

Article

Leisure Instruction Content Considered Important by Special Education Teachers for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Kazuaki Maebara ^{1,*}  and Yukiya Yamada ²¹ Graduate School of Education, Akita University, Akita 010-8502, Japan² Kimitsu Special Needs Education School, Kimitsu 299-1161, Japan; yamadasnowmanrun@gmail.com

* Correspondence: maebara-kazuaki@ed.akita-u.ac.jp

Abstract: Leisure education has the potential to improve the quality of life and prepare students for social participation after graduation. This study elucidates the perspectives of special education teachers on leisure instruction. The study surveyed 129 teachers from 10 special needs schools for students with intellectual disabilities in Prefecture A, a rural area of Japan. An online survey was conducted from 21 October to 17 November 2023. The survey items were based on 13 aspects of leisure instruction identified from a literature review related to leisure instruction in Japan and a qualitative analysis of interviews with high school teachers in special needs schools for students with intellectual disabilities. The results showed that “The ability to pass time during brief periods of free time”, “Various activity experiences that lead to leisure”, and “Knowing one’s strengths and weaknesses in activities” were significantly more important during school. Conversely, “understanding the psychological importance of leisure”, “connecting with organizations that support leisure activities”, and “finding places to engage in leisure activities” were significantly more important after graduation. The results of this study can be used to identify the gaps in perception between special education teachers and vocational rehabilitation practitioners responsible for post-social participation support.

Keywords: leisure instruction; intellectual disabilities; social participation; special education; vocational life



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1. Introduction

Recently, various initiatives have been undertaken in Japan to promote the social participation of students with disabilities. The Basic Act for Persons with Disabilities defines social participation as the coexistence of all citizens with mutual respect for each other’s personality and individuality, without being separated by disability [1]. As of March 2022, 32.7% of the students with intellectual disabilities who graduated from the high school division of special needs schools in Japan have transitioned to competitive employment, and this percentage has been on the rise [2]. The proportion of companies achieving employment quotas for people with disabilities under Japan’s employment quota system has been steadily increasing [3]. Special needs schools play a critical role in the transition of students to society.

Supporting leisure activities as part of efforts to promote the social participation of students with disabilities is beneficial. In this study, supporting leisure time activities refers to educational support that enables individuals to participate in voluntary leisure activities while working. Leisure activities improve quality of life [4–7]. Individuals unable to work for extended periods because of disabilities may experience an imbalance between work and leisure [8,9]. Leisure activities are essential for rediscovering meaning in daily

life [10]. Stability in occupational life, including leisure, contributes to job adaptation and continuous employment [11–14].

Leisure education in special needs education aims to help children with disabilities overcome difficulties in living and learning, acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for independence, and enhance their leisure time. Leisure education is currently implemented in special needs education programs in Japan to promote social participation after graduation. According to the “Guidelines for Special Needs School Curriculum”, which serves as the instructional guide for special needs education in Japan, it is necessary “not only to ensure that students can make a living and earn wages through work, thereby fulfilling their roles in society, but also to find purpose in life through lifelong learning and experiences such as learning, culture, and sports, and to connect with others” [15]. Additionally, it is stated that “leisure enriches life and is important for leading a healthy school life and future occupational life” [16]. Based on these guidelines, teachers involved in special needs education can provide leisure education. For example, in special needs schools, leisure education includes art clubs, Facebook activities, and shopping training.

In Japan, there have been reports of leisure instruction being conducted on holidays at special needs schools [17–19] and leisure activities integrated into classrooms [20–25]. However, most of these practices have been limited to merely increasing the repertoire of leisure activities and fall short of providing education that promotes a fulfilling social life after graduation [26]. For example, despite their social participation, they often maintain a lifestyle with no leisure time, only going back and forth between work and home, or in a situation where they have no enjoyment of life supported by their work, such as having no use for their salary. This can result in problems such as job withdrawal. It is necessary to foster the acquisition of various skills and enrich life through leisure instruction [27–30].

