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Career path support for special needs students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties in middle school in Japan: a qualitative study

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Emotional and behavioural problems have marked adverse effects on school engagement and student performance. While previous studies have investigated the transition from primary to secondary school, middle to high-school transitions are not well-documented. Therefore, this qualitative study focuses on teachers charged with special needs classes in middle schools to identify their difficulties in supporting the career decisions of students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. The study participants consisted of 18 teachers from special needs classes in Japanese middle schools. We identified three themes concerning teachers' experiences: difficulties in determining students' future trajectories, difficulties in collaborating with stakeholders, and teachers' considerations of what is important. The findings suggest that the stigmas associated with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties interfere career path choices of such students. Therefore, future studies about these students are essential for supporting career path-related decision-making among the teachers, students, and parents.

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Introduction

Social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties include a wide range of difficulties in the social and school life of children with the issue. The term includes difficulties in social interaction with peers, psychological and mental health problems, feeling isolated in class, or disruptive behaviours (Carroll and Hurry, 2018; Cosma and Soni, 2019). Other terms, such as Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties and Social, Emotional, and Mental Health difficulties, may have been used in the literature. Adolescents with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties often experience poorer social relationships, functional impairments, and poor educational outcomes (De Lugt, 2007; Farmer et al., 2013; Veldman et al., 2014). They may experience difficulties at various milestones of their school life, including school transitions. Students transitioning from middle school are required to adapt to the broader classroom expectations, greater social demands, and a new high-school environment. Even among students with neurotypical development, the transition from middle to high school has been known to cause increased anxiety, poorer social relationships, and unfavourable school adjustments (Benner et al., 2017; Nielsen et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2017). In these years (the typical age at the transition period is 15 years), the pubertal process profoundly affects students' social and emotional development and their engagement with families and schools. This period is associated with a rise in emotional and behavioural problems among students that often negatively affect their educational engagement and performance levels (Patton and Viner, 2007). Although studies have been conducted on primary to secondary school transition, the transition from middle to high school has not been well-documented (Mowat, 2019).

In recent years, many countries have promoted policies and practices based on the philosophy of inclusive education. However, the situation of educational support for students with disabilities varies, depending on the local educational systems (Hosshan et al., 2019; Yada and Alnahdi, 2021; Yang and Yu, 2021). The Japanese education system begins with pre-school education, followed by 6 years of elementary education, 6 years of secondary education (3 years of middle school and 3 years of high school), and then higher education. The 9 years of education in elementary and middle school cover compulsory education. To enter high school, students must take an entrance examination and demonstrate a certain level of academic performance. The process of completing high school education and obtaining the requisite academic qualification is considered a significant determinant of future employment (Fujita, 2011). While these expectations have changed in recent years, a substantial proportion of parents of middle school students still hope that their children will be enrolled in higher-ranked schools in Japanese society (Fujita, 2011). Most middle school graduates with special needs have transitioned to high school education (Sato, 2018). Of these, 94% pursued upper secondary education: 60% of these entered high schools for special needs students and 30–40% entered regular high schools (Sato, 2018). Therefore, while graduating from middle school, students with special needs had to choose a career path by going either to a regular, or a special needs high school, based on their future career path and expected school life. In the Japanese educational system, the transition to high school also parallels graduation from compulsory education; thus, students' experiences while transitioning to high school differ from those in previous transitions. Therefore, teachers of special needs education are required to support the transition and decision-making of the students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties.

Owing to the diverse nature of their individual issues, providing career guidance to students with special needs requires knowledge and understanding of special needs and

developmental disabilities, on aspects such as students' personality traits, developmental characteristics, and parents' understanding (Billingsley and Bettini, 2019). Even if they do not have significant intellectual disabilities, students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties may lack sufficient knowledge regarding the transition to high school, face difficulties in decision-making, or have biased perceptions of themselves (Huggins et al., 2021; Khadka et al., 2019; Maiano et al., 2019; Orchard et al., 2021). In addition, students with social and emotional disabilities may encounter difficulties when developing interpersonal relationships and emotional stability after entering high school. Under such circumstances, teachers involved in providing career guidance must disseminate the right information to parents and support the students' decision-making regarding their career paths (Sasamori, 2017). However, teachers may face various challenges in supporting students in their career decisions and those related to the students themselves. Understanding the challenges is essential to improve educational practice and develop support resources for teachers, parents, and students with special needs.

