



Lived Experiences of Inclusive Education Teachers in Selected Public Schools in Japan: Basis for a Proposed Action Plan

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Abstract

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach and thematic analysis to investigate the lived experiences of inclusive education teachers in public schools in Japan. By centering on teachers' voices, the research sought to capture how educators interpret inclusive education, the challenges they face, and the strategies they use to meet the needs of diverse learners. Semi-structured interviews with nine teachers from both elementary and junior high school levels provided rich insights into inclusive practices as they unfold in everyday classrooms. Thematic analysis revealed eight interrelated themes: (1) understanding and embracing the philosophy of inclusive education, (2) persistent resource constraints and overwhelming workload, (3) challenges in meeting diverse student needs, (4) the critical role and difficulty of parental involvement, (5) adaptive instructional strategies and inclusive classroom practices, (6) collaboration and support systems as enablers of inclusion, (7) systemic and policy-level gaps in inclusive implementation, and (8) personal and professional growth through inclusive practice. While teachers demonstrated creativity, resilience, and deep commitment to inclusive values, their efforts were often constrained by systemic limitations and policy-practice gaps. Grounded in these insights, the study developed a six-component action plan designed to strengthen inclusive education from both classroom and systemic perspectives. The action plan integrates inclusive teaching practices, collaborative support systems, professional development, family and community engagement, equitable resource allocation, and policy-practice alignment. As a contextually grounded and teacher-informed model, it offers a significant and original contribution to the discourse on inclusive education, providing a practical foundation for advancing sustainable and flexible inclusive practices within the public school system in Japan.

Keywords: inclusive education, teacher lived experiences, public schools in Japan, phenomenological approach, thematic analysis, proposed action plan



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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a global initiative that promotes equal educational opportunities for all learners regardless of their backgrounds or conditions. It emphasizes providing students with the support and resources necessary for active participation and success in the classroom (UNESCO, 2024). Beyond being an instructional approach, inclusive education is also regarded as a social justice imperative that addresses the needs of learners vulnerable to exclusion and marginalization (Horne-Shuttleworth et al., 2024). Studies have shown that inclusive learning environments enhance empathy, social awareness, communication,

and academic performance among students (Zubia, 2023; Woodcock et al., 2022). However, challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, insufficient professional development, and increased emotional and professional demands continue to hinder effective implementation (Arias et al., 2023; Ngadni et al., 2023; Miña, 2024; Olalekan-Maxwell, 2023).

In Japan, inclusive education promotes learning environments where students with and without disabilities learn together while their individual needs are appropriately addressed. To support equitable access to education, Japan has introduced diverse learning systems, especially

for learners unable to participate in traditional schooling (World Economic Forum, 2025). The country is also institutionalizing an educational model that integrates regular and special needs schools through specialized curricula and innovative teaching approaches, reflecting its commitment to building an inclusive society (Cabinet Office of Japan, 2024). As enrollment of students with special needs in public schools continues to increase, teachers face new challenges in addressing diverse learner needs. As an Assistant Language Teacher in Japan's public schools, the researcher observed these realities firsthand, prompting an investigation into how inclusive education is practiced in classrooms. Since empirical studies focusing on teachers' lived experiences remain limited, this study seeks to explore their perspectives and narratives to better understand the factors that support or hinder inclusive education. The findings will serve as the basis for proposing a flexible and transferable action plan to improve inclusive education practices in Japan and similar contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive Education. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (2024) essentially defines inclusive education as a fundamental right of every individual to access quality education regardless of their circumstances. It recognizes that every child is capable of learning considering their unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs. In an inclusive learning environment, a diverse range of students learn together and are supported accordingly to reach their highest potential. Inclusive education is not merely a result; it is a process that involves the adoption of "actions and practices that embrace diversity and build a sense of belonging, rooted in the belief that every person has value and potential and should be respected." Through inclusive education, everyone becomes a valued member of society.

Furthermore, inclusive education goes beyond improving the overall wellbeing of children with

disabilities. It aims to promote equity and equality among all children, youths, and adults who experience discrimination and marginalization due to gender, remoteness, wealth, ethnicity, language, migration, displacement, incarceration, sexual orientation, etc. Moreover, it endeavors to eliminate all barriers to learning and transform cultures, policies, and traditional pedagogical approaches to accommodate and effectively include all learners. As noted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2022), inclusive education pertains to educational institutions adapting to and reaching all learners, not the other way around.