It is essential to implement leisure education in special needs education programs to support social participation after graduation. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the perspectives of special needs education teachers on leisure instruction. To develop support programs for leisure instruction in special needs education, it is necessary to clarify teachers’ perceptions of leisure education. It is believed that teachers in special needs schools who provide leisure education to their students do so with some intention. Therefore, it is important to clarify their perceptions of leisure education. Therefore, this study aimed to clarify the perceptions of special needs education teachers regarding leisure education.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

A survey was sent to 10 of the 11 special needs schools for students with intellectual disabilities in Prefecture A, a rural area in Japan, who agreed to participate. All special needs schools were exclusively for children with severe to moderate intellectual disabilities. One school was unable to participate in the survey because the school’s policy was to reduce the workload of teachers who belonged to the school, and the principal’s decision was not to allow the school to participate in the survey. A total of 538 teachers from these 10 schools were invited to participate, and responses were obtained from 129 teachers. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. Most teachers held university degrees or higher. The average age of the participants was 44.1 years, and the average number of years of support experience was 18.9 years.

Table 1. Demographic information.

Gender	N	%
Male	42	32.6
Female	87	67.4
Other	0	0.0
Total	129	100.0
Education	N	%
High school	0	0.0
Vocational school	1	0.8
Junior college	0	0.0
University	121	93.8
Graduate school	7	5.4
Total	129	100.0
	Mean	SD
Age	44.1	9.67
Years of support experience	18.9	9.42

SD = Standard Deviation.

The final education level for most teachers was a university degree or higher. This was expected because a school teaching license must be obtained at the university level. Teachers likely attended vocational or graduate schools after university graduation to obtain additional qualifications.

2.2. Procedure

Between 21 October and 17 November 2023, a request letter containing a URL link to an online survey was emailed to all 10 special needs schools for students with intellectual disabilities.

2.3. Survey Items

2.3.1. Demographic Information

Participants were asked to provide their sex (male, female, or other), the highest level of education (junior high school, high school, vocational school, junior college, university, or graduate school (master's/doctorate), and their age and years of experience as of 31 March 2024.

2.3.2. Leisure Instruction-Related Items

The 13 items related to leisure instruction surveyed in this study are presented in Table 2.

The researchers of this study initially developed the survey items. To increase validity and reliability, the items were based on results from a study of special needs practices in Japan and interviews with special education teachers [31,32]. Items related to leisure instruction were developed from a qualitative analysis of instructional content, drawing on a literature review of leisure activities in Japan [33] and interviews with high school teachers at special needs schools for students with intellectual disabilities [31,32]. This qualitative analysis identified six categories of instructional content required by teachers at special needs schools to improve their students' leisure skills: "skills necessary for enriching leisure", "student challenges", "instruction content", "challenges in school-based instruction", "parental awareness", and "perceptions of leisure". The survey items were refined by the researchers using insights from these studies. During the item development process, feedback was received from a researcher with expertise in special needs education and vocational rehabilitation, as well as from two special needs education teachers with more than 10 years of experience.

Table 2. Items related to leisure instruction.

No.	Items
1	The ability to choose one's own leisure activities
2	The ability to pass time during brief periods of free time
3	Having friends to play with during holidays
4	Spending time with others
5	Understanding the psychological importance of leisure
6	Various activity experiences that lead to leisure
7	Understanding how to spend time outside the workplace
8	Managing finances necessary for leisure activities
9	Securing transportation needed for leisure activities
10	Acquiring a repertoire of easy-to-do activities
11	Knowing one's strengths and weaknesses in activities
12	Connecting with organizations that support leisure activities
13	Finding places to engage in leisure activities

The respondents in the current study were asked to rate the importance of 13 items related to leisure instruction (see Table 2) on a 5-point scale (unimportant = 1, 2 = not very important, undecided = 3, somewhat important = 4, and important = 5) based on their perceptions at various times during school and after graduation. The questions for the 13 items are organized according to the following two patterns:

During school: To what extent do you think it is important to guide classes and school situations before graduation?