Currently, studies have suggested several predictive factors for post-school outcomes, such as school completion, employment, and independent living, in adolescents with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (Test et al., 2009; Test et al., 2015). In implementing the knowledge into practice, the framework and perception of educators are also essential factors that affect their practice (Test et al., 2015). In addition, studies on the middle to high-school transition, as well as studies from non-Western countries, are scarce because most studies have focused on primary to secondary school transitions or high school to post-school transition outcomes in Western countries (Metzner et al., 2020). Therefore, this study focuses on teachers' experiences in charge of special needs classes at middle schools in Japan. This qualitative study aims to identify the difficulties experienced by teachers who support the career-related decision-making of middle school students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties and examines the status of their efforts to deal with these difficulties.

Methods

Participants. The study participants were teachers of special needs classes in Japanese middle schools. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) those teaching middle school students, (2) those with prior experience in providing guidance regarding career-related decision-making for students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. To recruit the participants, we used snowball and purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling was used to include participants from rural areas.

The recruited participants were 18 school teachers at middle schools in Oita, Japan. Oita City is a typical, middle-sized city in Japan. In 2019, the population of Oita City was approximately 480,000. It had 33 regular middle schools and five special needs schools, of which two were for students with visual and hearing impairment. All but three participants (T3, T12, and T13) were recruited from different schools. In addition, three participants were recruited from cities around Oita City to include participants from different settings (i.e., rural areas). The age ranges of the participants were 24 to 62 years, and most participants were in their 50s ($n = 12$, 67%). The teachers' experience in special needs education for middle schools ranged from 1 to 19 years (mean = 9.8 years). Eleven teachers (61%) had a teaching license for special needs education, and only two (11%) had experience of working in special needs schools. Nine teachers (50%) had 10 or more years of experience in special needs

Table 1 Characteristics of the study participants.

Participant	Gender	Age	Experience in special needs education in middle school	Teaching license for special needs education	Experience in teaching in special needs school	Year of participation in this study
T1	Female	52	6	No	No	2016
T2	Female	55	9	No	No	2016
T3	Female	24	1	Yes	No	2016
T4	Female	50	11	Yes	No	2016
T5	Male	58	18	Yes	No	2016
T6	Male	53	8	No	No	2016
T7	Female	50	4	Yes	No	2016
T8	Female	57	18	Yes	No	2019
T9	Female	52	8	Yes	Yes	2019
T10	Female	57	19	Yes	No	2019
T11	Female	62	14	Yes	No	2019
T12	Female	48	2	Yes	Yes	2019
T13	Female	55	6	No	No	2019
T14	Female	60	13	No	No	2019
T15	Female	54	11	No	No	2019
T16	Male	42	10	Yes	No	2019
T17	Female	40	3	No	No	2019
T18	Female	55	15	Yes	No	2019

education in middle school (Table 1). All participants provided written informed consent.

Procedures. This study was a cross-sectional qualitative study based on semi-structured face-to-face interviews, conducted from August to December 2016 and October to December 2019. During the interviews, the teachers were asked about their experiences and difficulties in providing career guidance for students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. The interviews were audio-recorded after receiving the participants’ consent.

The authors developed an interview guide that included questions about the participants’ difficulties while providing career support to middle school students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. For example, the participants were asked to describe their process of helping students in decision-making and their experiences while doing so. The interview guide and the questions were developed for this study through a discussion between the authors and educators in middle schools and special needs schools. However, despite relying on the interview guide, the participants were encouraged to speak freely about their views, ideas, experiences, and challenges. The length of the interviews ranged from 34 to 98 min (mean = 63 min). The interviews were conducted in Japanese by the second author and a trained research assistant.

Data analysis. The qualitative data gathered from the interview transcripts were thematically analysed and coded for the teacher’s experience when supporting the career paths of middle school students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis method aimed at exploring patterns within narratives, including interview transcriptions (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2013). The authors read the transcripts several times to familiarise themselves with the interview data. Before identifying data themes, the authors coded the data to identify the relevant aspects of the transcribed text based on our research question. In this study, we used inductive coding to identify the codes from the obtained transcripts. No a priori codes were created. The transcribed text was coded by two authors independently. After the initial coding process, the codes were discussed until a consensus was reached. The codes and original text were reviewed to confirm the context

of the data and were modified accordingly. Through this iterative process, we finalised both the codes and themes. After completing the qualitative data analysis in Japanese (the original language of the data), the excerpts of the manuscripts were translated into English by a professional translator. The translated materials were then checked by the first author.

