Six- Page Thesis Summary

1. **Clarifications**

* “International” was the umbrella term used in this thesis to include international families where at least one parent is from an international background and the primary language spoken at home is not Japanese (primarily English in the case of this thesis).
* All stages of education from pre-school to high-school were considered when collecting data and conducting interviews.
* The Japanese education system referenced in this thesis referred to the Japanese Article 1 public and private schools, defined within Article 1 of the School Education Act (Act no.26 of 1947). In the context of this thesis, the Japanese education system does not refer to alternative schools in Japan, such as international schools, ethnic schools, or free schools (although a limited number of exceptions exist).
* The implications of this thesis apply predominantly to “newcomer” foreign nationals/immigrants in Japan, a term which refers mainly to the population of immigrants who have been moving to Japan since the late 1970s and to the individuals who will be moving to Japan in the near future.

1. **Introduction**

Since the late 1970s and, particularly, since Japan revised its laws regarding immigration in the 1990s, the number of international families living in Japan has rapidly increased (Tsuneyoshi & Okano, 2012; Yamamoto, 2014). The Japanese government recently passed a law in December, 2018 that will allow for an even greater number of foreign workers to enter Japan with their families. It is likely that many of these families will have children, and that a certain number of these international children will have special needs. It is these double challenged international students with special needs (DCISwSN) that were the focus of this thesis.

The conceptual framework of this thesis was to identify the unmet needs of the DCISwSN within the Japanese education system, as well as the unmet needs of their parents. The lens to understand the unmet needs of the DCISwSN and their parents through the research, was that of the interviewed parents themselves, as well as teachers, educational figures, and government related figures. In terms of theoretical framework, John Rawls’ 1971 “Theory of Justice” was used as this thesis aimed to examine whether, currently, Japan’s society and education system is unfair and unjust towards the needs of DCISwSN.

1. **Literature Review**

Existing research conducted independently on special needs students in Japan, and on international students in Japan, demonstrated that both groups face four of the same key challenges. The same four challenges that both groups face are displayed in the table that follows.

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| --- | --- |
| **Special Needs Students Challenges** | **International Students Challenges** |
| Homogeneity of Japanese Culture | Homogeneity of Japanese Culture |
| Inflexible-Segregated Education System | Inflexible-Segregated Education System |
| Social-Emotional Issues | Social-Emotional Issues |
| Teachers’ Expertise | Teachers’ Expertise |

Consequently, it was hypothesized that the international students with special needs in Japan possibly face these four challenges at a doubled level. Thus, the term “DCISwSN” was used.

The existing Japanese literature on DCISwSN is currently limited, but importantly identifies an academic gap in this area of study on DCISwSN in Japan. Most of the existing research studies conclude that there is currently not enough data on this population of students, and that there is a need to further collect such data and study this population as it will likely be increasing in the coming years. One of the studies, conducted by Minamino (2017), points out the challenges with diagnosis and assessment of such students due to linguistic and cultural differences, as well as mentions the potential challenges that these students face in school due to these differences. Another study by Sakai & Tsuzuki (2012), points out the challenges for teachers in distinguishing between whether an international student only has a cultural/communication issue or an actual developmental disability when assessing the child.

The largest international research study conducted on international students with special needs was by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE), titled “Multicultural Diversity and Special Needs Education” (EADSNE, 2009). This study, as well as other, smaller-scale existing international research, studies about DCISwSN generally discuss the issues of language problems clouding underlying special needs problems and how this relates to unreliable assessments regarding DCISwSNs, as well as language barriers for parents limiting access to important information about Special Needs Education (SNE). In addition to this, existing international research studies also talk about teachers’ expertise as a general issue for international students with special needs, including teachers’ awareness and understanding about how to properly support a student with these needs, and the lack of training to learn how to do so.

**Significance and Overview of the Study**

As for practical significance, this thesis provided light and information on the challenges this population of students face, as well as possible solutions to these challenges. As for academic significance, this is the first research study conducted in English on the DCISwSN in Japan. It is also the first large-scale study conducted on this population of students, as the existing research in Japanese on this population of students has been at a smaller-scale until now. Finally, the research identifies important areas for further research in areas that would bring about more changes to support the DCISwSN in Japan.