After graduation: To what extent do you think it is important to guide social life situations after graduation?

2.4. Data Analysis

The mean scores for each item related to leisure behavior were calculated, and a ranking of the importance of instruction during the school years and postgraduate period was created. Additionally, paired t-tests were conducted to examine the differences in the importance of instruction between the school years and post-graduation for each item. SPSS Statistics version 29 was used for the analysis, and the t-test was conducted before the t-test to confirm the normality of the data, as well as to test the effect size. In this study, the significance level was set to 0.5%.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

When conducting the survey, explanations regarding the protection of personal information were provided on the front page of the questionnaire, and consent was obtained through participants' responses. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee for Human Subjects at the Tegata Campus of Akita University (Approval No. 5-37, dated 11 October 2023).

3. Results

3.1. Importance of Instructional Items

Table 3 shows the ranking of the instructional items in order of importance during school attendance. Teachers recognized the importance of items related to preparing students to select and engage in leisure activities within society, such as "Knowing one's strengths and weaknesses in activities" (rank 1), "Various activity experiences that lead to leisure" (rank 2), and "The ability to pass time during brief periods of free time" (rank 3).

Table 3. Importance of instructional items during school attendance.

Rank	Items	Mean	SD
1	Knowing one's strengths and weaknesses in activities	4.57	0.66
2	Various activity experiences that lead to leisure	4.48	0.70
3	The ability to pass time during brief periods of free time	4.47	0.71
4	The ability to choose one's own leisure activities	4.47	0.65
5	Managing finances necessary for leisure activities	4.43	0.58
6	Understanding how to spend time outside the workplace	4.32	0.72
7	Securing transportation needed for leisure activities	4.31	0.56
8	Spending time with others	4.23	0.81
9	Connecting with organizations that support leisure activities	4.22	0.79
10	Acquiring a repertoire of easy-to-do activities	4.19	0.70
11	Understanding the psychological importance of leisure	4.03	0.77
12	Finding places to engage in leisure activities	3.97	0.74
13	Having friends to play with during holidays	3.85	0.78
Total ($\alpha = 0.859$)		4.27	0.43

Table 4 shows the ranking of instructional items in order of importance after graduation. Unlike during school attendance, teachers recognized the importance of items related to the concrete actions necessary to engage in leisure activities, such as "Managing finances necessary for leisure activities" (rank 1), "The ability to choose one's own leisure activities" (rank 2), and "Connecting with organizations that support leisure" (rank 3).

Table 4. Importance of instructional items after graduation.

Rank	Items	Mean	SD
1	Managing finances necessary for leisure activities	4.50	0.65
2	The ability to choose one's own leisure activities	4.44	0.71
3	Connecting with organizations that support leisure	4.40	0.74
4	Knowing one's strengths and weaknesses in activities	4.34	0.72
5	The ability to pass time during brief periods of free time	4.34	0.78
6	Understanding how to spend time outside the workplace	4.28	0.75
7	Securing transportation needed for leisure activities	4.23	0.71
8	Understanding the psychological importance of leisure	4.19	0.69
9	Various activity experiences that lead to leisure	4.16	0.77
10	Acquiring a repertoire of easy-to-do activities	4.16	0.82
11	Spending time with others	4.12	0.81
12	Finding places to engage in leisure activities	4.12	0.77
13	Having friends to play with during holidays	3.92	0.81
Total ($\alpha = 0.929$)		4.25	0.55

In both periods, the item "Having friends to play with during holidays" (rank 13) was rated the least important. Additionally, during school attendance, the items "Understanding the psychological importance of leisure" (rank 11) and "Finding places to engage in leisure activities" (rank 12) were rated as less important, while after graduation, "Spending time with others" (rank 11) and "Finding places to engage in leisure activities" (rank 12) were rated as less important.