The key assumptions were that teachers might have difficulties in providing career guidance to students with special educational needs and their parents. The first author is a clinical psychologist working on psychological and educational support for children and adolescents with disabilities. The second author was a student attending a teacher training programme for special needs education.

Ethics. The study was carried out in accordance with the ethical standards set forth in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments, with written informed consent from participants. The protocol was approved by Oita University Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (H28-008).

Results

Our interviews enquired about the teachers’ difficulties in providing career guidance to students with special needs. After coding, we selected the codes relevant to the teachers’ problems and generated topics from the related codes. As shown in Table 2, we identified the following three themes: difficulties in determining students’ future trajectories, difficulties in collaborating with stakeholders, and what the teachers consider important. Difficulties in determining future trajectories constitutes the major difficulties and uncertainties faced by teachers in predicting the students’ future academic and career-related trajectories. Difficulties in collaborating with stakeholders explain their difficulties in working with parents and students. Finally, ‘what teachers consider important’ explains teacher’s beliefs about career guidance and support for students (Table 2). The detailed results for these themes and sub-themes are provided below.

Difficulties in determining students’ future trajectories

Teachers’ uncertainty about the right career path for students. Without knowing the type of life an adolescent would lead after completing their education, it is impossible to determine whether their chosen path was ‘right’ for them. Therefore, although most

Table 2 Summary of themes.

Theme/sub-theme	Explanations
Difficulties in determining students' future trajectories	
Teachers' uncertainty about the right career path for students	Teachers encountered difficulties in confidently supporting the decision-making of career paths.
Difficulties helping students' decision-making regarding their future career paths	Teachers find it challenging that their options are limited by the difficulties of the students
Teachers' worries about future support for students	Teachers are worried that the transition of students to high school will change the framework and reduce the support they receive.
Difficulties in collaborating with stakeholders	
Parental hopes about their children's futures	Parents have hopes about the course of their children's career paths, but it can be difficult to achieve.
Parental anxiety about children's next steps	Parents are worried about decision-making for their children, who are about to transition to a regular or special needs high school.
Difficulties in conceding to students' wishes	Restrictions in students' cognitive states make it difficult for students and teachers to reach a consensus on their paths.
Stigmas regarding disability and special education	Parents and the broader society have stigmas or negative impressions of disabilities and special needs education.
What teachers consider important	
Career guidance from an early stage	Teachers think that career guidance must start early.
Visiting prospective schools and workplaces	Teachers believe that proactively visiting future high schools, special needs schools, and exploring employment opportunities throughout the school year are important.
The students' futures	Teachers' hope that students' have bright futures even after completing their education.

teachers aim to support the students' future paths from an early stage, they are concerned and anxious about the appropriateness of their guidance and the students' choices for their futures because they do not know whether their choice was 'right' until later. For instance, below are some excerpts from teachers sharing their concerns about their students' career paths.

Regarding a student who dropped out of high school: I finally understood later on that the special needs school was a place where he [the special needs student] could really relax and have fun. I wondered whether I should have recommended it more strongly. I did have some regrets, though. But at the time, they [the parents and student] looked at various schools. I went along with this too... and it was really difficult to think about what the best choice for the student would be. (T15)

Even if they [students with emotional and mild developmental disabilities] can get into a regular high school, they may not be able to stay there. It's difficult there; they'll have a much narrower range of options for their careers. It's difficult to say whether it's the best option. (...) But if they go to a private [regular] high school, then their interpersonal relationships would be the problem. (T4)

Difficulties helping students' decision-making regarding their future career paths. The participants expressed that it is difficult to work out the path for students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties because of their various challenges and limited options for schooling.

[Owing to the school system in Japan] these students can't attend special needs schools. They don't have any cognitive delays, but if they go to a regular school, it usually won't work out [because they have problems with their interpersonal relationships]. There are hardly any schools that will accept these students [while providing sufficient support]. (T14)

Academic performance is a critical factor that limits the possible options for students with difficulties in attending and engaging in class activities. Additionally, the Japanese educational

system for high-school students with special needs also compounds the challenges faced by teachers and students.

