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Not peer-reviewed version

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[Kazuaki Maebara](#)^{*} and Yukiya Yamada

Posted Date: 9 September 2024

doi: 10.20944/preprints202409.0659.v1

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Article

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

Kazuaki Maebara ^{1,*} and Yukiya Yamada ²

¹ Akita University

² Kimitsu Special Needs School; yamadasnowmanrun@gmail.com

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

Abstract: Leisure education has the potential to improve quality of life and prepares students for social participation after graduation. This study aimed to elucidate the perspectives of special education teachers regarding leisure instruction. This study surveyed 538 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 October 21 to November 17, 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 will be used to identify gaps in perceptions 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

1. Introduction

Recently, various initiatives have been undertaken in Japan to promote the social participation of students with disabilities. As of March 2022, 32.7% of 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 is increasing (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2024). The proportion of companies achieving employment quotas for people with disabilities under Japan’s employment quota system has been steadily increasing (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2024). Special-needs schools have played a critical role in the transition when students enter society.

Supporting leisure activities as part of the effort to promote social participation of students with disabilities is beneficial. Leisure activities improve quality of life (Day et al., 1993; Folta et al., 1996; Campbell, 2021; Niitsuma, 2024). Individuals unable to work for extended periods due to disabilities may experience an imbalance between work and leisure (Kvam, 2015; Powrie, 2020). Leisure activities are essential for rediscovering meaning in daily life (Hammell, 2004). Stability in occupational life, including leisure, contributes to job adaptation and continuous employment (Wehman, 1977; McCarron, 1979; Nemoto, 2018; Takebe, 2021).

Currently in Japan, leisure education is implemented in special needs education programs 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” (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2018a). Additionally, it is stated that “leisure enriches life and is important for leading a healthy school life and future occupational life” (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2018b). Based on these guidelines, teachers involved in special needs education can provide leisure education.

In Japan, there have been reports of leisure instruction being conducted on holidays at special needs schools (Hosoya, 2017; Hatakeyama, 2011; Hatakeyama, 2012) and leisure activities integrated in classrooms (Okabe, 2006; Matsushita, 2008; Okamoto, 2009; Wada, 2009; Kishida, 2010; Enomoto, 2013). 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 (Nakamura, 2021). It is necessary to foster the acquisition of various skills and to enrich life through leisure instruction (Yasukawa, 2004; Kato, 2018; Matsushita, 2022; Sasaki, 2023).

It is essential to implement leisure education in special needs education 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 in the future, it is necessary to first clarify teachers’ perceptions of leisure education. This study aimed to elucidate the perceptions of special needs education teachers concerning leisure instruction.

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, that agreed to cooperate with the survey. In total, 538 teachers from these 10 schools were invited to participate, and responses were obtained from 129 teachers. Table 1 presents the participants’ demographic information. Most of the 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 of the teachers was a university degree or higher. This was expected, as a school teaching license must be obtained at university level. The teachers likely

attended vocational or graduate schools after university graduation to obtain additional qualifications.

2.2. Procedure

Between October 21 and November 17, 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

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 March 31, 2024.

Leisure Instruction-Related Items:

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

Table 2. Items related to leisure instruction.

No.	項目
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 researchers of this study initially developed the survey items. To increase validity and reliability, the items were based on results from a study in special needs practices in Japan and interviews with special education teachers. The items related to leisure instruction were developed from a qualitative analysis of instructional content, drawing on a literature review of leisure activity in Japan (Yamada and Maebara, 2023) and interviews with high school teachers at special needs schools for students with intellectual disabilities. This qualitative analysis identified six categories of instructional content needed by teachers at special needs schools to improve their 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 then 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 two special needs education teachers with more than ten years of experience.

The respondents were asked to rate the importance of 13 items related to leisure instruction using a five-point scale (unimportant = 1, not very important = 2, 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 were organized according to the following two patterns:

During school: To what extent do you think it is important to provide guidance in classes, school situations, etc., before graduation?

After graduation: To what extent do you think it is important to provide guidance in social life situations after graduation from school?

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 school years and the postgraduate period was created. Additionally, paired t-tests were conducted to examine differences in the importance of instruction between school years and postgraduation for each item.

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 October 11, 2023).

