Public elementary school teachers' positioning in teaching physical education to Japanese language learners

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain Japanese generalist elementary teachers' experiences teaching physical education (PE) to Japanese language learner (JLL) children in public schools in Japan. Participants were seven public elementary school teachers (two females and five males) who had experience teaching JLL children. Data sources included a demographic questionnaire, online semi-structured interviews, and follow-up email interviews. Framed in positioning theory, three themes were identified from the data analysis: (a) *seeking PE lesson ideas from observing children's performance in other academic subjects*, (b) *learning how to interact with parents of JLL children*, and (c) *accommodating JLL children's cultural and behavioral differences in PE*. The findings indicate that all seven Japanese public elementary teachers experienced a wide range of physical, emotional, and social struggles when they taught JLL children in PE class. This study suggested that PE has the potential to enrich teachers' and children's cultural awareness and mutual understanding and as a tool to raise awareness of social justice and diversity.

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Introduction

In the past decade, Japanese public schools have become increasingly ethnically, culturally, religiously, and linguistically diverse. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science, and Technology (MEXT) (2020) reported that there were 40,755 Japanese language learners (JLLs; i.e. children who live in Japan but whose primary language is one other than Japanese, who lack Japanese language proficiency, and who receive Japanese-as-a-second-language lessons) enrolled in public schools in Japan in 2018, representing an increase of 18% since 2016. Due to the amended Immigration Control Act (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2019), it is expected that the growth of the immigrant population in Japan will continue to accelerate.

Many teachers in Japanese schools believe that children from countries outside of Japan are an important population in Japanese schools because their inclusion may help improve the intellectual engagement, self-motivation, citizenship, cultural engagement, critical thinking, and problem solving of all children (Takahashi, 2000). However, many Japanese elementary teachers struggle to help JLL children adapt to the Japanese culture and adjust to the academic and social environment of Japanese public schools (Takenaka et al., 2016). Teachers may lack knowledge about how to identify and adapt to cross-cultural differences in religious beliefs, communication styles, food preferences, lifestyles, and physical activity habits (de Munck, 2000). Therefore, many teachers struggle to develop culturally relevant teaching skills and knowledge of how JLL children adapt to the socio-cultural aspects of Japanese elementary schools. Japanese teachers may lack knowledge about teaching language skills, including not only speaking, listening, reading, and writing but also linguacultural elements such as how to use honorifics (Li and Umemoto, 2010). Japanese, the official and main language, can be challenging for JLLs because it uses four types of vocabulary (Japanese origin, Sino-Japanese, foreign loanwords, and hybrids) and the Japanese writing system uses multiple scripts (Kanji, Hiragana, Katakana, Roman alphabet, and Arabic numerals). Teachers also have difficulty correcting JLL children's misuse of honorifics in Japanese, which can cause various challenges for intercultural relationships (Hatta et al., 1998). As a result of the difficulty of communication with JLL children, Japanese teachers may find a significant gap in academic achievement between native Japanese-speaking students and JLLs (Kobayashi and Tsuboya, 2021). In particular, many elementary language learners perform poorly because of challenges in handling the unique linguistic demands of various subject areas (e.g. physical education (PE), reading, and mathematics) (Sato and Hodge, 2016).

Teaching second language learner children in PE

In PE lessons, elementary teachers use language as a tool to question, direct, explain, suggest, prompt, and stimulate children to think. In turn, children are encouraged to respond by describing, explaining, discussing, and expressing ideas and reactions in the PE class (Government of Ireland, 1999). The PE class can also be a site for supporting language acquisition; for example, elementary teachers could label items using discipline-specific academic language (e.g. skipping, jumping, and dribbling) in both the first and second language using task cards or handouts (Samalot-Rivera et al., 2018).

There are several studies that have explored PE teachers' experiences in teaching second language learners in elementary schools (e.g. Sato, 2012; Sato and Hodge, 2016; Sato et al., 2019) and in secondary schools (e.g. Sato and Sutherland, 2013; Sato et al., 2022) in the United States. For example, Sato (2012) found that many PE teachers had difficulty teaching elementary English language learner (ELL) children. Much of their struggle had to do with academic language discourse issues, cultural differences (e.g. collectivism vs. individualism), language barriers, and an unawareness of ELL students' academic backgrounds in PE. All PE teachers were greatly challenged as they attempted to overcome those barriers, but they still sought best practices for teaching ELL students in PE. In addition, in PE classes, different from many other classroom settings, misunderstandings due to linguistic challenges can result in safety concerns for language learner students (Sato et al., 2019). However, de Munck (2000) explained that when teachers gained knowledge and skills for teaching children in different ways (i.e. not treating children homogeneously), the class atmosphere improved, which motivated all children to develop cultural awareness through diversity of religion, culture, and language.