*Research Questions*

MAIN RQ**:** How are the educational needs of the DCISwSN in Japan not being met within the Japanese education system?

RQ1:How does previous published literature and research show similar challenges for the independent groups of students with special needs in Japan and international students in Japan, and thus reveal similar challenges for the DCISwSN?

RQ2:How does the research conducted in this thesis identify new challenges for the DCISwSN in Japan?

RQ3: How can the needs of the DCISwSN in Japan be met, and their challenges be solved?

1. **Methodology**

For this research, a mixed methodology approach was used with a concurrent triangulation design as both quantitative and qualitative research was conducted. The mixed methodology research approach of this study includes quantitative research in the form of a questionnaire administered to international background parents in Japan who may have a child with special needs, as well as a questionnaire administered and collected at a Japanese regular public elementary school (ES).

The qualitative portion of this research took the place in the form of in-depth interviews conducted with 72 individuals over about 90 hours including some follow-up interviews. The interviews mostly took place over a course of eight months from May to December of 2018. The interviews can generally be categorized as being conducted with four different groups of individuals. These were firstly, parents of an international background with a child with special needs. Secondly, interviews were also conducted with teachers not only in Japanese ES, junior high, high, and special needs schools (SNS), but also teachers in private schools, and teachers in alternative schools as well (e.g. international schools). The three locations that were used to visit schools to administer questionnaires to teachers were selected due to their high concentration of international families living there. These three locations were Minato district of Tokyo prefecture, Tsukuba city of Ibaraki prefecture, and Higashi-Osaka city of Osaka prefecture.

Thirdly, interviews were also conducted with educational figures, meaning individuals working in different areas of education, including founders of schools, principals of schools, founders of educational organizations, and independent educational practitioners (e.g. psychologists). And finally, interviews were conducted with government related figures (GRF), such as some individuals working in a district level board of education, and a couple of individuals working in connection with MEXT.

1. **Findings**

**Qualitative**

From the interviews conducted with parents, Japanese teachers (JT), educational figures (EF), and government related figures (GRF), quotes were identified that supported the possible four identified challenges for the DCISwSN from the literature review, which included: i) the homogeneity of Japanese culture, ii) the inflexible and segregated education system, iii) social-emotional issues, and iv) teachers’ expertise. Multiple quotes were provided on these four different challenges, and these quotes were presented in the thesis in tables that were separated for each individual challenge.

Seven newly identified challenges for the DCISwSN were found after conducting the interviews, through provided quotes and remarks from the different interviewees. These seven newly identified challenges were: (i) MEXT’s central role to address issues for the DCISwSN, (ii) accessibility of information, (iii) transferability of information and lost time, (iv) parent and community strength, (v) issue of IQ tests to determine special needs not accounting for language, (vi) lack of a coherent learning plan similar to an IEP, and (vii) discord between the central government and municipal/prefectural governments.

**Quantitative**

The quantitative findings were collected from the one questionnaire administered to Japanese teachers in a public ES in the Minato district in Tokyo Prefecture, that yielded 13 responses, as well as a questionnaire administered to parents with special needs children, that yielded 24 responses. The quantitative findings were not used to provide any new findings or to identify any new challenges for the DCISwSN, but rather used as supporting quantitative data for the challenges supported and identified by the qualitative research. The most relevant and pertinent questions from the questionnaires were displayed in graphs within the thesis.

1. **Discussion**

The discussion section of the thesis analyzed how the findings supported the four identified challenges from the literature review and also identified seven new challenges for the DCISwSN. The analysis and discussion of these challenges is included in this section.

**Four Identified Challenges**

*Homogeneity of Japanese Culture*

Some parents commented on the issue of being pointed out for being different, and how this posed an additional challenge for the parents when it comes to finding a school that is a good fit for their child. Many of the parents, including those who answered the questionnaire, commented on how Japanese culture does not “value” those who may be different. Parents also pointed out in the interviews that the children themselves may not want to be perceived as different, which can occasionally dissuade these students from reaching out for support when struggling, or sharing their struggles with others.