Benefits of Inclusive Education. Yilmaz and Yeganeh (2021) noted that inclusive environments foster respect, empathy, and acceptance. Through daily peer interaction, learners become aware of each other's differences their strengths and weaknesses. As they work together towards achieving a learning goal and overcoming hurdles, stronger relationships are forged along with a growing sense of acceptance and respect for individual differences.

Likewise, Raguindin et al. (2021) reported improvements in students' communication and collaborative skills while getting to know diversity as a natural cultural element. For all learners, this learning environment results in higher academic performance and development in both social and emotional aspects. Through peer mentoring and social modeling, learners with disabilities can perform better academically while becoming familiar with social norms and finding emotional security in connecting with others. As mentioned by Zubia (2023) and Li (2022), these experiences help learners with disabilities develop confidence and a sense of belongingness leading to increased levels of classroom engagement and active participation in school activities; whereas learners without disabilities gain intellectual growth and develop values of empathy, respect, and acceptance of individual differences by supporting others (Raguindin et al., 2021).

Modiba and Masunungure (2024), Miña (2024), and Rahmi et al. (2024) also cited the positive impact of inclusive education on teachers. To be able to reach all students, teachers learn to be resourceful, flexible, and innovative. Rahmi et al. (2024) assert that learner diversity urges educators to become reflective of their practices and collaborate with others for effective instructional delivery. At the same time, Modiba and Masunungure (2024), Miña (2024), and Pasumala et al. (2024) attest to the increase of teachers' emotional sensitivity as they develop greater awareness of classroom diversity. Specifically, teaching inclusive classes inspires values of patience and empathy, encouraging teachers to apply more compassionate pedagogical approaches.

Inclusive Practices. Inclusive practices refer to everyday teaching approaches that promote active participation, equal access to education, and a sense of belonging among all learners in diverse classrooms. Creating supportive and emotionally safe environments is considered essential in inclusive education. This can be achieved through respectful classroom climates, open communication with parents and other stakeholders, early identification of learning barriers, and implementation of appropriate interventions (Balik & Özgün, 2024). Inclusive teachers also foster enjoyable learning experiences, recognize students' efforts, celebrate diversity, and encourage positive peer relationships (Woodcock et al., 2022). Shared activities, collaborative learning, and opportunities that strengthen students' social competence further help learners feel included and understood (Sigstad et al., 2021). Effective inclusive practices also rely on responsive pedagogy, where teachers adapt instruction, assessment methods, and classroom management according to students' diverse needs through differentiated instruction and continuous monitoring (Sigstad et al., 2021; Woodcock et al., 2022).

Collaboration and accommodations are likewise important components of inclusive education. Teachers are encouraged to work closely with colleagues, support staff, and families to

improve the appropriateness of instructional strategies and learner support (Miña, 2024). Establishing trust and regular communication with families strengthens their involvement in the educational process (Yilmaz & Yeganeh, 2021), while collaboration among teachers can help address limited access to specialists and resources (Raguindin et al., 2021). The use of assistive technologies, multi-sensory instruction, and varied forms of self-expression also contributes to greater student participation and engagement (Miña, 2024; Pasumala et al., 2024). Furthermore, inclusion involves maintaining high expectations for all learners across academic, social, and emotional domains. Although learners differ in their abilities, setting clear and meaningful goals while providing appropriate support helps students build confidence, motivation, and engagement in the classroom (Zubia, 2023; Sigstad et al., 2021; Raguindin et al., 2021).

Inclusive Strategies. Inclusive strategies are targeted instructional approaches designed to address specific learning barriers experienced by individuals or groups of learners. These strategies enable teachers to modify instruction and support systems to ensure equal educational access for students with diverse abilities (Rahmi et al., 2024). One widely used strategy is differentiated instruction, which involves adjusting lessons, teaching methods, and assessments according to learners' needs and abilities (Woodcock et al., 2022; Li, 2022). This approach allows students to achieve learning goals through varied pathways while maintaining high expectations in diverse classrooms. Another important framework is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which promotes flexible instruction through the principles of engagement, representation, and expression (Flood et al., 2025). UDL encourages teachers to motivate learners in different ways, present content through multiple formats, and provide varied opportunities for students to demonstrate learning outcomes. According to Miña (2024), UDL helps educators proactively adapt lessons to accommodate learner diversity.

Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) also play a significant role in inclusive education by outlining the academic, social, and support needs of learners with special needs (Phillips, 2024). Developed collaboratively by teachers, parents, and specialists, IEPs help ensure equitable access to education through individualized goals and accommodations. Peer-Assisted Learning is another effective strategy where more capable learners support peers in achieving learning objectives through social interaction (Mrunalini et al., 2025; Baht et al., 2023). This approach promotes collaboration, empathy, confidence, and skill development among learners. Additionally, Positive Behavioral Support uses reinforcement methods such as praise and rewards to encourage positive behavior and address behavioral challenges (Miña, 2024). Teachers reported that this strategy helps create a supportive and nurturing classroom environment where students feel recognized and valued.

Challenges in Implementation. Research on inclusive education highlights several persistent structural and contextual challenges affecting its implementation in schools. One major issue is the lack of teacher preparation and professional development. Studies revealed that many teachers receive little to no pre-service training on inclusive education, leaving them unprepared to manage learners with special needs, particularly in behavior management and instructional adaptation (Zubia, 2023; Rahmi et al., 2024). Available in-service training is also limited and often too theoretical to be effectively applied in classrooms (Zubia, 2023; Rahmi et al., 2024). In addition, schools commonly face shortages in instructional materials, assistive technologies, physical accommodations, and classroom support personnel, causing teachers to handle large and diverse classes independently (Mahmud et al., 2023; Miña, 2024; Ngadni et al., 2023). These conditions often result in overlooked learner needs, teacher frustration, and emotional exhaustion.

Overcrowded classrooms and excessive workloads further complicate inclusive teaching. Teachers struggle to provide individualized support and differentiated instruction in large classes while also managing extensive paperwork and emotional demands, increasing the risk of burnout and reduced instructional quality (Arias et al., 2023; Zubia, 2023; Olalekan-Maxwell, 2023). Addressing the wide diversity of learners, including those with cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and linguistic challenges, also requires significant planning, creativity, and collaboration that teachers often lack time and support to accomplish (Li, 2022; Woodcock et al., 2022). Moreover, limited parental engagement and understanding of inclusion hinder cooperation between schools and families due to lack of awareness, communication barriers, and conflicting expectations (Yilmaz & Yeganeh, 2021; Raguindin et al., 2021). Researchers further emphasized the gap between inclusive policies and actual practice, noting that although schools may support inclusion in principle, insufficient resources, weak implementation, and unrealistic policies limit sustainable success (Modiba & Masunungure, 2024; Pasumala et al., 2024).

This study investigated teachers' experiences in practicing inclusive education in Japan. Insights derived from their narratives became the basis for a proposed action plan to enhance its implementation. The following questions were used to guide this inquiry:

1. What are the lived experiences of inclusive education teachers in public schools in Japan?
2. What themes can be derived from their statements?
3. What insights can be derived from the themes?
4. What action plan can be proposed to strengthen inclusive education based on the lived experiences of teachers?

METHODS

Research Design. This study adopted a phenomenological qualitative approach to examine the lived experiences of teachers managing inclusive classes in public educational settings in Japan. This research design, as characterized by Philipps et al. (2023) and Tenny et al. (2022), is particularly ideal for exploring complex topics that can be difficult to quantify, such as experiences, attitudes, and behaviors. Conducting research inquiries in the participants' natural settings allows for the collection of authentic data reflecting outcomes grounded in reality. In qualitative research, complexities of a phenomenon are well-accounted for and described in detail, cautiously eliminating researcher bias in the process. Furthermore, a phenomenological approach aims to elicit universal themes by cross-referencing participants' individual interpretations of their own experiences, accounting for higher validity of research results.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participant	Role	Years of Experience	School Level
P1	Homeroom Teacher	5 years	Elementary School
P2	Homeroom Teacher	5 years	Elementary School
P3	Homeroom Teacher	5 years	Elementary School
P4	Subject Teacher	15 years	Junior High School
P5	Subject Teacher	5 years	Junior High School
P6	Homeroom Teacher	3 years	Elementary School
P7	Subject Teacher	17 years	Junior High School
P8	Homeroom Teacher	7 years	Elementary School
P9	Special Education Teacher	3.5 years	Elementary School

