



Teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy on implementing inclusive education in Japan and Finland: A comparative study using multi-group structural equation modelling

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H I G H L I G H T S

- Teacher self-efficacy and attitudes on inclusion in Japan and Finland are examined.
- Testing measurement invariance showed cross-cultural validity of the used scales.
- The strongest predictor was experience in teaching students with disabilities.
- A longer teaching career had a positive impact on teachers' self-efficacy in Japan.
- The amount of inclusive education training affected positively only in Finland.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Article history:

Received 1 November 2017

Received in revised form

19 June 2018

Accepted 19 July 2018

Keywords:

Inclusive education

Teachers

Attitudes

Self-efficacy

Multi-group structural equation modelling

Measurement invariance

A B S T R A C T

This study aims to explore relationships between teachers' attitudes, self-efficacy, and background variables regarding inclusive education by using a sample of 359 Japanese and 872 Finnish teachers. A multi-group structural equation modelling was conducted to find similarities and differences in how the background variables predict teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy. Experience in teaching students with disabilities had a positive effect on teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy in both countries. However, teachers' teaching career and the amount of inclusive education training affected them differently in Japan and Finland. The findings could be used to improve inclusive education training for pre- and in-service teachers.

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1. Introduction

After the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education was published (UNESCO, 1994), there has been a growing trend to develop national education systems towards inclusive education around the world. This trend has been further enforced by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), which regards inclusive

education as a universal human rights objective. The definition of inclusive education has been extended to school systems in which all children, including children from ethnic minorities, children from low socio-economic or otherwise disadvantaged background, and children with disabilities, can obtain access to their local schools (Mitchell, 2005; de Boer, Jan Pijl, Minnaert, & Tied, 2011; Savolainen, 2009). However, in many countries, the scope of inclusive education is often limited to specific types of children. In Japan, for example, inclusive education is still considered as an issue on how to educate students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms and how to arrange special needs education for those who need it (Forlin, Kawai, & Higuchi, 2015). Similarly, in Finland,

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inclusive education is most often understood as a pragmatic approach to offering the best possible support for those who need it, particularly students defined as having Special Educational Needs (SEN) (Malinen, Väisänen, & Savolainen, 2012).

Although providing quality education for all children is a global agenda (United Nations General Assembly, 2015), there are various ways to apply the concept of inclusion to policies and practices in each country, according to cultural and historical background (Artiles & Dyson, 2005; Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Nel, & Malinen, 2012). Therefore, comparative analysis needs to consider cultural-historical factors to understand what inclusive education means and how its meaning may be influenced by social, political, economic, and cultural histories (Savolainen et al., 2012). Furthermore, outcomes of comparative studies may create new ideas and approaches for developing inclusive education in different countries (Savolainen et al., 2012). Even though many studies compare inclusive education practices as implemented in several countries, only few are available focusing on Japan and other countries.

Japanese and Finnish education systems have gained prominence because the students have showed high academic achievement in international studies such as the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (e.g., Bulle, 2011; Green, Preston, & Sabates, 2003; OECD, 2011; Savolainen, 2009; Schleicher, 2009). On one hand, the two countries are similar in that both: (a) have relative cultural homogeneity; (b) perform consistently well in international comparative studies like PISA; (c) provide nine years of free, compulsory education; and (d) show socio-economically equitable variance of learning outcomes (OECD, 2011; Schleicher, 2009). On the other hand, there are several differences. The Japanese education system is one of the most meritocratic and competitive in the world (Bulle, 2011). Structural elements of this system include large class sizes, longer schooling hours, and detailed national curriculum standards that teachers throughout the country follow (OECD, 2011). The Finnish education system, by contrast, is based on social cohesion and trust, small class sizes, relatively short schooling hours, concise national core curriculum, and high autonomy for municipalities, schools, and teachers (OECD, 2011). As can be expected, Japan and Finland have applied different approaches to inclusive education. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to compare elements of inclusive education in Japan and Finland – specifically, teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy concerning inclusive education in these two countries.