*Inflexible and Segregated Education System*

The research showed and supported that the education system is also a big challenge for the DCISwSN. What the interviews showed is that JTs and EFs certainly feel that the major gap between the regular schools and the SNS could be a challenge. One teacher pointed out that at their SNS, there are students who probably should not be placed there. However, due to an array of issues, such as possible miscommunications and misunderstandings, the student was placed in that setting. Why this misplacement is a potential issue for the DCISwSN is best described by another teacher, who points out the issue of students who aren’t placed in a regular school setting often losing the ability to live a “fulfilling” life as possibly a result of this misplacement. “Fulfilling” in the sense of these students being placed on a special track with lower opportunity for higher education and subsequent job opportunities as they progress through the education system and further.

*Social-Emotional Issues*

The literature review suggested that social-emotional issues are one of the possible main challenges for the DCISwSN. However, the research found that social-emotional issues aren’t generally perceived as one of the main possible challenges. Within the interviews, when asked the structured question of, “What do you think is the biggest challenge for the international student with special needs in Japan?”, very rarely did a parent respond with the challenge of social-emotional. Only within the parent’s questionnaire in the provided comments did one parent share that the “bullying culture” is one of the main issues that must be changed. This is not disproving that social-emotional issues do pose as a challenge for DCISwSN, however, the research showed it is perhaps not considered as a main challenge.

*Teachers’ Expertise*

Several of the parents in the interviews mentioned that the type of support provided to their child greatly depended on the efforts of the individual teachers or teachers in leadership positions such as the principals themselves. The parents noted that if the teacher has a passion for working with the DCISwSN, the results will be successful and the child’s experience will be a positive one. However, if the teacher does not have this background or interest, the child’s experience will generally be a negative one. One teacher and another parent pointed out the issue of expertise as well, and confirmed that currently there are teachers who have not sufficiently studied special needs, and that this is an issue that must be addressed.

**Seven Newly Identified Challenges**

*Central Government’s Role to Address Issues*

The research showed that many of the challenges for DCISwSN are linked with the responsibility of the central government. One GRF pointed out that one of the major challenges potentially affecting the unmet needs of DCISwSN, is the lack of government funding and budget towards improving education in general, which is affecting not just teachers’ expertise, but available accommodations and modifications in schools as well such as available technology aids. Another issue brought up, related to the central government, is the non-recognition of alternative schools such as international schools as part of Article 1 schools. The implication for the DCISwSN is, if the parents feel that language is too much of an issue for the student to be successful in a public Japanese regular school, especially at high school level where it is more difficult to keep up academically within a regular school, the parent might feel that an international school is the best option for the child’s education. However, due to the high cost, this may not be an option for these parents, and the DCISwSN will continue to fall behind in school or possibly even drop out. Recognition of these schools as Article 1 would allow for funding opportunities, and possibly increase their affordability for parents.

*Accessibility of Information*

Out of all of the newly identified challenges, the most commonly identified one by parents when asked the structured question of, “What do you think is the biggest challenge for international students with special needs?”, was that of a lack of accessible information. What the research from this thesis found is that important information for international parents regarding SNE in Japan is not easily accessible. Some parents pointed out that even just from researching on the internet that there is not enough information available on how to understand and navigate the education system to meet the needs of the DCISwSN. Further independent research on this area showed that there is a serious lack of important information available in other languages, with what little information on SNE in Japan available mostly provided by the National Institute of Special Education (NISE). This information provided, however, is still insufficient.

*Transferability of Information and Lost Time*

The lengthy time taken for certain processes to be completed is mostly attributed to the lack of transferability of information. The missing information being referred to here is information regarding the background of the DCISwSN, which is often important for the school or board of education to know in order to make a recommendation for what school the child should attend. The research showed that a big issue for many parents is that information they have from another country is often not transferable and is not accepted once moved to Japan. Even more of a concern, as one parent pointed out, is that even sometimes assessments from one prefecture can be non-transferable when moving to a new prefecture.

