

A TENTATIVE PROPOSAL FOR INCLUSIVITY EDUCATION TRAINING FOR JAPANESE SCHOOL TEACHERS BASED ON THE NEEDS OF MIGRANTS AND RETURNEES

Julian Chapple

Department of International Studies, Ryukoku University (Japan)

Abstract

Although Japan has not traditionally been considered a multicultural nation or possesses anything resembling an open immigration policy, it is rapidly becoming more and more diverse. Events like modifications to the nation's immigration regulations in April 2019 and the recent proposed scrapping of the 5-year term limits on accepted "temporary" foreign workers (Category 1 Specified Skilled Workers) have ostensibly led to a quiet opening to unskilled foreign workers for the first time in the nation's modern history. While Japan's hand may have been reluctantly forced by serious labour force shortages in many sectors of the economy, it is undoubtedly the beginning of the creation of an even more 'multicultural Japan'; providing further impetus to the pressing challenge of creating a society where diverse peoples can live together in harmony. Yet, despite these changes and the obvious implications they have for the future, very little consideration has been given to allowing for - and accommodating - greater diversity into the nation's schools. There is a great risk that without preparation now, the already emerging signs of distress in the education sector (language problems, truancy, drop-out rates, bullying, etc.) will only escalate. In other words, in order for Japan to prepare to accept even a modest increase in the number of newcomers, teachers and education officials need to undertake greater training to enable them to understand and assist in the successful integration of future migrant children. Based on interviews, literature and a review of the recent educational situation in the light of these changes, this paper aims to ascertain whether greater inclusivity training is required, and if so, what it should entail. To allow for greater support of non-Japanese students into Japan's education system, it concludes with a tentative proposal for what future educational training courses should consider, how they could be incorporated into teacher training curricula and the overall potential benefits for society in general.

Keywords: *Japan, inclusive education, immigration, multicultural society, diversity.*

1. Introduction

When discussing the concept of multiculturalism or situation of multicultural nations, it is unlikely that many people would think of Japan. Yet while Japan has neither traditionally been considered a multicultural nation nor today possesses an open immigration policy, it is rapidly becoming more and more diverse. Recent events, like modifications to the nation's immigration regulations in April 2019 and the recent proposed scrapping of the 5-year term limits on accepted "temporary" foreign workers (Category 1 Specified Skilled Workers), ostensibly point to a shift towards a quiet opening to unskilled foreign workers for the first time in the nation's modern history. Moreover, with the revised immigration law (*Nyukanho*) it has become possible for such workers to bring their families. While Japan's hand may have been reluctantly forced by serious labor force shortages in many sectors of the economy, we are undoubtedly witnessing the beginning of the creation of an even more 'multicultural Japan'¹; providing further impetus to the pressing challenge of creating a society where diverse peoples can live together in harmony.

However, despite these changes and the obvious implications they have for the future, very little consideration has been given to allowing for - and accommodating - greater diversity into the nation's schools. There is a great risk that without preparation now, the already emerging signs of distress in the education sector (language issues, truancy, drop-out rates, bullying, etc.) will only escalate. In other

¹A number of researchers have already written about the extent of Japan's diversity. See, for example, Maher, J. & Macdonald, G. (Eds.) (1995). *Diversity in Japanese Culture and Language*. London: Routledge; Denoon, D. et al. (Eds.) (2001). *Multicultural Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

words, in order for Japan to prepare to accept even a modest increase in the number of newcomers, teachers (and education officials) need to undertake greater training to enable them to understand and assist in the successful integration of future migrant children. Based on interviews and a review of literature of the recent educational situation in light of these changes, this paper aims to ascertain whether greater inclusivity training is required, and if so, what it should entail given the diversifying needs of migrants and so-called ‘returnees’. It concludes that such training will likely become inevitable and suggests a brief tentative proposal for what future educational training courses could look like, how they could be incorporated into teacher training curricula and the potential benefits for society in general.

2. ‘Elusive’ inclusive education in Japan

Generally, the term ‘inclusive education’ has been used to focus on specific groups, notably students with disabilities and special needs (Hayes et al., 2018), and their placement in mainstream schools. However, this paper applies UNESCO’s broader definition which sees inclusive education as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of *all* learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion from education and from within education.” (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2020, Emphasis added). Simply put, the whole education system facilitates learning environments in which both teachers and learners embrace and welcome the challenge and benefits of diversity (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2020). This means that all young people are engaged and achieve best through being present, participating and belonging. The definition of inclusive education training used here, therefore, covers far more than just that of traditional ‘special education’ and education for ‘others’. It includes the enormous array of diversity represented by humanity including (but not limited to) disability, culture, socio-economic disparity, gender, sexuality, religion, experiences, etc. and acknowledges that education for *all*, means precisely that.