1.1. Inclusive education in Japan

After World War II, the Constitution of Japan based on democracy was promulgated. In the Constitution, the right to education was guaranteed for everyone, and several amendments to policies and school reforms were introduced to develop education systems correspondingly (Nishinaka, 2012). For students with disabilities, the compulsory special education system was started in 1979 (Muta, 2002). Until then, many students with disabilities did not have access to schools and stayed at home (Nagano & Weinberg, 2012). After this school reform, even children with severe disabilities gained access to public education (Muta, 2002); nevertheless, students with disabilities were educated separately in special schools (Nagano & Weinberg, 2012). Criticism against this segregated education was increasing in response to the worldwide trend towards inclusive education (Shimono, 2016), and the resource room system was established in 1993 in which students with mild disabilities could receive special education services while spending most of their time in regular classrooms (Muta, 2002; Nagano & Weinberg, 2012). Besides, the Japanese government replaced the special education system called *Tokushukyoiku* with

the special needs education system called *Tokubetsushienkyoiku* in 2007, and this was a major turning point for Japanese inclusive education (Miyoshi, 2009; Shoji, 2015). The aim of this new system was to provide appropriate support for children with individual needs (Nagano & Weinberg, 2012). Until that time, special educational support was offered mainly for students belonging to special schools or special classes, but under the current system, officially everyone who needed support can obtain it at any type of school (Shoji, 2015). According to the *Committee of Elementary and Lower Secondary Education in the Central Council for Education* (2012), municipalities or schools must provide 'reasonable accommodations' for students with disabilities. This term was emphasised in the Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and was defined as making necessary and suitable modifications and adjustments to ensure the rights of children with disabilities to receive education equal to that of other children without imposing a disproportionate or undue burden on municipalities or schools (United Nations, 2006). Furthermore, in 2013, the educational placement decision system for students with disabilities was revised through a partial amendment to the Enforcement Ordinance of the School Education Law (MEXT, 2013). In the new system, children with disabilities who formerly were persuaded to enrol in special schools gained alternative choices for educational placements (Forlin et al., 2015). Although an education board of each municipality determines school enrolment, it must respect children's and guardians' opinions as much as possible (MEXT, 2013). Overall, the school reform towards inclusive education was promoted rapidly within 10 years after the long history of segregated education in Japan.

Several challenges of inclusive education have been pointed out since the new special needs education system was established. First, Miyoshi (2009) argues that although this system is based on the concept of normalization, actual practices in schools differ from the concept, and segregated education continues. According to the MEXT (2016) report, there were 1114 special needs schools and 54,586 special needs classes at the primary and the secondary level. The number of pupils studying in such schools or classes is increasing, and this is a retrograde phenomenon towards inclusive education (Institute for Global Education and Culture, 2007). Additionally, it is suggested that children with disabilities and their guardians are not able to fully exercise their rights to state their opinions, as there is insufficient support not only in the law but also in practice to ask for necessary help in regular classrooms (Nagano & Weinberg, 2012). In the same vein, Watanabe (2012) claims that no legal regulations define reasonable accommodations for children with disabilities, with that task left to the discretion of municipalities and schools.

1.2. Inclusive education in Finland

Since Finland's independence in 1917, Finnish educational policies and systems have been constructed and reformed several times to improve basic education. According to Halinen and Järvinen (2008), the development of the Finnish education system towards inclusive education has been threefold: (a) the stage of 'access to education' in which the general compulsory education was developed according to the Compulsory School Attendance Act in 1921; (b) the stage of 'access to quality education' in which the current comprehensive school system was adopted in the 1960s and 1970s; and (c) the stage of 'access to success in learning' in which students' needs and quality instruction were discussed in the 1990s. Perhaps the most drastic change during the past 50 years occurred after the Educational Act was passed in Parliament in 1968 starting the nine-year comprehensive school system (Halinen & Järvinen, 2008; Kivirauma & Ruoho, 2007; Savolainen, 2009).

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