Some children [with emotional and behavioural disorders] who have entered middle school and enrolled in special needs classes would like to go on to high school if possible, but it's really tough. (T1)

Teachers' concerns about future support for students. When students leave middle school, part of their public support is withdrawn, and they may not receive the kind of support they were receiving previously. The teachers expressed some concern about the transition in the students' support systems; transitioning from middle school to high school also signifies an end of their compulsory education (9 years till middle school in Japan). Concerned about the students' ability to cope with the demands of high school, T9 stated, '*Previously they've had the help of [people around them] to do things, but when all that assistance disappears, it becomes clear what they can't do [things] themselves.*' Additionally, citing the case of a particular student, T10 believed that '*[In middle school] people encouraged them and looked out for them all the time, but (...) when they went to high school, [the teachers and other students] didn't understand them so well.*'

Difficulties in collaborating with stakeholders

Parental hopes about their children's futures. Many teachers revealed a narrative regarding parents' desire for their children to at least graduate from high school. In Japan, most adolescents get at least a high-school diploma, and parents hope that their children will be able to find employment at a regular company in the future. In contrast, from a teacher's perspective, it is difficult to accommodate these students in some cases, leading to feelings of conflict.

[From the parents' perspective,] they want the child to gain a [high school] diploma. They say that 'in terms of finding work, wouldn't it be better for [the child's] future to graduate from high school, rather than middle school [and instead of attending a high school programme at a special needs school]?' But the students themselves might not be able to attend high school (non-attendance); there may be

issues with their mental health condition, or they may not be comfortable in crowds. But the mother says, 'I really want him to go to high school.' (T10)

Parental anxiety about their child's next steps. The teachers remarked on parental concerns about their children's next steps, such as choosing schools. Some parents may struggle with decision-making for their child's future, which can be a challenging process.

I tried to provide information to the caregivers from an early stage when they were considering future career paths. It was quite difficult for the caregivers to know which path to choose [for their child]. We began discussing specific career paths from the time the student was in their first year, and experienced various environments, such as high school and the workplace. (T6)

T5 expressed his understanding of parents' anxiety if they did not look at many options for enrolling their children into high school: 'Parents are bound to be worried if they don't look at all the options that their child might be able to attend.' (T5)

Difficulties in conceding to students' wishes. Teachers spoke about the problems associated with the students' understanding of their disabilities and emotional status. The students' skewed self-perception at times conflicted with the teachers' assessment of the right career path for them, hindering their career guidance process.

They would convince themselves that 'I'm going to go there [high school], just like everyone else', and I just couldn't shatter that belief. I'm sure they really wanted to go to the same school as their friends, but [later they came to realise that] they couldn't. (T5)

T4 spoke of the difficulties in dealing with students whose low self-esteem could lead to self-negation, even when the teacher was trying to help them.

If a teacher recommends a school other than the one the student wants to go to, [students with low self-esteem] may feel like they are being rejected and may not accept it, even if it is for the student's own benefit. (T4)

Stigmas regarding disabilities and special education. The stigmas of parents and the community towards disabilities and receiving special needs education at school discourages students from accepting support and entering the high-school programmes at special needs schools.

Sometimes, guardians cannot accept their children's disabilities. Many mothers feel very uncomfortable with the idea of sending their children to special needs classes. (...) These are parents of elementary or middle school students (...); they don't know what today's special needs classes are like. So, there are still many mothers who, based on their own experiences, feel that 'my child's not like them [people with developmental disabilities], I don't want to think of him like that.' (T9)

In the family, there are often parents who don't accept or understand the disability [of a child]... maybe the mother understands it, but the father doesn't. In some cases, the parents understand it, but the grandparents don't. There are also cases where family members who don't understand the disability, object and prevent the student from attending

an appropriate school or workplace. In these cases, [the situation at home meant that] it wasn't possible to provide support.' (T18)

What teachers consider important

Career guidance from an early stage. Regarding the importance of early career guidance, the teachers expressed awareness of the need to encourage both the guardians and the students to think about their future career paths from an early stage:

Once a goal is set, we can discuss how much the student must work to reach that goal. This discussion happens with the guardians and the child. I aim to encourage them to think about their goals as soon as possible after they enter school. (T18)

Visiting prospective schools and workplaces. The teachers advised that students and their guardians should visit several schools and facilities before making a choice. T6 explained the importance of observing various environments while considering the future experiences of students with disabilities, not only in high schools but also at workplaces: 'We were able to move the discussion forward as we visited various places, such as high schools and workplaces' (T6). T7 stated, 'It's not like an individual education support plan, but we talked with the guardians about the child's future and life ahead, not just about what's going on in school.'

