

A Survey on the Personnel Changes of Teachers in Special Needs Schools in Japan: Focusing on Interviews with University Teachers in Training Schools

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the issues related to the personnel transfer of teachers involved in special needs education in Japan. The participants were five university faculty members who trained teachers in special needs education. A survey was conducted from June to September 2022 using semi-structured interviews. The data obtained were analysed based on similarity, generating 10 categories: (1) personnel transfer system; (2) teacher employment system; (3) school administrators; (4) teachers' professional growth; (5) teacher evaluation; (6) collaboration among teachers; (7) professional qualifications other than teaching licenses; (8) school management of special needs schools; (9) challenges in the system for certifying teachers of special needs schools; (10) education-related laws. School authorities must consider strategies to solve the issues identified. This study suggests specific issues related to personnel transfers in special needs education.

1. Introduction

In Japan, public kindergarten, elementary, junior high, and high school teachers are reassigned every 3–10 years; special needs schools follow the same system. For example, a teacher who has worked at a school for the blind for five years may consequently work at a school for the deaf and then at a special needs school for students with physical impairments. Teachers can read Braille, but they do not necessarily know sign language. Nevertheless, the system was designed to transfer teachers. Under the current system, teachers find it challenging to acquire special knowledge and skills specific to their students' disabilities and transfer those to the next generation of teachers. For example, it has been noted that a minimum of seven years of consulting experience is required for teachers to develop a sense of self-efficacy for conducting early interventions in schools for the blind [1]. In addition, a study examining the relationship between teachers and the quality of professionalism in schools for the blind found that it is difficult for teachers to acquire the

professional knowledge and skills necessary for teaching visually impaired students unless they have taught for 10 years or more [2]. Meanwhile, research on teacher personnel transfers has focused on teachers in regular schools; prior research on teachers in special needs schools is limited [3].

2. Objective

This study aims to determine how personnel transfers among teachers working in special needs schools affect their professional knowledge and skill development.

3. Literature Review

The School Education Law was amended in 2007 to include special needs education in Japan. The three major changes made as a result of this amendment are as follows [4]:

1. The child and parents can decide where the child with a disability will attend the school. Before the amendment, the school committee had the right to decide where the child would attend school
2. A shift from segregated education to inclusive education, which provides a variety of options for school placement
3. The previously independent concept of each disability area was eliminated and teacher licensing and special schools were integrated.

The changes outlined in points 1 and 2 were implemented because they provided equitable access to education for disabled children. The number of hearing-impaired children enrolled in special schools for the hearing impaired has been declining as a result of many children with hearing disabilities choosing to study in local schools [5]. This situation varies according to the type of disability. More recently, the number of special schools for the intellectually impaired has been increasing; prior to 2007, school placements were controlled by the school committee. However, it is now possible to choose the type of

school based on the needs of the child and parents [6]. This is most likely what caused the changes in the number of schools and pupils.

However, it has been pointed out that point 3 may reduce the quality of education [1, 7]. This includes concerns about the lack of professional development related to disability. Prior to the amendment, the disability areas were independent of each other. However, after the amendment, there was a shift towards developing teachers who could work across disability domains and deal with a wide variety of disabilities. This has resulted in the loss of special teaching methods and experiences in each area of disability. In response to these challenges, members of the Japanese Society for Special Education issued a statement in 2010 [8]. However, to date, they have not improved.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The participants were five university teachers working in special needs education (especially visual impairment education) teacher training programmes at Japanese universities.

4.2. Procedure

The survey was conducted between June and September 2022. Participants could choose between an online or face-to-face survey. The survey lasted approximately 60–120 minutes. It was conducted using semi-structured interviews, which were recorded with the participants' consent. This study was conducted under ethical review by the University of Tokyo. There were no conflicts of interest in this study.

4.3. Survey questions

To clarify effective personnel transfers in Japan, we asked the following two questions:

Does your region have effective personnel transfers for teachers in special needs education? If so, please provide some specific examples.

What do you think are the challenges of personnel transfer for teachers of special needs education in Japan?

4.4. Analysis

The audio data obtained from the interviews were verbatim transcribed. They were coded and categories were generated based on similarities [9].