PE should be considered an important academic subject that produces substantial positive effects on the academic and social development of second language learner children (Graham et al., 2012). Therefore, elementary teachers must engage in reflective action, which involves first identifying and then critically challenging their initial assumptions about teaching second language learners (e.g. stereotypes regarding culturally popular sports, physical attributes, and beliefs toward second language learners' national, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds) (Sato et al., 2022).

Japanese public elementary educational system

Japanese elementary schools provide six years of education from age 6 to 12, which is also called primary education (Grades 1–6). The school year starts on 1st April and ends the following March. The curriculum consists of Japanese, social studies, mathematics, science, life studies, music, arts and handcrafts, homemaking, moral education, and health and PE (health and PE are combined and considered one subject area). One teacher is assigned to a classroom consisting of around 30–40 children, including JLLs. Elementary school teachers are responsible for teaching and assessment of all academic subject areas, including PE (MEXT, 2020; Sato et al., 2020a, 2020b). PE lessons are typically 45 minutes long in public elementary schools (Nakai and Metzler, 2005).

After World War II, MEXT mandated a course of study which contains both the objectives and content of PE (Takahashi, 2000). Historically, Japanese PE is underpinned by five characteristics identified by Takahashi (2000): (a) democratic PE, (b) culture-oriented PE, (c) fitness-oriented PE, (d) school PE for lifelong participation, and (e) PE for mind and body. The ultimate objective is to cultivate an attitude that will cause students to live a happy and cheerful life that integrates physical activity and to acquire an understanding of the values of health and safety (Nakai and Metzler, 2005). With increasing linguistic diversification in recent years, teachers in Japan must teach and assess PE taking into consideration JLLs' linguistic concerns and modify lessons to meet JLLs' unique needs (Takahashi, 2000).

Japanese elementary teachers tend to consider PE a subject in which children interact a great deal with other children, and it has been suggested that PE is particularly effective in fostering social attitudes such as mutual understanding (Takada et al., 1999). To our knowledge, no study has documented teachers' perceptions and experiences in teaching JLLs in inclusive PE lessons at public elementary schools in Japan. In order to develop quality PE and provide a social environment that addresses diversity and social justice, it is critical to understand how elementary teachers

develop a PE class atmosphere where all children feel comfortable developing their communication skills and respecting individual differences.

Theoretical framework and purpose

The current study was grounded in positioning theory (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). This is a theory of social behavior that explains the fluid patterns of dynamic and changing assignment of rights and duties among groups of social actors (Varela and Harré, 1996). The term *positioning* involves the analysis of interpersonal encounters from a discursive viewpoint (Hollway, 1984). This framework allows researchers to explore teachers' capacity to position themselves and others and, in this case, to describe how teachers negotiate and implement PE curricula with JLL children.

The current study examined Japanese elementary teachers' views about teaching JLL children in PE classes. According to McVee et al. (2004), elementary teachers aim to treat all children equally; however, second language learner children often lag behind their native-speaking peers and sometimes show slow progress in closing this gap (Abedi and Gándara, 2006; Kobayashi and Tsuboya, 2021). Because most teachers identify with the dominant culture, they have not typically experienced language, race, or other diverse factors as constructs that position them in opposition to the mainstream. Therefore, positioning theory may help us better understand and explain what Japanese elementary teachers might or might not do based on their experiences, which influence their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about teaching children of diverse backgrounds.

One perspective of positioning theory is intentional self-positioning, which incorporates how a person positions him or herself within the structure of rights and duties (Yoon, 2008). Hermans (2001) identified two types of factors, internal and external, which influence human behavior. An internal factor refers to a position within the inner group where the individual focuses on self-development to assess and evaluate personal strengths and characteristics. An external factor refers to a position (of others) within the outer group (e.g. my JLL children and my colleagues). Self-positions identify the complex shifts between internal and external factors that help to describe an individual's professionalism, dispositions, and challenges. For example, teachers of JLLs may have a problem with their own self-image because of their stereotypes of a JLL's country of origin (Sosa and Gomez, 2012).

Davies and Harré (1990) use the term "reflective positioning," which is useful in explaining how teachers position themselves in their roles and responsibilities as physical educators. Teachers' reflective positions shape how they perform their roles, and patterns of reflection (e.g. conversation) position themselves and JLL children in their classrooms (Jones, 2001). When the Japanese elementary teachers participate in diverse discourses, including silent (teachers talk and students listen) and/or active (teachers facilitate while students talk to each other) discourses, they must reference their own experiences and backgrounds that position their beliefs, thoughts, and judgments and determine their own roles (e.g. roles as teachers, facilitators, parents, or helpers). They may be able to analyze critically what they are doing and consider how they (teachers) could apply their knowledge and skills to various situations (first to sixth grades) in the teaching environment (Jones, 2001). Although they might consciously understand that they play various roles when teaching or working with JLL children, they might unintentionally position such children in their classes as powerless learners in isolated spaces, which can lead to negative consequences such as marginalization (Yoon, 2008).