Population and Sampling. The study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method used to select participants with sufficient knowledge and experience relevant to the research topic (Akpan & Piate, 2023). This approach was considered appropriate for obtaining detailed insights from information-rich cases while addressing resource limitations. The nine (9) participants were elementary and junior high school teachers from inclusive classrooms in Osaka, Japan, including homeroom/general education teachers, subject teachers, and special education teachers. All participants had at least three years of experience teaching in inclusive

settings, ensuring informed reflections based on practice. In Japanese public schools, inclusive classrooms are commonly managed collaboratively by homeroom or subject teachers together with teaching aides and special education teachers. Including participants from these different roles allowed the study to capture diverse perspectives on inclusive teaching across various classroom arrangements.

Data Gathering Procedure. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with nine (9) public elementary and junior high school teachers in Osaka City, conducted either face-to-face or online, primarily in English, and lasting between 15 to 60 minutes. The interview guide consisted of three sections focusing on participants' understanding of inclusive education, their inclusive practices and challenges, and their recommendations and additional insights. Open-ended questions allowed participants to freely share their experiences while enabling the researcher to ask follow-up questions for clarification and deeper discussion. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. To minimize bias, reflexivity and bracketing were practiced throughout data collection and analysis, as the researcher, an Assistant Language Teacher in Osaka public schools, consciously reflected on personal assumptions and ensured that questions remained neutral and non-leading. Ethical considerations and confidentiality were also strictly observed through the use of pseudonyms, voluntary participation, secure storage of recordings and documents in password-protected and encrypted files, and proper disposal of all data after a five-year retention period.

Data Analysis. The study utilized Thematic Analysis (TA) developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, as cited by Christou, 2023; Finlay, 2021; Ahmed et al., 2025) to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns within the qualitative data. This approach was appropriate for the phenomenological nature of the study because it allowed both explicit and underlying meanings

in participants' narratives to be examined (Finlay, 2021). The analysis followed six stages: familiarization with the data through repeated reading, generation of initial codes, organization of codes into potential themes, refinement and modification of themes, naming of themes based on their relevance to the research questions, and final presentation of a coherent thematic discussion supported by participant extracts and related literature.

This study contributes to the growing body of qualitative research on inclusive education by exploring teachers' lived experiences and perspectives regarding its implementation. Similar to other phenomenological studies, it highlights issues such as the emotional and professional demands of inclusive teaching, the importance of collaboration, and the gap between policy and practice. However, this research specifically focuses on the public school system in Japan, emphasizing the influence of local culture, institutional structures, and available resources on inclusive education. Unlike studies limited to particular aspects of inclusion, this research provides a broader examination of professional development, administrative support, inclusive practices, and parental involvement. Furthermore, the study extends beyond thematic findings by proposing a culturally responsive and adaptable model for inclusive education in Japan, thereby contributing both theoretical and practical insights to the field.

RESULTS

Lived Experiences of Inclusive Education Teachers in Japanese Public Schools. Participants commonly viewed inclusive education as a system that promotes diversity, equality, and opportunities for all learners to learn together regardless of their differences. They emphasized the importance of understanding students' individual strengths and needs, fostering empathy, and creating safe and supportive classroom environments where all learners feel accepted and motivated. Several participants highlighted that inclusion extends beyond academics and should also

support learners' social and emotional development. They considered diversity a valuable learning experience not only for students but also for teachers, as it encourages growth in instructional practices, empathy, and collaboration. Most participants acknowledged that Japan has made progress in inclusive education, although many believed significant reforms and stronger systemic support are still necessary to make inclusion sustainable and effective.