Despite the importance and increasing necessity of inclusive educational training for teachers, it still isn’t that universally widespread. According to the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report, of the 168 countries surveyed, 61% claimed to provide teacher training pertaining to inclusion (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2020). Further, in a 2018 international survey of 49 mainly middle and high income countries, 35% of lower secondary school teachers reported that teaching in multicultural and multilingual settings was a part of their pre-service training (OECD, 2019). In the same survey, Japan stood out as the country in the survey whose teachers reportedly seek more opportunities for professional development in inclusion. Clearly, therefore, this is an important topic and as Rouse and Florian (2012) state, inclusive approaches should be a core element of general teacher training rather than a specialist module or something only applying to a select few in so-called ‘special’ schools. However, the reality in Japan is considerably far from this approach at present and still limited to accommodating disabled students.

To obtain a teaching license in Japan requires successfully completing a course of study at university which fulfils the credit requirements stipulated by law as well as completing a brief practicum and short period of time in voluntary work (usually in a nursing home or disabled persons facility). With regards to inclusive education training, only a one credit course relating to ‘understanding of infants and students who need special support’ is compulsory, although the contents of such classes are left up to the discretion of the teaching faculty at the institutions offering such courses. Consequently, while universities do offer inclusive education related classes, they usually fall under the subject title *tokubetsu shien kyōiku* (special needs education) and are predominantly focussed on issues pertaining to physical (and sometimes developmental) disabilities. This is hardly surprising given that, as Forlin et al. (2015) write, “[I]nclusive education in Japan refers to a system in which students without disabilities and those with disabilities learn together in a general education system in their local community” (p. 315). It should also be noted that the content depends on the university/department or teacher involved; there is no uniform curriculum and therefore no guarantee that nationwide all students are actively covered. In fact, feedback from 15 students presently enrolled in teacher training courses at 2 universities in Japan revealed none reported any such inclusivity training. In a focus group discussion with 18 in-service junior and senior high school teachers, only two mentioned that they had had meaningful exposure to inclusive education related pre-service training and only one had experienced in-service training (related to one of the so-called cities with high levels of foreign residents). In terms of what training they mentioned they most desired now, learning how to respond to students’ ethnic and cultural backgrounds, such as those of immigrant children, was the most common response, followed by language issues (including the need for translators), and academic support including caregivers. This resonates with similar findings other researchers have found (Takahashi, 2020). Clearly, the growing diversification of Japan’s student population is increasingly putting pressure on teachers who are ill-prepared to deal with it.

A review of previous studies relating to formal inclusion training for pre-service teachers in Japan reveals that again the focus is extremely narrow; predominantly how to engage with disabled students (Takahashi, 2013; Ree, 2015, Moberg et al, 2020, Forlin et al, 2015). This is hardly surprising given – as mentioned above – the notion that inclusion equals ‘special’ education in Japan and the prevalence of similar ‘misunderstandings’ about exactly what it does/should entail (Sanagi, 2016). Further, a lack of adequate preparation in training courses has been reported as another factor contributing to Japanese teachers’ anxiety with regards to inclusive practices (Forlin et al., 2015, Fujii, 2014). What is needed, therefore, is something more encompassing, less restrictive, and able to accommodate the somewhat unique situation in Japan. In short, “inclusive education training used in Japan should be improved” (Yada & Savolainen, 2018, p. 353).

3. Needed: A future plan for the growing needs of migrants and returnees

The ‘unique’ situation pertaining to Japan is that, as mentioned, the nation is slowly embarking on a period of increased immigration, albeit more a result of necessity than design. With the nation’s population falling year-on-year since 2011 and glaring gaps in some sectors, increasingly today Japan’s manufacturing and service industries are relying on foreign workers. But migrants alone are not the only ones in need of more inclusive-friendly educational support. For decades *kikokushijo*, or ‘returnees’ (students who studied abroad for family or other reasons and then returned to Japan to re-enter mainstream schools), have struggled with social, cultural, psychological (Kanno, 2003) and other pressures during their ‘(re)acclimatization’ process. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), in the two decades since 2000 roughly 12,000 such students each year have started or returned to Japanese elementary, junior and senior high schools representing a significant total number. Apart from these two groups, however, it should also be noted that while Japan’s education system does an outstanding job and ranks almost at the top of major international surveys, it has been found wanting in terms of acceptance of forms of difference. Put another way, the push or pressure for conformity has been pointed to as an area in need of attention. With acceptance of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Japan has committed to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education before 2030 (SDG number four).

It is against this background of an increasing need for teacher trainees to be prepared for changes in their nation’s demographic make-up, it’s increasingly international-experienced domestic population as well as the fundamental benefits to be obtained through educational reform open to *all* that the following tentative plan is proposed. It must be reiterated that this proposal is not necessarily specific to Japan, but given the lack of such policy at present, it covers some of the best practice ideas deemed immediately applicable there.

