

Title

Reconceptualizing Inclusive Education as Institutional Design:
Bidirectional Inclusion and Temporal Governance in Upper Secondary
School Collaboration

Research Overview

This study reconceptualizes inclusive education as institutional design by analyzing collaboration between special support and general upper secondary schools in Japan. Introducing bidirectional inclusion and temporal governance, it demonstrates how relational practices and time structures reshape participation, generate institutional friction, and enable systemic redesign toward more equitable school-to-work transitions.

Research Objectives

This study aims to advance the theory and practice of inclusive education by reframing it as a problem of institutional design rather than merely a matter of placement or individualized support. Despite global policy commitments to inclusion, implementation has largely remained confined to ensuring access within existing school structures. As a result, deeper institutional conditions that shape participation—particularly temporal arrangements—have been insufficiently examined.

The study pursues three interrelated objectives. First, it seeks to conceptualize bidirectional inclusion as a relational and reciprocal process in which both special support schools and general upper secondary schools are transformed through sustained collaboration. Second, it aims to theorize temporal governance as a key institutional mechanism through which

legitimacy, participation, and transition opportunities are structured in schooling. Third, it investigates how collaborative practices across institutional boundaries generate both friction and innovation, thereby illuminating the conditions under which inclusive education can move from localized adaptation to systemic redesign.

By integrating perspectives from the sociology of education, career development, and inclusive education studies, the research contributes to international debates on how education systems can better support equitable school-to-work transitions for diverse learners.

Research Methods

The study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design focusing on sustained collaborations between special support schools and general upper secondary schools in multiple regions of Japan. These cases were selected to capture variation in organizational arrangements, curricular integration, and institutional contexts, thereby enabling analytical generalization.

Data were collected through three primary methods. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, career counselors, and coordinators involved in collaborative practices, each lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Second, classroom and workplace-based observations were carried out, particularly in vocational subjects and joint learning activities, to document interactional processes and pedagogical practices. Third, institutional documents—including curricula, timetables, and partnership agreements—were analyzed to examine formal structures and their transformation over time.

Data analysis followed an iterative coding process, combining inductive thematic analysis with theoretically informed interpretation. Triangulation across data sources ensured analytical rigor, while attention to ethical considerations—including informed consent and anonymization—was maintained throughout. This methodological design allows for a nuanced understanding of both micro-level practices and macro-level institutional dynamics.

Results and Discussion

The findings yield three major insights with theoretical and practical implications.

First, collaboration between different school types generates new forms of relational expertise among educators. Teachers and career counselors develop intermediary roles that function as translators across institutional, pedagogical, and cultural boundaries. These roles are crucial in enabling students to navigate diverse learning environments and transition pathways.

Second, inclusive education emerges as a transformative process rather than an additive one. Interaction between special support and general education contexts leads to the reconfiguration of pedagogical authority, participation norms, and learning opportunities. Notably, instances of bidirectional inclusion were observed in which general education students participated in specialized vocational settings, thereby challenging conventional one-directional models of inclusion.

Third, temporal conflicts—such as mismatches in schedules, assessment cycles, and internship timing—constitute central sites of institutional friction. These conflicts reveal how standardized temporal structures function as mechanisms that regulate legitimacy and constrain participation. While some tensions are addressed through ad hoc adjustments, others prompt systematic redesign of timetables, evaluation practices, and progression pathways. Such processes demonstrate the emergence of institutional plasticity, whereby temporal arrangements become subject to negotiation and reconfiguration.

Taken together, these findings shift the analytical focus of inclusive education from access and support to institutional design and the redistribution of legitimacy. The concept of temporal governance provides a novel lens for understanding how inclusion is structured through time, extending existing theories that have primarily emphasized spatial or organizational dimensions.

Keywords

Inclusive education; institutional design; bidirectional inclusion; temporal governance; school-to-work transition