3. Results

3.1. Importance of Instructional Items

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

Table 4 shows the ranking of the 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 after graduation, 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	Rank during school
1	Managing finances necessary for leisure activities	4.50	0.65	5
2	The ability to choose one’s own leisure activities	4.44	0.71	4

3	Connecting with organizations that support leisure	4.40	0.74	9
4	Knowing one’s strengths and weaknesses in activities	4.34	0.72	1
5	The ability to pass time during brief periods of free time	4.34	0.78	3
6	Understanding how to spend time outside the workplace	4.28	0.75	6
7	Securing transportation needed for leisure activities	4.23	0.71	7
8	Understanding the psychological importance of leisure	4.19	0.69	11
9	Various activity experiences that lead to leisure	4.16	0.77	2
10	Acquiring a repertoire of easy-to-do activities	4.16	0.82	12
11	Spending time with others	4.12	0.81	8
12	Finding places to engage in leisure activities	4.12	0.77	10
13	Having friends to play with during holidays	3.92	0.81	13
合計(α=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 postgraduation, paired t-tests were conducted across these periods. The results are summarized in Table 5.

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<.05), “Various activity experiences that lead to leisure” (p<.01), and “Knowing one’s strengths and weaknesses in activities” (p<.01). Conversely, the importance of “understanding the psychological importance of leisure” (p<.05), “connecting with organizations that support leisure activities” (p<.05), and “finding places to engage in leisure activities” (p<.01) was significantly higher after graduation.

Table 5. Differences in perception of importance between periods.

No.	Items	Periods	Mean	SD	p- Value
1	The ability to choose one’s own leisure activities	During	4.47	0.65	n.s.
		After	4.44	0.71	
2	The ability to pass time during brief periods of free time	During	4.47	0.71	*
		After	4.34	0.78	
3	Having friends to play with during holidays	During	3.85	0.78	n.s.
		After	3.92	0.81	
4	Spending time with others	During	4.23	0.81	n.s.
		After	4.12	0.81	
5	Understanding the psychological importance of leisure	During	4.03	0.77	*
		After	4.19	0.69	
6	Various activity experiences that lead to leisure	During	4.48	0.70	**
		After	4.16	0.77	
7	Understanding how to spend time outside the workplace	During	4.32	0.72	n.s.
		After	4.28	0.75	
8	Managing finances necessary for leisure activities	During	4.43	0.58	n.s.
		After	4.50	0.65	
9	Securing transportation needed for leisure activities	During	4.31	0.56	n.s.
		After	4.23	0.71	
10	Acquiring a repertoire of easy-to-do activities	During	4.19	0.70	n.s.

		After	4.12	0.77	
11	Knowing one’s strengths and weaknesses in activities	During	4.57	0.66	**
		After	4.34	0.72	
12	Connecting with organizations that support leisure activities	During	4.22	0.79	*
		After	4.40	0.74	
13	Finding places to engage in leisure activities	During	3.97	0.74	**
		After	4.16	0.82	
Total		During	4.27	0.43	n.s.
		After	4.25	0.55	

4. Discussion

This study reveals 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 (Heinlein et al., 1998; Eldeniz, 2020; Eratay, 2020). Enhancing leisure education is essential to promote social participation among students with intellectual disabilities. In this study, 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. Thus, teachers should support students with intellectual disabilities throughout their transition into society.

The results provide insights into how special education teachers view leisure education. 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 (Scanlan et al., 2011). 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 (Kvam et al., 2013). Thus, the importance of leisure education is evident. The findings confirmed that the teachers conducted leisure education with a focus on social participation after graduation. Particularly during the school years, teachers provide education based on self-awareness and recognition of choices, aiming to expand leisure activity options.

Teachers conducted their current leisure education with 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 (Dusseljee et al., 2011), or instances where an imbalance between work and life is caused by insufficient instruction during school years (Maebara, 2022). While 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, it is necessary for teachers to be aware of the current perspectives on leisure education and to 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 sense, collaboration between special education and vocational rehabilitation in Japan needs to be reconsidered from the perspective of transitional support.

5. Conclusions

The 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 (Jenkins, 2002). This study revealed that special education teachers in Japan recognize the necessity of leisure education, highlighting the need to further develop and improve these educational programs. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable information for the development of educational programs. Our research may help bridge this gap by enabling special-education teachers to provide better education. Moving forward, 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.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: www.mdpi.com/xxx/s1, Figure S1: title; Table S1: title; Video S1: title.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, K. M. and Y. Y.; methodology, K. M.; validation, K. M.; investigation, K. M. and Y. Y.; resources, K. M.; data curation, K. M.; writing—original draft preparation, K. M.; writing—review and editing, K. M.; and visualization, K. M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of this manuscript.

Funding: Please add: This study was supported by the Research Startup Grant from the Japan Society of Vocational Rehabilitation.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Human Research Ethics Committee of Akita University, Tegata District (Approval No. 5-37, dated October 11, 2023).

Informed Consent Statement: In the survey, explanations regarding the protection of personal information and other matters were provided on the front page of the questionnaire, and consent was obtained by the respondents' participation in the survey.

Data Availability Statement: Data are contained within the article.

Acknowledgments: The authors thank the special education teachers who supported this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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