To support diverse learners, participants reported using various inclusive strategies and practices such as differentiated instruction, individualized educational plans (IEPs), Universal Design for Learning (UDL), peer-assisted learning, positive reinforcement, collaborative learning activities, visual aids, assistive technology, and simplified instructions. Building strong relationships and maintaining open communication with parents, fellow teachers, administrators, and specialists were also regarded as essential in addressing learners' needs. Participants stressed the value of setting clear goals with students, adapting assessments, creating engaging lessons, and encouraging cooperation among peers to increase student participation and confidence. Several teachers also relied on specialized instruction outside the classroom, repeated explanations, and behavioral support strategies to accommodate learners with special needs.

Despite these efforts, participants consistently identified major barriers to inclusive education, including overcrowded classrooms, insufficient manpower, lack of classroom support, limited preparation time, heavy workloads, inadequate professional development, and lack of instructional resources and assistive devices. Junior high school teachers particularly struggled with balancing curriculum standards and diverse learner needs while preparing students for higher education. Difficulties in obtaining parental cooperation and inconsistencies in government support were also highlighted. Many participants expressed that teachers alone cannot fully realize inclusive education without broader

institutional and societal support. Consequently, they recommended increasing classroom personnel, strengthening collaboration with experts and families, improving teacher training opportunities, providing more time for lesson preparation, and reforming educational policies to better align with the realities of inclusive classrooms in Japan.

Themes Surrounding the Lived Experiences of Teachers in Japanese Schools. Table 2 presents the key themes derived from the teachers' lived experiences regarding the implementation of inclusive education in their classrooms. These themes capture the recurring patterns across participants' narratives, highlighting both enabling practices and persistent challenges in inclusive education.

Table 2
Themes Derived from Teachers' Lived Experiences

Themes	Lived Experiences of Teachers
Philosophy of Inclusion	equity, empathy, valuing diversity, mindset shift toward acceptance
Resource Workload Constraints	large class sizes, limited manpower, lack of time, insufficient teaching resources
Meeting Diverse Needs	differentiated instruction, ICT integration, peer support, addressing varied abilities
Parental Involvement	inconsistent engagement, awareness gaps, importance of home-school partnerships
Adaptive Practices	flexible teaching approaches, creative strategies, scaffolding, adjusting to learner needs
Collaboration and Support	teamwork with colleagues, specialist input, professional learning opportunities
Policy-Practice Gaps	disconnect between policy ideals and realities, lack of monitoring, insufficient adaptation
Personal and Professional Growth	increased patience, empathy, resilience, strengthened professional identity

Participants strongly view inclusive education as a value-driven approach grounded in equity, empathy, diversity, and shared learning for all students, seeing it not only as a pedagogical strategy but also as a means of fostering social change and inclusion. This perspective aligns with UNESCO (2024), which frames inclusion as a right and social justice concern, and is supported by Zubia (2023), Nilholm and Göransson (2021), Woodcock et al. (2022), Saloviita (2020), and Raguindin et al. (2021), who emphasize its role in promoting empathy, communication, academic success, and belonging. However, teachers consistently reported major structural constraints such as insufficient manpower, time, materials, and institutional support, which contribute to stress and burnout and reveal a gap between policy

intentions and classroom realities (Olalekan-Maxwell, 2023; Ngadni et al., 2023; Mahmud et al., 2023; Arias et al., 2023). They also highlighted difficulties in addressing wide learner diversity due to limited time, training, and resources, making differentiated instruction and meaningful participation challenging (Li, 2022; Pasumala et al., 2024).

Teachers further emphasized that parental involvement is essential for inclusive education but is often hindered by denial, stigma, limited awareness, and time constraints, weakening school-home collaboration (Yilmaz & Yeganeh, 2021; Raguindin et al., 2021; Modiba & Masunungure, 2024). In response to these challenges, participants actively implement adaptive strategies such as differentiated instruction, visual aids, assistive technology, peer learning, and behavioral support, demonstrating strong commitment and creativity in inclusive practice (Woodcock et al., 2022; Miña, 2024; Pasumala et al., 2024). Collaboration with colleagues, specialists, administrators, and families was also consistently identified as essential, reinforcing inclusion as a shared responsibility supported by teamwork and partnerships (Raguindin et al., 2021; Li, 2022).