3.2. Differences in the Perception of Importance Between Periods

To clarify the differences in perceptions of the importance of instructional items between school attendance and postgraduate, paired t-tests were conducted across these periods. The results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Differences in perception of importance between periods.

No.	Items	Periods	Mean	SD	t-Value	p-Value	
1	The ability to choose one's own leisure activities	During After	4.47 4.44	0.65 0.71	0.484	0.62	n.s.
2	The ability to pass time during brief periods of free time	During After	4.47 4.34	0.71 0.78	2.042	0.04	*
3	Having friends to play with during holidays	During After	3.85 3.92	0.78 0.81	−1.013	0.31	n.s.
4	Spending time with others	During After	4.23 4.12	0.81 0.81	1.795	0.07	n.s.
5	Understanding the psychological importance of leisure	During After	4.03 4.19	0.77 0.69	−2.302	0.02	*
6	Various activity experiences that lead to leisure	During After	4.48 4.16	0.70 0.77	4.954	0.00	**
7	Understanding how to spend time outside the workplace	During After	4.32 4.28	0.72 0.75	0.584	0.56	n.s.
8	Managing finances necessary for leisure activities	During After	4.43 4.50	0.58 0.65	−1.365	0.17	n.s.
9	Securing transportation needed for leisure activities	During After	4.31 4.23	0.56 0.71	1.197	0.23	n.s.
10	Acquiring a repertoire of easy-to-do activities	During After	4.19 4.12	0.70 0.77	1.450	0.15	n.s.
11	Knowing one's strengths and weaknesses in activities	During After	4.57 4.34	0.66 0.72	4.029	0.00	**
12	Connecting with organizations that support leisure activities	During After	4.22 4.40	0.79 0.74	−2.760	0.01	*
13	Finding places to engage in leisure activities	During After	3.97 4.16	0.74 0.82	−3.208	0.00	**
	Total	During After	4.27 4.25	0.43 0.55	0.808	0.42	n.s.

n.s. = not significant, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

The analysis revealed that the importance of the following instructional items was significantly higher during school attendance: “The ability to pass time during brief periods of free time” ($p < 0.05$), “Various activity experiences that lead to leisure” ($p < 0.01$), and “Knowing one's strengths and weaknesses in activities” ($p < 0.01$). Conversely, the importance of “understanding the psychological importance of leisure” ($p < 0.05$), “connecting with organizations that support leisure activities” ($p < 0.05$), and “finding places to engage in leisure activities” ($p < 0.01$) was significantly higher after graduation.

4. Discussion

This study examined the content of leisure education as perceived by special education teachers in Japan. Supporting the development of the environments and skills necessary for leisure participation is said to increase socially positive activities [34–36]. Enhancing leisure education is essential for promoting social participation among students with intellectual disabilities. In this study, the teachers recognized the importance of providing instructions to help students select leisure activities based on their self-awareness during their school years, such as understanding their strengths and weaknesses. After graduation, the teachers emphasized the importance of instruction related to the practical implementation of leisure activities, such as managing the finances necessary for leisure activities. Therefore, teachers should support students with intellectual disabilities throughout their transition to society. While this study used quantitative methods to analyze the data, the integration of qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews or case studies, could

provide a richer understanding of the practical challenges faced by teachers and the nuanced needs of students. Future studies should adopt a mixed-methods design to fully explore these dimensions.

The results provide insights into how special education teachers view leisure education. From previous studies, perceiving leisure merely as unstructured time or a way to pass time could lead to meaningless leisure activities, which may ultimately contribute to the deterioration of the health of individuals with disabilities [37]. It has been suggested that leisure education not only helps individuals with disabilities maintain their health but also provides a way for them to contribute to their communities [38]. Thus, the importance of leisure education is evident. Previous research has often focused on the therapeutic and health benefits of leisure education for individuals with intellectual disabilities, while less attention has been paid to its role in equipping students with skills for lifelong social participation. This study bridges this gap by providing empirical insights into how teachers perceive leisure education as a tool for promoting students' autonomy and self-efficacy. Additionally, it underscores the need for more structured leisure education programs that are aligned with students' post-graduation realities.