According to Davies and Harré (1990), interactive positioning is when one person assigns positions to another. Teachers' positioning influences potential forms and actions of speech (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999). Interactive positioning involves multiple storylines; individuals are available to them with multiple positions that they can sometimes strategically adopt, contest, or play off one another. A teacher, for example, might shift between assigning the position of "student," "friend," or "son/daughter" when attempting to cajole a child into doing something (Andreouli, 2010).

Interactive positioning also explains teachers' decision making about pedagogy, behavior management, and lesson examples that positively or negatively influence academic and social positions for JLL children. Interactive positioning helps to identify political or hierarchical interactions among conflicting values or norms on the part of the teacher and learner(s). In fact, a teacher might reject or accept children as a function of his or her positioning (Harré and Moghaddam, 2003). Some teachers are not aware of how to support children from diverse populations (Columna et al., 2009), such as JLLs. Positioning theory is, therefore, a powerful lens for examining how Japanese elementary teachers position themselves and others in educational contexts. While research pertaining to elementary teachers is ubiquitous, few studies have utilized this theoretical framework to understand positioning experiences in teaching second language learners in PE (see, however, Lamb, 2016; Sato et al., 2019, 2022). Further, this theoretical paradigm has not been previously utilized in regard to examining the meaning of teaching experiences among elementary teachers in Japan. Thus, the current study will provide unique insight into elementary teachers' positioning and teaching experiences in elementary education in Japan.

The purpose of the current study was to describe and explain Japanese elementary teachers' experiences in teaching PE to JLL children at public schools. The research questions guiding this study were: "What were Japanese public elementary teachers' experiences in teaching JLL children in PE classes?" and "How did Japanese public elementary teachers position themselves in teaching JLL children in PE classes?"

Previous studies grounded in positioning theory have found that not all teachers have equal access to the rights and duties to teach language learners effectively. Further, teachers' self-positioning can affect their classroom practices and the performance of language learners (e.g. Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Yoon, 2008). Therefore, this study focused on how the ongoing use of the JLL label also unintentionally positions teachers to view their students as academically and socially capable or incapable in the PE setting.

Method

This study adopted an exploratory-descriptive case study research design (Yin, 2017). An exploratory-descriptive case study is often referred to as an interpretive case study (Merriam, 1998). A case study method is a logical sequence that helps researchers to connect empirical data to the study's research questions and, ultimately, to some set of conclusions (Yin, 2017).

Participants and research sites

In this study, snowball sampling was used (Yin, 2017). Snowball sampling is a non-random sampling method that uses a few cases to help encourage other cases to take part in the study, thereby increasing sample size. This approach is most applicable in small populations that are difficult to access due to their closed nature (Brewerton and Millward, 2001). In the context of the present

study, Japanese elementary schools, only one teacher is assigned to a classroom and teaches all the academic subject areas, including PE, to their class. In this way, each teacher and classroom form a relatively closed unit. Therefore, we utilized teachers' professional networks (i.e. relationships among teachers) to recruit public elementary school teachers as participants. The selection of the participants involved soliciting nominations (from the lead researcher's former colleagues in the Kanto region in Japan) of teachers who matched the following selection criteria: participants must (a) possess an elementary school and PE teaching license, (b) have experience teaching PE including JLL children, and (c) have more than three years of teaching experience in elementary school (i.e. not a beginning teacher). In addition to these criteria, only the teachers who accepted online interviews were included. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers were unable to conduct face-to-face interviews.

Seven public elementary teachers (two females and five males) who had experience teaching JLL children were selected. All participants were teaching in the Kanto region of Japan (including Ibaraki, Chiba, Saitama, and Tokyo) and belonged to various school districts. Across Japan, public schools are required to follow a prescribed course of study as a part of the national curriculum standards. Therefore, there are common curriculum standards across the participants, allowing us to investigate the teachers' experiences in teaching PE including JLL children. The teachers had from 1 to 14 years of experience teaching JLL children. Pseudonyms for the seven participants are as follows: Ms. Arita, Mr. Hori, Mr. Kanda, Mr. Kondo, Ms. Murase, Mr. Santo, and Mr. Shirota. Demographic information about the participants is available in Table 1.

Data collection

The data sources were a demographic questionnaire, online semi-structured interviews, and follow-up email interviews. The focus of this study was to understand public elementary school

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants.