5. Results

After analysing the interview content based on similarities, the study identified the following 10 categories:

(1) Issues related to the personnel transfer system: In this category, the respondents noted that teachers were forcibly transferred within a defined administrative area, which made it difficult for them to accumulate real-world experience of a single disability type. Therefore, teachers cannot provide support for children. The mismatch between teachers and children in need of support presents a challenge. In particular, teachers working in special needs schools can transfer personnel only to special needs schools in specific areas. Consequently, children with disabilities in the community are unable to receive specialised instruction.

(2) Issues associated with the teacher employment system: It is common for teachers to be hired in a different disability area than the one they studied at the university. For example, it is now a reality that students who have studied education for the visually impaired at universities are hired as teachers at schools for deaf students. Therefore, the respondents emphasised the need to link teacher training and teacher employment.

(3) Issues related to school administrators: School administrators are subject to personnel changes every two to three years. This was intended to make the systematic development of human resources and school management difficult. In addition, the educational scene is increasingly misunderstood because principals are typically teachers with no knowledge or experience of special needs schools.

(4) Issues related to teachers' professional growth: Teachers who have not been involved in one area of disability for a long time find it difficult to visualise their careers. In some areas, personnel transfers are made mechanically regardless of the teacher's wishes, thereby preventing teachers from developing independently.

(5) Issues related to teacher evaluation: To avoid personnel changes within a short time, principals must demonstrate evidence of teacher expertise. However, the lack of a scale for measuring teacher expertise makes this difficult to achieve.

(6) Issues related to collaboration among teachers: Because teachers are replaced every few years, they have difficulty establishing collaborative relationships. Consequently, schools cannot provide continuity in children's teaching.

(7) Issues related to professional qualifications other than teaching licences: Japan offers several qualifications for disabilities. However, the cost of acquiring these qualifications is borne by teachers, thereby burdening them.

(8) Issues related to the management of special needs schools: Owing to repeated and unplanned

personnel changes, special needs schools can no longer guarantee their teachers' expertise. Children and their parents desire specialised education, but school management is unable to respond to their requests. Until the 2000s, teachers were considered to have expertise if they had worked in the same special needs school for 20–30 years. As the number of special needs schools are increasing, the need to train teachers has become an urgent matter.

(9) **Challenges in the system for certifying teachers of special needs schools:** Teachers can obtain a teaching licence for special needs schools after attending a two-day training course. However, being licenced is not synonymous with the ability to provide specialised education.

(10) **Issues related to education-related laws:** Respondents noted issues with laws that allow teachers who teach children with disabilities to provide education even if they do not hold a teaching licence for special needs schools. Furthermore, issues were observed with laws that required the government to make efforts to support inclusive education. The lack of legal basis is an issue.

6. Discussion

Through this study, previously unidentified challenges to personnel transfers for teachers of special needs education were identified. The following is a discussion of the ten issues identified in this study.

(1) **Issues related to the personnel transfer system:** For more than a decade, it has been pointed out that the professional development of special needs education teachers is a time-consuming process [2]. However, this demand was not met. The results of this study also revealed that the personnel transfer system hinders teachers' professional development. In addition, owing to the 2007 policy shift in Japan to promote inclusive education, the number of children with disabilities studying outside special needs schools has increased [5]. To guarantee learning opportunities for children with disabilities, it is essential to have special needs teachers who can deal with inclusive education. It was also noted that personnel transfers are only permitted between special needs schools, which does not guarantee learning opportunities for disabled children in regular schools. In the future, there is a need to improve the personnel transfer system to one that takes into account the professional growth of teachers and to create a system for allocating special needs education teachers who can cope with inclusive education through personnel transfers.

(2) **Discrepancies between teacher training and recruitment:** In Japan, there is a discrepancy between the specialisation chosen by university students and the specialisation in which they are employed. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture,

Sports, Science and Technology [10], there is a serious shortage of teachers, especially in special-needs schools. The background of these problems suggests that teachers of special needs education may not have prospects for their own professional development. In the future, it will be necessary to establish a link between teacher training and teacher recruitment in the field of special needs education, and to make it easier for teachers to develop their careers.