*Parent and Community Strength*

The research illustrated a pattern of parents often feeling disempowered when trying to seek either language or special needs support for their child. The research showed that, although difficult, the efforts of parents that are willing to speak out to create change in the education system, particularly in the case of the rights of students with special needs, has helped to improve the situation for such students in Japan. However, as this thesis is addressing the DCISwSN, it must be acknowledged that such parental organizations and parental efforts are almost non-existent in the case of international parents in Japan. This is a certainly an issue that needs to be addressed as without a voice to be heard, the chance of any change occurring is slim.

*Issue of IQ Tests to Determine Special Needs not Accounting for Language*

One teacher remarked that IQ tests are potentially an issue for the DCISwSN as these tests are language specific and a non-Japanese speaking child may have worse results because of their possible language needs. The major implications here for the DCISwSN is that if the child has low Japanese language ability and takes the IQ test, it is possible that the child gets misplaced in a SNE setting, which parents may reject and the student can end up not receiving any support at all. A teacher remarked on how parents can fight against IQ test scores and the resulting placement, but what must be considered here is the case of international background parents who can’t fight against such a misplacement because of their own language barriers.

*Lack of a Coherent Learning Plan Similar to an IEP*

This particular challenge, which is somewhat related to the challenge of transferability of information, proved to be a common challenge discussed in the interviews with North American parents, as they were most familiar with the Individualized Education Program (IEP) provided to students with special needs in the United States. The lack of a comprehensive plan in Japanese SNE was discussed not only by these parents, but also by JT and EF as a possible issue for the DCISwSN as well. In the case of an IEP, teachers, doctors, and parents, and other stakeholders will be involved in the construction of the plan. In Japan, learning plans do exist but they are mostly handled by the teacher, with input from the parents to the level that they are willing to put into the construction of the plan.

*Discord Within Government and the Lack of a Standard*

One of the most consistently discussed newly identified challenges found in the research and interviews with parents, JTs, and EFs is the lack of a standard when it comes to support available for the DCISwSN. What the research showed is that the lack of a clear standard is a major issue for DCISwSN getting the consistent support required to meet their needs. This lack of a standard is possibly a result of the discord that exists between the central government and prefectural then municipal governments, as well as existing policies being constructed in a way that leaves them open to interpretation. The implication for the DCISwSN is that the support available to them can greatly differ from prefecture to prefecture, municipality to municipality, and even school to school.

**Recommendations for Follow-up Actions**

*Creating Better Network Opportunities for Parents*

The research conducted in this thesis showed that the issues of accessibility of information, as well as parent and community strength, are major challenges for DCISwSN and their parents. A recommended temporary solution is that of an independently created website for international parents with special needs that provides all of the information about the SNE system in Japan in a language other than Japanese. The limitation of an independently run website is that it cannot be updated as frequently or as reliably as a website with information provided by the government. A MEXT run website, would be permanent and readily accessible to parents, and updated whenever necessary. Another solution would be the possible establishment of a non-profit organization (NPO) created and run by parents of DCISwSN, aiming to share important information with one another, as well as increase recognition of the unmet needs, and fight for changes and solutions.

*Establishing Alternative Education Pathways*

A possible way to address the challenges of the DCISwSN with the inflexible and segregated Japanese education system, is the creation of alternative education pathways for the DCISwSN. The first recommended solution here for establishing alternative options would be allowing certain existing international schools that accommodate DCISwSN to be recognized by the government in order to open up opportunity for funding, thus making them more reasonable and affordable for certain families. The second solution would be the establishment of more schools within the Japanese education system that divert from the rigid national curriculum that is not well suited to the DCISwSN. The IB has recently been introduced as an alternative pathway, but it is still not an ideal one for DCISwSN. A possible recommended option to greater meet their needs would be the establishment of schools that focus on the arts as a program of study, to lead towards graduation from the school, honing in on the unique talents of certain students rather than exposing their weaknesses.