Pseudonym	Gender	Location (prefecture)	Years of teaching experience	Years of teaching JLL children	Nationality of JLL children	First language of JLL children
Ms. Arita	F	Ibaraki	4	2	Australia, Sri Lanka	English, Sinhalese
Mr. Hori	M	Ibaraki	3	1	Thailand	Thai
Mr. Kanda	M	Tokyo	14	14	China, Mongolia, Nepal, Philippines, South Korea, Thailand	Chinese, Mongolian, English, Tagalog, Korean, Thai
Mr. Kondo	M	Tokyo	15	5	China, Philippines	Chinese, Tagalog
Ms. Murase	F	Saitama	19	2	Ukraine	Ukrainian
Mr. Santo	M	Chiba	14	6	China, Philippines, Russia, Spain	Chinese, English, Russian, Spanish
Mr. Shirota	M	Tokyo	12	3	China, Bangladesh, Philippines	Chinese, Bengali, Tagalog

teachers' experiences, positioning, and reflections on educating and interacting with JLL children in PE classes. All data collection procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board (approval number: PE019-151) at the lead researcher's university.

Demographic questionnaire. Two survey scales, titled English as Second Language Students in Mainstream Classrooms: A Survey of Teachers (Reeves, 2006) and Elementary Physical Educators' Positioning in Teaching English Language Learners (Sato and Hodge, 2016; Sato et al., 2019), were modified (e.g. the term "Second Language Students" and "ELL" were changed to "JLL children") and used to collect survey data from the participants. This demographic questionnaire was used to collect descriptive, quantifiable data from the participants. The demographic questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A was focused on teachers' experiences in teaching JLL children. Section B was focused on the teachers' thoughts throughout their experiences teaching JLL children. The demographic data were used to understand participants' background information including attributes, experiences, and perceptions of their experiences teaching JLL children in PE.

Online semi-structured interviews. This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to maintain social distance and avoid face-to-face contact and long-distance travel, interviews were conducted through social network services using online video calls.

This study used semi-structured interviews that were organized using 17 predetermined, open-ended questions (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006), which were derived from the literature on positioning theory, second language learners, teacher professional development, and PE. In particular, the interview questions were based on those originally developed by Reeves (2006) and modified by Sato and Hodge (2016) and Sato et al. (2019). For this study, questions were modified and carefully worded in consideration of the context of Japanese elementary schools (Yin, 2017). The researcher asked the predetermined questions as well as additional follow-up questions to obtain information and insights about the participants' experiences teaching JLL children. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each. Examples of interview questions include: (a) How have your experiences in teaching PE including JLL children changed over time? (b) What were the challenges of including JLL children in your elementary PE classes? Did you use any instructional techniques or strategies to overcome those challenges? (c) What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of teaching PE lessons that include JLL children? Are there any teaching strategies that can be applied to other subjects?

Follow-up email interviews. Email messages were employed to ask follow-up questions, especially when clarifications, explanations, and/or previous responses were needed (Meho, 2006). The lead researcher followed up with each participant via email as warranted.

Translation process. This study used the cross-cultural translation technique developed by Banville et al. (2000) and Hodge et al. (2013) to translate the survey questions and the predetermined interview questions as well as the resulting data. All survey and interview questions were asked in Japanese to all seven participants. For the translation process, one native Japanese speaker (A, who collected the data) translated and modified the two surveys and the interview questions from Reeves (2006), Sato and Hodge (2016), and Sato et al. (2019) from English to Japanese. After translation into Japanese, two bilingual native Japanese speakers (A and B) and two other native Japanese speakers (C and D) discussed the adequacy of the translation to fit the Japanese context (e.g. the term "PE teacher" was changed to "elementary teacher"). They then edited the translated interview and survey questions as deemed necessary for proper vocabulary, grammar, and syntax and to ensure that the meanings of the translations and the original English questions were the same. Similarly, the interview data were translated from Japanese to English.

Translation of the data to English was conducted by one native Japanese speaker (A), who compared the translation with the originals and discussed the translation with colleagues (B, C, and D) including one native English speaker (E). Agreement was reached on all items in the interview data.

Data analysis. A constant comparative method (Boeije, 2010) was used to interpret the data from the online semi-structured interviews and the follow-up email interviews, which allowed themes to be identified from the data. The basic strategy of this analysis process is to do what its name implies—constantly compare (Hastie and Glotova, 2012). Using constant comparative analysis, data from different people are compared and contrasted and the process continues until the researcher is satisfied that no new issues will arise from the data set (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In this study, the process of constantly comparing data from several sources led to tentative categories that were compared to each other and to other data, which is the process of category construction.

More specifically, each potentially meaningful piece of data within the interview transcripts from each participant was independently coded by all researchers. If there were any differences in coding, the researchers discussed them until agreement was reached. Some codes were combined during this process (similar terms such as *habits* and *actions*), whereas other initial codes were split into multiple codes (i.e. subthemes). Then all researchers interpreted each participant's storyline and primary messages (i.e. what the participant was trying to convey) using the coded data. The second step was to identify the implicit and explicit aspects of the participants' data.