T4 noted that 'From the first year of middle school, we visit many high schools to find the one that the child and their guardians approved of. We spoke to the students in the special needs class and with their guardians.' However, T4 also expressed that when the students themselves do not seem to accept their disabilities, visiting a special needs school may give them a negative impression: 'When they see the other students [with more severe disabilities at the special needs school], they would feel like "those students aren't like me" and develop the idea that a special needs school wasn't for them.'

The students' future. The participants described that their concerns about the students' future are the foundation that influences their perspective on career guidance at the school. They considered the students' future even after they left the educational setting.

I think it's better [for the student] to choose the place that they feel is best for them at that moment, after having seen, heard, and experienced all sorts of things. I always think about what it will be like ten years from now, or what it will be like after they graduate. But I don't know if that's how it will actually turn out ... I guess in the end, what's important is that they decide for themselves. (T12)

T17 stated, 'I'm most concerned about whether the student will be able to go out into the world and succeed. That's what I think is important.'

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the difficulties experienced by middle school teachers in supporting the career decisions of parents and students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. We identified three themes: teachers' difficulties in determining students' future trajectories, difficulties in collaborating with stakeholders, and their considerations of what is important.

Determining future trajectories. The most prominent feature of the teachers' experience was the difficulties in determining the

future trajectories of the students with disorders. Estimating the functional outcome of adolescents with emotional and behavioural difficulties is naturally challenging (Forbes et al., 2021); however, as educational professionals, the teachers may feel obligated to inform the parents about their children's future trajectories. While knowledge of the next steps and prospects would help decrease the anxiety and worries of these parents, the lack of evidence cannot allow the teachers to predict the students' future trajectory with confidence. Adolescent students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties often experience school adjustment problems, particularly in forming peer relationships and improving their learning performance (Farmer et al., 2013; Veldman et al., 2014). These problems can complicate the process of providing career guidance when the teachers' recommended career choices conflict with that desired by the stakeholders.

Conversely, teachers' support and positive relationships with students during transitions are also essential for helping these students adapt to their new environment (Longobardi et al., 2016). Therefore, understanding the nature of these students' interpersonal relationships with other students during middle school years is an important determinant in the assessment process. Transition planning can be improved by earlier intervention and increased access to information, as described by the teachers in this study (Strnadová et al., 2016). In addition, we believe that early consideration of students' future plans and information sharing may increase opportunities to collaborate, leading to the formation of shared goals (Owen et al., 2021). While the effectiveness of these suggestions is unclear, we believe that having such a foundation could aid the decision-making process for an uncertain future.

In contrast, identifying student's strengths and resources may encourage their active involvement in the decision-making regarding their future paths, as suggested in a previous study (Tellis-James and Fox, 2016). Therefore, teachers must assess both the difficulties and strengths of students with social, emotional, and behaviour difficulties to provide a valuable assessment of their future trajectories.

Collaborating with stakeholders. Teachers and parents have a collaborative relationship, which is usually favourable (Tso and Strnadová, 2016). However, disagreements in their values and criteria for determining the students' career paths could pose a challenge for teachers when dealing with parents (Dixon and Tanner, 2013). Parents also experience anxiety about their children's career paths and subsequent decisions. The challenge is how to resolve the differences that arise through a collaborative process. To address parents' hopes and concerns, teachers are expected to provide appropriate information and support to aid decision-making.

Sometimes, discrepancies can also occur between the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers about the transition process (Dixon and Tanner, 2013). Student involvement in transition planning is a crucial part of this process; however, in cases where students, parents, and teachers have different beliefs about the suitable career path, more time and consultations will be needed to resolve the disagreement. Discrepancies with the students' understanding and ideas must be dealt with carefully, as their cognitive abilities and emotions at the time may limit their judgment about their career paths. Students with emotional disturbances often experience additional challenges with respect to their school engagement and academic performance (De Lugt, 2007; Farmer et al., 2013). Additionally, students with emotional disturbances may feel excluded in school (Stiefel et al., 2017). Such difficulties may further compromise the situation and require careful support in the transition process. Understanding contextual circumstances and individual emotional and behavioural difficulties are both important

in assessing the situation and the students' developmental stages (Balart et al., 2021).