Despite systemic limitations, participants reported significant personal and professional growth through inclusive education, including increased empathy, patience, creativity, and reflective practice, indicating that inclusion transforms both teaching practice and teacher identity (Sanger, 2020; Pasumala et al., 2024). However, they also pointed to persistent gaps between inclusive policies and actual implementation, including inadequate resources, unclear execution, and unrealistic expectations that hinder effective practice (Ainscow, 2020; Modiba & Masunungure, 2024; Rakhmatov, 2024). Overall, while inclusive education is widely valued and actively practiced through adaptive and collaborative strategies, its sustainability remains dependent on stronger systemic support, policy alignment, and institutional commitment.

Insights Derived from the Themes. These insights captured how inclusive education is understood, sustained, and challenged within public schools in Japan. They also revealed the interplay between teachers' values, classroom realities, and systemic conditions that shape inclusive practice. Table 3 presented the summary of insights drawn from the themes, followed by a detailed discussion.

Table 3
Insights Derived from Emerging Themes

Themes	Insights Derived
Resource Constraints and Workload Challenges in Meeting Diverse Needs	Systemic constraints hinder differentiation.
Parental Involvement Collaboration and Support Systems	Collaboration and family engagement is
Policy and Systemic Gaps	Policy gap persists.
Philosophy of Inclusion Adaptive Strategies Teacher Growth	Inclusive education transforms teachers.

The findings show that inclusive education in Japan's public schools is both a philosophy rooted in equity and empathy and a practice constrained by systemic limitations. Teachers demonstrated strong moral commitment to inclusion, emphasizing fairness, compassion, and respect for diversity as central values in education. However, participants noted that these values alone are insufficient without adequate institutional support. Consistent with Ainscow (2020) and United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (2020), the study suggests that meaningful inclusion can only be achieved when teacher commitment is supported by effective educational systems and reforms. Participants identified inadequate resources, heavy workloads, large class sizes, limited manpower, and insufficient instructional materials as major barriers that contribute to stress, frustration, and burnout. These challenges were particularly evident among junior high school teachers, who faced stricter academic demands and larger classes, reflecting the findings of Mahmoud et al. (2023), Arias et al. (2023), and Ngadni et al. (2023).

Collaboration emerged as a critical factor in sustaining inclusive education. Teachers relied heavily on cooperation with colleagues, specialists, administrators, and families to better address students' needs and adapt instruction accordingly. Homeroom teachers frequently monitored students' daily conditions and shared relevant information with other educators and specialists, while subject teachers depended on this collaboration to make appropriate classroom adjustments. Beyond improving instruction, collaboration also provided emotional and professional support that reduced stress and strengthened teacher resilience, supporting the findings of Raguindin et al. (2021) and Miña (2024). Nevertheless, participants reported challenges in building strong partnerships with some parents due to stigma, limited awareness of disabilities, and inconsistent involvement. Similar to the conclusions of Raguindin et al. (2021) and Yilmaz and Yeganeh (2021), the study highlights that successful inclusion requires not only school-based collaboration but also broader community understanding and support for inclusive practices.

The study also revealed persistent gaps between inclusive education policies and actual classroom realities. Although teachers supported inclusive policies, many believed implementation remained difficult because of insufficient training, limited resources, and lack of adaptation to current school conditions. Experienced teachers often compensated through creativity and resourcefulness, while newer teachers felt unprepared to manage inclusive classrooms independently. These findings align with Pasumala et al. (2024), Kaizu et al. (2024), and Modiba and Masunungure (2024), who emphasized the importance of contextualized professional development and policy support. Despite these difficulties, participants reported personal and professional growth through inclusive teaching, including increased empathy, patience, creativity, and self-efficacy. Consistent with Sanger (2020) and Woodcock et al. (2022), the findings suggest that inclusive education transforms teachers by

encouraging more reflective, relationship-centered, and adaptive approaches to teaching.

to develop the practice of inclusion in a manner that is effective and sustainable.