(3) **Issues related to school management:** In Japan, it is common for those employed as teachers to be promoted to school management positions in their 40s and 50s years. Therefore, experienced teachers must relearn new knowledge and skills to become school managers. According to a report on the work situation of school administrators [11], before assuming a school management position, teachers are expected to learn the following:

- Knowledge of educational laws and regulations (including work and administration)
- Crisis management skills
- The ability to conceive a management vision
- Knowledge of national and local educational policies
- Expertise in curriculum, subject guidance, student guidance, etc.

Clearly, it is extremely difficult to incorporate the above into school management and improve education within a short period of two to three years. In particular, as the actual conditions of children in special needs schools are diverse, the professionalism required by the school management is considered to be higher than that in regular schools [12]. These results suggest that, similar to teachers, the personnel changes of school administrators need to be reviewed.

(4) **Issues related to teachers' professional growth:** The results of this study suggest that personnel changes can be an impediment to teachers' professional growth. Yongjae and Tkao [13] reported on the professional growth process of teachers of children with severe and multiple disabilities, finding that the peak of professional growth was between 7 and 13 years. Risa et al. [1] examined the growth process of teachers' self-efficacy for early intervention in schools for the blind and found that a minimum of seven years of service in schools for the blind was required. The present findings support prior studies, suggesting that the current short-term personnel changes need to be reviewed to promote the professional growth of special education teachers.

(5) **Issues related to teacher evaluations:** Special needs teachers may have few opportunities to be provided with appropriate evaluations. In fact, it has been noted that teachers have few opportunities to perceive their own development [13]. Thus, there is a need to develop appropriate methods for measuring

teachers' teaching skills to achieve effective teacher personnel changes.

(6) Issues related to collaboration among teachers: Special schools have adopted Team Teaching, in which teachers work together to provide instruction [14]. Therefore, the significant negative effects of teacher turnover over a short period of time were identified as issues. Cooperation between classroom teachers and building trusting relationships with parents were noted as important [7]. Therefore, changes in teachers' personnel over a short period of time make it difficult to maintain ongoing relationships with children and their families—a key challenge.

(7) Issues related to professional qualifications other than teaching licences: The possession of a teaching licence is supposed to be an endorsement of one's expertise as a teacher in a relevant field. However, this may not necessarily be the case for teaching licences for special needs education teachers in Japan. In addition, teachers are expected to obtain additional qualifications for professional development at their own expense. It is suggested that this should be improved so that it is subsidised by the government.

(8) Issues related to school management in special needs schools: As mentioned earlier, frequent personnel changes by managers prevent them from managing schools from a long-term perspective. Furthermore, managers do not have a scale to assess teachers appropriately, and may transfer teachers who are needed for school management. Consequently, school management is presumed to be more difficult.

(9) Challenges in the system for certifying teachers in special needs schools: The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology has designed a system to facilitate the acquisition of teacher licences for special needs education by making it easier for teachers to obtain them. Teachers with at least three years of experience as in-service teachers can obtain their licences after only two days of training. Universities that train teachers are taking various initiatives to improve these training programmes, but some limitations to short-term training have been noted [15]. It is suggested that the teacher licencing process be reviewed in order to guarantee the same education for children with disabilities as for children without disabilities.

(10) Issues related to education laws: The current law exempts even teachers working in special needs schools from holding a teacher's licence for special needs education, which needs to be amended immediately. The lack of legislation to guarantee access to education for children with disabilities may have resulted in difficulties in training teachers specialising in special needs education. To break through this information, the revision of legislation related to special needs education is probably an urgent task.

7. Conclusion

The results suggest that the personnel transfer system of Japan for teachers makes it difficult to maintain and pass on expertise in special needs education. Considering the results, the issues can be divided into categories that can be addressed by the government (particularly the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology) and those that should be addressed by the local education committees. The government should make efforts to improve issues (4), (5), (7), (8), (9), and (10) to provide equitable educational opportunities for children with disabilities. Local educational committees should work on issues (1), (2), (3), and (6) to ensure that children with disabilities receive high-quality education. These issues need to be addressed to improve future practices.

This study has one limitation: it included a small number of participants. More surveys of university faculty members, special needs schoolteachers, school boards, administrators, and children with disabilities and their families are needed to propose a feasible personnel transfer model.

8. Acknowledgment

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9. Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest by specific companies or organisations in relation to this research.

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