4. A Tentative proposal

Interest in inclusivity programs and their content for trainee teachers has gained considerable interest in recent years, especially in North America and Europe (Mule, 2010). Consequently, there are many plans and programs available focusing on differing content, but they all share “a desire to develop in teachers the knowledge that will allow them to be effective teachers of all students (Mule, 2010, p. 12). This is the core that should drive any new program agenda for Japan. Overseas, one of the recently raised concerns is the need to move away from the model of preparing different teachers for different students (Florian & Pantić, 2017). However, given Japan’s history of offering as unified an educational experience as possible to all students, this can be seen as a strength to build upon (Semuels, 2017). In other words, the very basis of educational equality in Japan means that accepting and treating all students in the same manner is already a fundamental, the main exceptions being those from different linguistic and/or cultural contexts (i.e. returnees and foreign nationals).

It is beyond the scope of this introductory paper to outline in detail what such a course might look like (nor is this possible, given that a ‘one course fits all’ program is in itself inherently counterproductive to this very topic), but since Japan’s teacher training courses presently contain very little inclusivity content (other than related to physical disability), a broad outline is possible. A useful starting point is the framework of core values and competencies created in 2012 by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education. It outlines support for learners (academic, practical, social and emotional), working with others (parents and families), valuing learner diversity and being involved in professional development. Of these four, the first two are already well established throughout Japan’s education system. However, with regards to the latter two, there is a need for development. Consequently, a course of education for pre-service teachers to verse them in knowledge and skills applicable for

enabling inclusivity in today's diversifying world would need to apply the following four broad approaches.

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the content would need to be wide-ranging (not limited solely to physical or mental disabilities although specialist training would still be required for certain teachers involved with students requiring high-level care) and mainstreamed into the curriculum. Finland provides a good example where teachers are given a wide variety of knowledge and skills that they can apply in various settings and situations (Savolainen, 2009). As is the case at present, institutions should be free to adapt their content to suit their philosophy and teaching strengths but should be required to cover multiple topics relating to inclusion and diversity (ethnic, religious, socio-economic, linguistic, gender, sexual, etc.) so as to reflect social reality as well as to prepare teachers for the different types of students they are increasingly likely to encounter. This could be covered in one or two core classes specifically tailored to topics of inclusion and diversity which students would be required to complete as a prerequisite to graduation.

Secondly, the teaching method and delivery of such classes should be developed to be as practical and active as possible. In general, Japanese university classes have been criticized as being unappealing due to their heavy reliance on one-way lecture style delivery (Sakakibara, Yamamoto, & Kobayashi, 2005), a sentiment shared by the subjects interviewed in this research. When discussing teaching methods, pre-service teachers were unanimous in their criticism of a lack of practicality, real-life situations and general lack of appeal of the teaching styles employed. One student commented: "There isn't much point attending lectures, the teacher just talks at us and there is almost no interaction" (Toshi). A 'hands-on' notion of practicality is particularly important because most trainee teachers come from non-inclusive educational backgrounds and therefore often lack the personal experience. As Ballard (2003) writes, teacher trainees "need to understand the historical, socio-cultural and ideological contexts that create discriminatory and oppressive practices in education. The isolation and rejection of disabled students is but one area of injustice. Others include gender discrimination, poverty and racism" (p. 59).

Thirdly, training should be ongoing, provide feedback and be linked to performance indicators (a topic for further research). As the make-up of society changes so too will the needs of learners in the classroom. Similarly, as teachers mature, their skillsets require updating and the opportunity to transfer experiences and wisdom to instructors in other regions or stages of their careers. Furthermore, the importance of collaborative skills and the ability to problem solve to assist students' changing needs (Smith & Leonard, 2005) must be considered a key component of any program and this can in part be obtained through an all-of-school approach to professional development.

Finally, it should be embedded into the ethos and culture of the entire education system. As the need for the acceptance of greater diversity increases, so too does the need for an educational system that is flexible and open in order to meet the needs of all Japan's present and future, foreign and local learners.

5. Summary

The UNESCO Policy Guidelines for Inclusion in Education (2009) outline three main justifications for teaching all students together, namely: educational, social and economic. The initial impetus and focus of this paper was on introducing training for inclusivity of foreign children and returnees (two subsets of society seemingly overlooked in education as well as being important for the future social and economic prosperity of Japanese society). However, as mentioned, inclusive education should encompass as much diversity as possible. Future research should explore in greater depth the attitudes and opinions of pre- and in-service teachers towards the present training system and its implications for Japan's schools in terms of dealing with all forms of difference in the coming years. Furthermore, as society does diversify more, in addition to training programmes and their content, it will most likely also be necessary to incorporate a variety of teachers themselves and to assign as wide a array of coordinators as possible to reaffirm and contribute to the goals and ideals of society at large. In short, the teacher training courses implemented now will guide the next generation of teachers and create and shape society for the future. Deciding what kind of society we want, who can participate in it and how are enormous questions that need to be addressed. This in turn requires making a distinction between diversity and disparity (OECD, 2010); one being an inevitable reflection of the richness of humanity the other associated with different outcomes and differential treatment. This is the social debate that needs to be had now for the status quo is fast becoming an ineffective obstacle to social growth and prosperity.

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