Table 4
Action Plan for Strengthening Inclusive Education Practices

Component	Objective	Key Activities	People Involved	Estimated Budget	Timeline
Equitable Resource Allocation and Classroom Support	Ensure appropriate human and material resources are in place for inclusive teaching	Hiring aides or co-teachers; procurement and maintenance of assistive technology; classroom accommodations checklist	School administrators, local education boards, procurement officers	¥2,500,000/year per school	Year 1
School-Embedded Inclusive Teaching Practices	Enhance daily classroom inclusivity through differentiated and flexible teaching approaches	Inclusive lesson design workshops; creation of resource banks with visual aids, adaptive tools, and digital materials; peer observation systems	General education teachers, SPED coordinators, curriculum developers	¥1,000,000/year per school	Year 1
Collaborative Support Systems within Schools	Establish structured teams for regular case conferences and planning for students with special needs	Formation of Inclusive Education Teams; appointment of Inclusive Education Coordinators; scheduled co-planning meetings	Homeroom/subject teachers, counselors, school heads, learning support staff	¥800,000/year per school	Years 1-2
Strengthened Pre-Service and In-Service Professional Development	Build teacher capacity for inclusion through practical and contextualized training	Inclusive education certification for teachers; practice-based modules; university-school partnerships	Teacher training institutions, Board of Education, in-service trainers	¥1,500,000 initial setup + ¥500,000/year	Years 1-5
Constructive Family and Community Engagement	Promote collaboration between schools and families to support inclusive learning	Parent orientation programs; multilingual communication tools; home-school communication platforms	Teachers, parents, interpreters, social workers, local NGOs.	¥600,000/year per school	Years 2-3
Policy-Implementation Alignment and Monitoring	Ensure inclusive education policies are actionable and reflect classroom realities	Orientation for new teachers; feedback loops from schools to policymakers; integration of inclusion indicators in evaluations	Education policy officers, school administrators	¥700,000/year for regional monitoring and reporting	Years 4-5

Overall, inclusive education in Japan is strengthened by teacher dedication and collaboration but remains limited by inadequate systemic support, inconsistent policy implementation, and insufficient community involvement.

Proposed Action Plan to Strengthen Inclusive Education Based on the Lived Experiences of Teachers. Table 4 presents the “Action Plan for Strengthening Inclusive Education Practices,” which outlined practical measures to support teachers, foster collaboration, and create sustainable conditions for inclusive education.

Title: Action Plan for Strengthening Inclusive Education Practices

Rationale. Based on the results of this study, the Action Plan for Enhancing Inclusive Education Practices was formulated to offer practical and responsive actions for schools. It responds to key concerns raised by teachers, such as limited training, access to resources, and more collaboration. The plan is a working tool to guide support for teachers, to build partnerships and

Objectives

1. To enhance teacher capacity through professional development and continuous support.
2. To promote collaboration among teachers, specialists, families, and communities.
3. To provide adequate resources and personnel to address diverse learners' needs.
4. To strengthen alignment between school practices and national policies on inclusion.
5. To support the sustainability of inclusive practices through monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

To provide transparency on how the proposed budget was developed, please refer to Appendix G, which presents the detailed breakdown of expenses for each component of the action plan. Estimated costs were derived from the average market prices of services and materials in

Japan, such as teacher assistant salaries, training honoraria, instructional materials, ICT tools, and assistive technologies (DataM Intelligence, 2024; Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare [MHLW], 2024).

Furthermore, this allocation is consistent with international models of inclusive education financing. For example, a cost assessment in Cameroon concluded that most of the inclusive education budgets were spent on staff and training, with the expenditure per school per year estimated at around USD 23,354 (Sightsavers, 2022). Equally, a multi-country costing analysis also noted that salaries, teacher training and assistive devices are the largest cost drivers in diverse environments (Sightsavers, 2024).

Lastly, implementing this plan in phases makes it feasible and sustainable. Teacher training, peer mentoring, and other short-term actions in the first year take priority. These initiatives are considered to be a good start in carrying out inclusive reforms, according to UNESCO (2020). Next come the medium-term plans involving the hiring of assistants, procurement of resources, etc., in the second and third years. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2024) argues that this allows for adequate preparation and involvement of stakeholders. This order of implementation is congruent with Japan's current reforms, such as the COCOLO Plan launched in 2023, laying the groundwork first before pushing for major reforms (World Economic Forum, 2025). When short-term and medium-term policies have stabilized, it is recommended that initiatives for evaluation and monitoring be introduced roughly around the fourth or fifth year (Kaizu et al., 2024; National Institute for Educational Policy Research [NIER], 2023). Five years is a standard time frame in line with the norms for planning in the education sectors of the UNESCO, the OECD and the Japanese policy frameworks, which is sufficient time to allow for evidence-based modifications and for institutionalization.

