD but also for other students with diverse needs enrolled in the school if appropriate support is guaranteed. To promote inclusive education that incorporates students with diverse needs, it is essential to review financial expenditures to enhance the educational and supportive environment of general education schools.

Conclusion

Inclusive education focuses on developing educational systems and learning environments that accommodate the diversity of learners, rather than integrating some learners into general education. In Japan, there is a growing demand for inclusive education and, by extension, for the diversification of values in education and society.

Understanding one's characteristics, while receiving the support necessary for self-actualization, is also essential. For instance, regarding reasonable accommodation, it is a prerequisite that students self-understand their characteristics and the support they need to request to negotiate reasonable accommodation. In this case, the student must recognize that receiving reasonable accommodation is a right and not something to be ashamed of. The student as well as those around them should recognize the need for reasonable accommodation. Future research must examine whether the students and those around them can recognize reasonable accommodation as a natural right to be provided when necessary.

Realizing inclusive education is not accessible in Japan owing to its national character and school culture. The needs of students and society are becoming more diverse because of the declining birthrate, aging population, increasing federal and local financial debt, shrinking population, and widening social and educational disparities. To truly enhance inclusive education, there must be (a) a shift from inclusive education that focuses only on disabilities to education that incorporates a more diverse student-centric approach, necessitating additional institutional transformation, (b) provision of professional development for teachers and administrators in general education schools regarding inclusive education, (c) an effort to secure and improve finance, environment, and supporting resources to enable the establishment of inclusive education systems in general

education schools permanently, and (d) recognition of the role of education as a contribution to a society that actively respects differences and acknowledges diversity in values, allowing all individuals to participate and contribute in various ways, supported by each other.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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