Finally, the researchers examined the final codes to organize them into a hierarchical structure using the number of individual and group codes (i.e. how many times key terms appeared in the data source). Then all data and definitions of key terms were sent back to all participants for member checking (Patton, 2002). We received final confirmation from all participants. The researchers grouped the codes into thematic categories, which were then refined into recurring themes (Boeije, 2010).

Member checking and peer-debriefing. Member checking was used to reduce the impact of subjective bias (Patton, 2002). The researcher sent electronic transcripts of the interviews to the respective participants, and the participants acknowledged accuracy of the transcripts. Peer-debriefing is a process of exposing oneself to a knowledgeable peer in a way paralleling an analytic session, with the purpose of exploring aspects of inquiry that might remain only implicit in the inquirer's mind (Patton, 2002). For this study, two professional colleagues who had expertise in qualitative research agreed to serve as peer-debriefers. These individuals reviewed the established themes and agreed with the findings of the researchers. They deemed the interpretations of the data to be accurate and representative.

Results

A review of the results of the demographic questionnaire related to teaching JLL children in PE indicated that almost all of the scores were scattered from neutral to positive (see Table 2).

Although the survey data show that the participants generally felt it was important to create an inclusive classroom and include JLL children in PE classes, the qualitative analysis shows that they had difficulty doing so. Three major interrelated and complex themes were identified from the data analysis: (a) *seeking PE lesson ideas from observing children's performance in other academic*

Table 2. Results of the questionnaire on the participants' perspectives about teaching JLLs.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Cultural and social diversity (nationalities, languages, disabilities, sexuality) has benefits for all children in PE.	2	3	2		
JLL children should avoid using their native language while attending elementary school.			1		6
JLL children should attain a minimum level of Japanese competency to participate in PE classes.		2	3	2	
The inclusion of JLL children in elementary PE creates a positive educational atmosphere.	4	2	1		
Elementary school teachers have enough time/skill to deal with the needs of JLL children to teach PE.	3	1	2	1	
Participation in PE contributes to the improvement of JLL children's Japanese language competency.	2	3	2		
It is good practice to lessen the difficulty of PE coursework for JLL children.				1	6
It is good practice to lessen the quality of coursework for JLL children.				1	6
I can evaluate PE without being affected by the Japanese language competency of JLL children.	2	2		2	1
In an inclusive classroom, teachers should give individual assignments to JLL children.	3	2	2		
The modification of the class coursework for JLL children is unavoidable.		2	2	2	1

JLL: Japanese Language Learner; PE: physical education.

subjects, (b) learning how to interact with parents of JLL children, and (c) accommodating JLL children's cultural and behavioral differences in PE. Each of the themes is described below.

Theme One: Seeking PE lesson ideas from observing children's performance in other academic subjects

This theme demonstrates how the Japanese elementary teachers used students' academic performance in other classes (e.g. information and communication technology (ICT), reading and writing) and activities (e.g. students' communication during recess) as vital sources of PE lesson ideas. The teachers became more conscious of their professional learning about how they might use teaching strategies from other academic classes as well as recess (outside PE classes). Mr. Santo, for example, believed that visual aids using ICT tools helped JLL children reflect on what they have learned in PE classes. PE lessons using ICT tools encouraged JLL children to think about important lesson information because ICT tools allowed JLL children to organize their thoughts:

> I think I should have visual aids when I teach JLL children in PE. I used a white board, team activity notes, and ICT tools. Using various visual aids helped JLL children and other students with learning disabilities who struggled to follow my instructions. JLL children absolutely face language barriers,

but I think the language barriers allowed all children to think about how to help and support each other through PE. (Mr. Santo, interview)

Mr. Santo believed that his students should be provided with opportunities to maximize their learning by engaging in meaningful social interactions with classmates through various educational techniques and skills from other academic subjects. Mr. Kanda also learned that it was important for all children to have some experience that challenges their thinking. For example:

When I taught JLL children, I taught how to write Hiragana [one of the scripts of the Japanese language] in the classroom. However, I have many local children in the class, so I cannot deal with JLL children all the time, so I used peer tutoring strategies where local students who wrote Hiragana well helped JLL children in the class. I also applied this peer tutoring strategy to PE class. These JLL children did not understand the rules and routines of the activities. The local students did not speak English or other languages, so local students automatically used gestures. If the rules and routines were complicated, local students simplified the rules and routines. The local students learned how to accept JLL children in PE. (Mr. Kanda, interview)

Mr. Kanda explained that he observed students' peer tutoring during Japanese language classes. Therefore, he applied similar peer tutoring strategies in PE classes, so that all students helped JLL children understand the PE lesson content. Another participant, Ms. Murase, also shared her experience:

All children with and without disabilities play together during recess. They often argued with each other while playing. In PE classes, when I taught team activities, it was difficult to divide them into two teams. I allowed all students to think about how to divide themselves into two different groups. Some children had a short temper, language difficulties, cultural differences, or a wide range of motor skills. Although this study is about JLL children, all children kept thinking what the best for them in the PE classes is. I learned student-centered and decision-making approaches in inclusion during recess. (Ms. Murase, interview)

Ms. Murase learned from the observations of social interactions between students with and without disabilities that student-centered activities are important for diverse children, including JLL children. Ms. Murase allowed the students to make decisions and become autonomous and independent learners by placing the responsibility for learning in the hands of the children in PE classes. All participants believed that using classroom observation and behavioral observation during recess helped them to identify motor and social skills and design PE lessons, because they could assess their JLL children's cognitive, motor, and communication abilities.

Theme Two: Learning how to interact with parents of JLL children

This theme captured the need for Japanese elementary teachers to make decisions, serve active roles, and take on responsibilities similar to parents in PE class. Some of the reasons for this were cultural differences and JLL children's and parents' low proficiency in the Japanese language. In fact, the participants struggled to communicate with some of their students' parents, who seldom participated in their children's learning. Mr. Kondo, for example, felt that many parents of JLL children did not know how to treat and care about the academic progress of their children, particularly in PE. There were cultural differences and challenging experiences, which led teachers to reflect,

work hard, and emotionally invest themselves in teaching PE; however, this resulted in Japanese elementary teachers being positioned in uncomfortable situations. For example, when Mr. Kanda had swimming lessons in PE classes, miscommunication with the parents of JLL children appeared. He said:

> In PE in Japan, swimming is a part of the public school curriculum. I had a boy from the Philippines and had to explain to him about safety issues, concerns, and prevention. The boy did not want to participate in swimming classes. He did not do well in the swimming classes and other classmates were having fun in the pool, so no one could help him. It seems that he also did not tell his mother what he should bring and what he does in swimming, so he forgot to bring bathing suits, towels, and so on. I could not figure out what was happening in his family. I was frustrated and did not know what to do or how to deal with the parents of JLL children. (Mr. Kanda, interview)

Mr. Kanda regretted that he did not use communication strategies to support JLL parents' involvement in PE classes. He also felt that there were a few factors that influenced parents' involvement, including Japanese language proficiency, financial resources, and time. Additionally, Mr. Shirota discussed grading issues and concerns for JLL children:

> When I assessed and evaluated the JLL children, I did not give any grades to them. Because the assessments were written in Japanese, the JLL children could not follow the directions. I explained to the parents. It did not mean that the JLL children did not try, and I gave grades for motor skill competency in PE, but I could not evaluate several components of knowledge of sport rules and routines because of language difficulty. I wrote comments to the parents of JLL children, but they did not respond, so it seems that they did not understand. I think I should discuss with the parents of JLL children before the PE classes begin. (Mr. Shirota, interview)

Mr. Shirota explained that he should follow the PE performance standards and the prescribed course of study regardless of children's academic backgrounds. He felt that he should treat all children equally, whether they met the PE performance standards or not. Mr. Hori used a communication tool called Pocket Talk, which is a multi-sensory, two-way translation device for communicating with parents. As an elementary school teacher, he was required to conduct home visits and meet the parents of all children. He said:

> It was important to have a home visit and I used Pocket Talk when I had conversations with the parents. I believe that it was difficult when I discussed about health insurance, habits, and child behaviors. It was a great experience and I learned how to handle the JLL children from the parents. Home visits were the only way to find and promote inclusive PE for all children. I was trying to meet JLL children's needs and design effective PE lessons for them. (Mr. Hori, interview)

Mr. Hori explained that although it was challenging to communicate with the parents of JLL children, a home visit was an efficient way to identify JLL children's motor competencies and design inclusive PE lessons. The participants felt that although JLLs' parents had language barriers and struggled to have efficient communication in Japanese, they also lacked resources (e.g. experience, know-how, and education) to provide and support the academic achievement of their children. Therefore, the school climate needs to be more welcoming, facilitate parental access to the school, and develop positive relationships with JLL parents.