Theoretical Frameworks Supporting the Findings. The findings of this study can be meaningfully understood through several interrelated theories that together explain how teachers in public schools in Japan experience and sustain inclusive education. The results revealed that inclusion is not solely a matter of individual commitment, but a process shaped by systemic conditions, teacher agency, and motivation within the school context.

The Social Systems Theory (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021) explains that an educational institution is a system with interrelated structures, namely, administration, policy, curriculum, and classroom practice. Coherence between these systems is essential for inclusion to thrive. As participants mentioned in this study, misalignment between these structures, such as heavy workloads, lack of support, etc., makes inclusion difficult to carry out.

Concurrently, the Teacher Agency Framework (Terosky, 2024) sees teachers as active players in developing inclusion. In this study, teachers make a big difference in realizing inclusion through their dedication and commitment. To combat systemic inefficiencies, teachers find ways to make the most of their resources and take personal initiatives to make sure all learners' needs are accommodated to the best of their abilities. This suggests that teachers' efforts are as important as policy implementations in shaping inclusion.

Finally, the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020) illustrates the reason why teachers remain motivated and resilient despite the challenges. According to this theory, intrinsic motivation is driven by autonomy, competence, and social connection. As evidenced by the study, participants feel encouraged when they succeed in responding to learners' needs through customized lessons and resourcefulness and when they receive support from their colleagues. On the contrary, teachers having limited control over curriculum requirements and being subjected to administrative pressures are left with

frustration and dissatisfaction. Taken together, these theories show that inclusive education is both structural and human. It relies on coherent systems, empowered teachers, and conditions that foster intrinsic motivation factors that must interact to make inclusion sustainable and meaningful in Japan's public schools.

DISCUSSION

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of inclusive education teachers in elementary and junior high schools in Japan, focusing on their understanding of inclusion, the challenges they face, and the strategies they employ in practice. Findings showed that teachers viewed inclusive education as both a symbol of equality and a professional responsibility. While participants experienced personal and professional growth through inclusive teaching, they also encountered systemic barriers such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient support, and inconsistent parental involvement. Thematic analysis generated eight interconnected themes: understanding the philosophy of inclusion, resource and workload constraints, addressing diverse learner needs, parental involvement, adaptive instructional practices, collaboration and support systems, policy-practice gaps, and teacher growth. These themes highlighted the tension between inclusive ideals and classroom realities while demonstrating teachers' resilience, empathy, and adaptability.

The study further revealed that inclusive education in Japan is highly dependent on teacher commitment, collaboration, and contextual factors. Elementary homeroom teachers were generally better able to provide individualized support because of their close daily interaction with students, whereas junior high school teachers faced greater curriculum demands and larger class sizes. General education teachers struggled to address diversity in large classrooms, while special education teachers emphasized systemic limitations and challenges in parental cooperation. In response to these findings, the

study proposed a six-component action plan that included equitable resource allocation, embedded inclusive teaching practices, collaborative support systems, strengthened professional development, enhanced family and community engagement, and improved policy implementation and monitoring. The plan aimed to provide a sustainable and context-sensitive framework grounded in teachers' lived experiences.

The study concluded that inclusive education reshapes teachers' professional identities by encouraging them to become advocates of equality, empathy, and social development rather than merely implementers of policy. However, successful inclusion requires alignment between inclusive goals and institutional realities, as systemic constraints continue to hinder effective implementation. The findings also emphasized that inclusive education is context-sensitive, influenced by school level, teacher roles, and community conditions, making collaboration among stakeholders essential for sustainable inclusion. Based on these insights, the study recommended increasing classroom support, improving access to resources and assistive technologies, strengthening collaboration among teachers, specialists, administrators, and families, and developing context-responsive policies and professional development programs. Future research is encouraged to explore the perspectives of administrators, parents, and students, as well as investigate innovative practices across different educational contexts.

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