Teachers conduct their current leisure education for future social participation. However, leisure issues may arise during this transition process to society. For example, even if individuals participate in leisure activities, there may be ongoing social exclusion because of a lack of interaction with non-disabled peers [39] or instances where an imbalance between work and life is caused by insufficient instruction during school years [40]. Although special education teachers provide sufficient instruction on leisure activities, there may be inconsistencies between the mechanisms related to leisure activities in society and the support provided after social participation. To further improve special education, teachers must be aware of the current perspectives on leisure education and consciously link instruction provided during the school years with that provided after graduation, continuing to engage in educational activities as part of ongoing transition support. In this context, collaboration between special education and vocational rehabilitation in Japan must be reconsidered from the perspective of supporting students' smooth transition from school to corporate employment. Rather than simply moving students with intellectual disabilities into employment, it is necessary to provide them with leisure education that will enable them to obtain quality employment and participate meaningfully in society with confidence.

The study focused mainly on students' experiences during their school years and shortly after leaving school. However, the long-term effects of leisure education on social participation and quality of life remain unexplored. The implementation of longitudinal studies, such as regular follow-up surveys or case studies, will be crucial in assessing the sustainability and wider impact of recreational education. In addition, collaboration between special education teachers and vocational rehabilitation specialists should be strengthened to ensure the continuity and effectiveness of leisure education programs. Such interdisciplinary efforts could bridge the gaps between school-based education and post-school support, thereby improving the overall quality of transition support. This study contributes to the field of recreational education by highlighting the perspectives of special education teachers in Japan, a context where recreational education has received limited scholarly attention. Unlike previous studies, which have focused primarily on therapeutic outcomes, this research emphasizes the preparatory and transitional role of leisure education, addressing gaps in both educational practice and policy. By identifying specific instructional priorities, such as self-awareness and practical skills, this study provides actionable insights for the development of targeted leisure education programs that support students with intellectual disabilities in their transition to adulthood.

5. Conclusions

A significant contribution of this study is that it sheds light on special education teachers' perspectives on instruction in leisure activities. Leisure is not an activity that hinders work; rather, it is an important aspect that provides benefits similar to those of employment, such as self-esteem and social integration [41]. This study revealed that special education teachers in Japan recognize the necessity of leisure education, highlighting the need to further develop and improve educational programs. The limitation of this study is that it requires responses based on the perceptions of teachers who fully understand the realities of their students, but not real students' needs. Future program construction should also consider students' needs.

We believe that research derived from this study will contribute to improving transition support for students with disabilities in Japan. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable information for the development of educational programs. The leisure instruction items surveyed in this study represent only a pool of leisure education instructional content that teachers must handle. Further studies on the relationships between these items are needed for future program construction. Our research may help bridge this gap by enabling special education teachers to provide better education. As part of our role in training teachers for special needs education in Japan, there is so much for teachers to learn. Specific instruction is usually learned through experience after becoming a teacher. Additionally, awareness of the importance of leisure education remains limited. Furthermore, we plan to use the results of this study to identify gaps in perceptions between special education teachers and vocational rehabilitation practitioners who are responsible for post-social participation support and to report on the practical implementation of specific educational programs.

Future research should address the long-term impact of leisure education through longitudinal studies and explore the integration of qualitative methods to provide deeper insights into the practical challenges and successes of leisure education. Based on the findings, there is a need to provide specific policy recommendations to assist educational institutions and government agencies in promoting leisure education. These include allocating adequate resources, providing professional training for educators, and fostering collaboration between relevant stakeholders to develop comprehensive programs.

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