Theme three: Accommodating JLL children's cultural and behavioral differences in PE

The Japanese elementary teachers believed that it was important to let all children know about concepts of safe activities in PE. One of the issues they raised was that Japanese elementary teachers were not familiar with the religious habits and practices related to JLL children's backgrounds. For example, some JLL children wore earrings for religious reasons and were unable to take them off when they participated in PE. Many schools have a policy against wearing earrings or other jewelry during PE lessons for safety reasons. Mr. Kanda explained:

> I had a JLL girl from Nepal who could not remove her earring because of religious reasons. I had concerns for her safety as well as hygiene practices. I shared my concerns to administrators in the school. Unfortunately, she could not participate in some activities and lessons. She only observed and I had to mark her absent. (Mr. Kanda, interview)

Mr. Kanda was uncomfortable and uncertain regarding the cultural differences that represent hierarchy and power for the JLL children. He did not want to be ignorant of the cultural differences and religious beliefs when he taught PE. However, he could not think of alternative strategies to provide culturally relevant instruction for the JLL children. Ms. Murase also felt that there were cultural and behavioral differences of her JLL children. For example:

> I had a Filipino boy in PE classes. I saw that he had his elbow on the floor while I was talking in the class. I felt that it was considered inappropriate and bad behavior in Japanese classes. However, it was acceptable in Filipino culture. This is a cultural and behavioral difference. Many Japanese elementary teachers want to control everything in their hands in the classes, so they struggled to accept cultural and behavioral differences. (Ms. Murase, interview).

Ms. Murase was concerned that cultural and behavioral differences created social tension with other classmates. Another participant (Ms. Arita) also found that her local (Japanese) children pointed out cultural and behavioral differences and gave corrective feedback to the JLL children (e.g. "sit down now") and said, "do it properly." Therefore, while she believed that it was important to make her own judgments about what is right and wrong, she also felt that she needed to respect JLL children's cultural and behavioral differences.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to describe and explain Japanese elementary teachers' experiences teaching PE to JLL children in public schools. In Japanese elementary schools, there are no PE specialists, and all teachers are assigned to a classroom and need to teach all subject areas. This is beneficial because it allows the teachers to understand how their JLL students act in various academic subjects and their complex system of cultural values and ways of thinking. Columna and Lieberman (2011) suggested that teachers should use feedback or modeling strategies to help students make connections between their understanding in their primary language and what they are learning in a second language. It is also important to maintain clear communication between the teacher and language learner students; Sato and Hodge (2016) found that when there is a language barrier, PE teachers in the United States may position language learner children as academically inferior and powerless, potentially leading to further achievement gaps. Through using

developmentally appropriate and inclusive learning strategies, teachers can create an optimal environment in PE to promote interaction and opportunities for verbal and nonverbal communication to support language acquisition among students whose first language is not the community language (Samalot-Rivera et al., 2018).

When Japanese elementary teachers position themselves as less knowledgeable of PE pedagogy, they may not be able to express their views or fulfill their duty to provide the right answer (Duveen, 2001). Harré and Moghaddam (2003) explained that teachers' positionings were either positively or negatively influenced by pedagogical knowledge and skills (e.g. how effective teachers were on specific tasks) and performance style (i.e. how well teachers focus attention on the way JLL children learn and how the JLL children construct meaning and reality in Japanese within cross-cultural academic and social contexts). Therefore, they are obligated to gain pedagogical capacity (knowledge, skills, and lesson ideas) and style from other academic subjects or activities that contribute to teaching JLL children PE effectively. The teachers in this study believed that, for example, integrating ICT, Japanese writing, and social skill activities as sources of functional and age-appropriate motor skill development helped them design PE lessons (Mlinac and Feng, 2016) because they could have hands-on, inquiry-based PE lessons that bridge contextualized exploration of natural phenomena, motor activities, and communication of ideas in a variety of formats, including written, gesture, and oral forms. For example, ICT can significantly contribute to teachers' new ways of constructing themselves in PE classes that may lead to their professional and personal growth in teaching and learning for JLL children in PE (Tearle and Golder, 2008). The use of digital content as additional visual learning aids for feedback and analysis of motor skills can help JLL children and teachers minimize miscommunication and language barriers (Tearle and Golder, 2008). The Japanese elementary teachers also often used student-centered teaching, peer tutoring, and communication strategies that are used in other classes, while also applying requisite knowledge, skills, and understanding for learning new PE lesson concepts (Russo et al., 2018). In positioning theory, student-centered classes allow JLL children to communicate and share their voices (see also Kayi-Aydar, 2014), so that Japanese and JLL children produce interactive positioning that helps them better understand each other's positions (Andreouli, 2010). All children bring their existing practices (ways of talking, thinking, and acting) constituted through gender, class, race, ethnicity, and peer status (Lewis, 1996). Such differences closely interact with how children position themselves and are positioned by others. When the JLL children have limited access to peer interactions in PE, they have fewer opportunities for language learning (Kayi-Aydar, 2014) and it is more difficult for them to understand the meaning of lessons and switch or translate between new and past PE discourse through interacting with classmates (Sato and Hodge, 2016).