*A More Cohesive Governmental Structure for Better Support Standards*

In order to address the challenges of teachers’ expertise and the inflexible and segregated education system, the establishment of a more cohesive governmental structure is necessary. The possible recommended solution would be for MEXT to establish itself as the standard educational policy setter with the participation of the prefectures and municipalities and thus ensuring their compliance. By having MEXT set these standards more effectively, there will be less opportunity for interpretation from individual prefectures, municipalities, and schools. Improved wording of policies from MEXT, that often leave opportunity for interpretation, must be improved as well as a recommended solution. Following this as a recommendation, MEXT could try to share cases of model prefectures, municipalities, and schools that are supporting DCISwSN and whose efforts should be emulated. Although MEXT has recently made efforts to improve the challenge of teachers’ expertise, such as increasing the number of SNE license holders, the lack of standards and opportunity for interpretation of these efforts still seems to remain to be a challenge.

*Creating Standards for Assessments and Information Transferability*

A recommended solution that could certainly help in addressing the identified challenge of the inflexible and segregated education system for the DCISwSN, as well as the newly identified challenge of the transferability of information and lost time of parents, and similarly discussed as a solution in the EASNIE (2009) report, is to create an assessment system that takes into stronger consideration the language and cultural needs of the student taking it. Such an assessment should be created by professionals who have an awareness of how the language and cultural needs of an international student may be different. A recommended solution to help better address the challenge of transferability of information, which is attached to the challenge of the lack of an international assessment, is to primarily create an internationally recognized learning plan for the DCISwSN in Japan that is transferable from other countries to Japan. Following this, a nationally recognized learning plan must be created that is also transferable from prefecture to prefecture. Efforts to address this particular issue of improved learning plans with more contributors are currently being made by MEXT, but the success of its implementation is yet to be seen.

*Eliminating Stigma Within Society*

One of the first recommended solutions in how Japanese society could address the stigma within its culture towards those who are different is by uncovering the challenges of these marginalized groups, as well as identifying their strengths and possible contributions to society. This could be done by events that bring different individuals and communities together. One of the teachers interviewed discussed how the school where they work hosts community events to display traditions and beautiful parts from other cultures to the rest of the community. The upcoming 2020 Tokyo Paralympics will also be a good opportunity for Japan to show its understanding and appreciation of individuals with disabilities, and this opportunity should not be missed. Another recommendation is to create a more inclusive education system in Japan. As found in the literature review and further supported in the research, the Japanese education system is still a very segregated one, particularly when meeting the needs of DCISwSN. The segregated education system influences how DCISwSN are viewed in society, mainly due to the fact that these students are seen as different in the segregated education system, and are therefore seen as different in society as well.

1. **Conclusion**

This thesis set out to identify the challenges of the DCISwSN in Japan. It was first motivated by the awareness of the possible existence of this group of students in the Japanese education system, and with a concern for the challenges they may face. A literature review identified four possible challenges, and the research supported these challenges and identified seven new ones as well. The main limitation of this thesis was the fact that the research was mainly conducted in English, leaving many other parents of different ethnic groups with large representation in Japan not interviewed or included in the research. Their stories are extremely important for learning more about DCISwSN in Japan. The lack of quantitative research as well was a limitation, as the need for more data on this population of students is necessary. Despite these limitations, the academic implications of this study is that it has shed more light on the challenges of this population of students in Japan, narrowed the academic gap that currently exists, and opened up new avenues for further research, even possibly a comparative study with other countries in addition to Japan. In terms of practical implications, it has provided, hopefully, valuable information to parents of DCISwSN to learn more about challenges that exist, along with practical solutions and ways to possibly overcome these challenges. The conclusion section of the thesis separated the solutions into ones that are more feasible for the near future such as the creation of an independently run website, of a non-profit organization (NPO) for parents, as well as introducing more accommodations and modifications in schools. More long-term solutions are included as well, such as the greater recognition of alternative schools, a MEXT run website with centrally translated documents (perhaps through the NISE), and greater standards from the central government that can all help to better meeting the needs of the DCISwSN in Japan.

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