Although various countries have made efforts to combat the stigmas against disabilities and special needs education, they still persist in society today (Kayama, 2010). As illustrated in the current study, these stigmas are influenced by several factors, including differences in a person's group membership, social contacts, exposure to literacy campaigns, and education levels (Committee on the Science of Changing Behavioural Health Social Norms et al., 2016; Stuart, 2016). 'Labels' such as emotional and behavioural difficulties, may also perpetuate negative perceptions about students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (Hickinbotham and Soni, 2021). However, previous studies suggested that the impact of such labelling is more complex for the students. While the labels may represent stigmas and negative expectations (Lauchlan and Boyle, 2007; Mowat, 2015), they can also help students understand their individual needs and fulfil their need for belongingness and autonomy (Cosma and Soni, 2019; Hickinbotham and Soni, 2021). To reduce stigmas, good role models and adequate knowledge of disorders may be helpful (Tanaka et al., 2003). In addition, an understanding and perception of the disability may vary considerably by generation and region (Kayama, 2010). However, they may change in the future with the changes in the educational system and social perception of disabilities.

Implications. These findings suggest that providing early career path guidance and reducing the stigmas against disabilities and special needs education are necessary for establishing collaborative relationships between parents and teachers. Sharing information about career paths and the experience of actual examples may support describing the trajectories of students with special educational needs. Knowledge of the following steps and prospects would help decrease the anxiety and worries in these parents as well as in educators. While the effectiveness of these measures remains to be seen, earlier transition planning and increased access to information would help teachers support students with special needs (Strnadová et al., 2016). These stigmas can exist at both personal and social levels. While individual education and support are crucial for challenging these stigmas, initiatives such as social campaigns and improving public understanding are also essential (Committee on the Science of Changing Behavioural Health Social Norms et al., 2016; Stuart, 2016), along with developing inclusive education in schools for addressing the needs of students, parents, and teachers. However, special education teachers at regular Japanese schools may perceive inclusive education as less feasible compared to segregated education (Maeda et al., 2021). This issue should be investigated in future studies to change the educational system and educator's beliefs and to challenge social stigmas. Evidence from longitudinal studies on outcomes of students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties may assist school teachers and reduce the concerns about the appropriateness of goal setting for students with these difficulties, although goal setting would still require consideration of the students' values and desires for their future career paths.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that could be addressed by future studies. First, the study does not include the perspectives of the stakeholders or present the entire picture regarding the views and difficulties of parents and students receiving career guidance (Cosma and Soni, 2019; Owen et al., 2021). Further research that includes the perspectives of both parents and students (Cosma and Soni, 2019) could help provide a broader view of the conflicts and challenges faced by

people receiving career guidance. Second, although the themes presented could differ depending on the detailed characteristics of the students' disabilities, it was not possible to examine these aspects in this study. In addition, although we explored whether there were meaningful differences in the themes presented by teachers with and without a special needs education license as an additional analysis, we found no significant differences. However, this finding should be interpreted with caution because the Japanese education system does not provide a formal license to teachers specialised in dealing with students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. Third, the data collection of this study was based on pragmatic grounds rather than attaining *theoretical saturation*. Although our findings seemed to be replicable or generalisable to those from other informants, further data collection and analyses may identify additional themes or more detailed examples of the teachers' experiences. In addition, other approaches, such as grounded theory approach based on iterative sampling and analysis, deductive contents analysis, and utilisation of visualisation techniques of qualitative and quantitative data analysis software, may advance or contribute to attaining greater understanding from a different perspective. Fourth, the interview guide of our study was developed based on the discussion with the researcher and educators. Although practical knowledge is essential to understand the issue, this may limit the variation of the themes identified in this study. Although the difficulties are affected by the context and the educational environment, referencing previous studies in similar settings (e.g., Asian countries) and pilot testing would strengthen the validity and rigour of the methods used in qualitative inductive approaches. Considering these limitations, alternative approaches would strengthen and help plan future research in this field. Although these limitations raise certain questions about the external validity of the findings of this study, our findings are relevant because they indicate the difficulties of teachers and their backgrounds and provide insights for future research.

Data availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available, as the transcripts include personal information, but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Author contributions

HF: conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, writing—original draft, writing—review & editing. NS: conceptualisation, investigation, formal analysis, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review & editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Oita University Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (H28-008). The procedures used in this study adhered to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Identifying information that was included in the interview transcripts was removed from the manuscript.

Additional information

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