Some elementary teachers expressed their concerns about communication and collaboration with parents who are not familiar with Japanese schools or culture or who are not proficient in the Japanese language (see also Chen et al., 2008). They explained that the parents of JLL children were not sufficiently familiar with the Japanese school system and struggled to provide effective academic support to their children. There is also a lack of language translation support, so Japanese teachers tend to treat the JLL children differently (i.e. as foreigners). Therefore, it depends on teachers' positioning whether they can lead to more and better language acquisition experiences or to fewer and poorer such experiences for parents (Kayi-Aydar, 2012). Following Chen et al. (2008), Japanese elementary teachers should respect JLL children's academic backgrounds, including past and new learning in PE, and seek pedagogical strategies to enable JLL children to obtain good results in PE (see also Aguado et al., 2003).

In Japan, elementary school teachers expect parents of elementary school children to be teachers' partners. Therefore, Japanese schools have home visits (*katei houmon*), where classroom teachers visit their students' homes to have discussions with parents about school concerns, children's talents and abilities, and children's safety, including PE (Jabar, 2010). This study found that several teachers used problem-solving approaches (online translation tools such as Google Translate or Pocket Talk) to communicate with the parents of JLL children and learn how to make intelligent guesses as to what an appropriate translation should be (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999; Vidhayasai et al., 2015). Although online translation tools do not produce a perfect translation (mismatch of word-for-word translation and sense-for-sense translation) of the oral conversation and communication between Japanese teachers and parents of the JLL children, the Japanese teachers began to develop strategies to negotiate and interpret the meaning of the translations (see also Vidhayasai et al., 2015). By using such tools to engage parents, teachers can position parents in certain roles (e.g. that of someone who makes a positive and lasting impact on their child's learning), a kind of other-positioning in positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1990).

This study found that the Japanese elementary teachers we studied had teaching frustrations in handling cultural differences (religious and behavioral differences) and the potential effect these could have on JLL children's learning outcomes in PE. Teachers had a tendency toward positive self-esteem and high standards in the sense of their expectation of excellence and accomplishments by JLL children in PE (see also Nilsson et al., 2008). In terms of positioning, when the JLL children adhered to traditional cultural or religious practices and/or demonstrated their own cultural habits and behaviors, the teachers positioned the children as invisible members of the learning group (Kay, 2006). This means that the teachers viewed the practice of teaching from a particular social and cultural position (that of Japan). Teachers define good teaching for themselves, and based on that, they make their own decisions for pedagogical actions (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999). According to Lapinski and Rimal (2005), teachers value their own social and cultural norms, which are rules and expectations of behaviors based on shared beliefs developed by a collective approach, such as that of Japanese teachers within the elementary schools. Olive (2014) explains that teachers bring their own emic perspectives, which capture their own interpretations of school systems, and interpret cultural and professional experiences within a particular group or culture. In contrast, teachers struggle to understand and encompass etic perspectives that view the JLL child's behaviors (in two or more cultures) from outside of a particular system (Pike, 1967). Therefore, when they find the JLL children act and behave differently, the teachers may begin to judge the behaviors of the JLL children as inappropriate or unacceptable. Forsyth and O'Boyle (2012) also explain that when teachers have high ideals of children's learning outcomes, they tend to reflect on their own teaching as successful rather than as a failure. Teachers who try to seek teaching improvements and respect children's backgrounds can express more self-reflective thoughts of happiness due to helping the children (Forsyth and O'Boyle, 2012).

Recommendations and conclusions

The results of this study describe and explain Japanese elementary teachers' teaching experiences, including finding PE lesson ideas, interacting with parents of JLL children, and understanding cultural and behavioral differences in PE. The following recommendations are intended to enhance the quality of pedagogical experiences in teaching JLL children in PE for elementary classroom teachers.

First, teachers need to gain specialized knowledge and skills in order to design PE lessons that help JLL children understand and interpret teaching–learning environments.

Japan is known for a collaborative approach to professional development called "lesson study" (*jugyo kenkyu* in Japanese), which is also adopted in the PE curriculum for elementary school teachers in Japan (Sato et al., 2020a, 2020b). Lesson study is a well-organized professional development opportunity that has emerged in Japan for in-service teachers (Saito, 2012) and has played an important role for elementary school teachers in Japan who are not licensed to teach a specific subject area, such as PE. Through the lesson study approach in PE, teachers may be able to understand how best to position JLL children and develop inclusive PE content so that they can understand how they influence pedagogical actions for JLL children.

Second, we suggest that schools and teachers should develop an open-door policy for immigrant parents, and the parents should be encouraged to visit the school as much as possible (Ozmen et al., 2016). Elementary teachers need to work effectively with the parents of JLL children. For example, teachers need to discuss good character traits, safe physical activity practices, and healthy eating habits with parents (Sato et al., 2020a, 2020b). Furthermore, teachers may need to communicate with parents if their children have injuries, illness, or other incidents during PE class (Kojima and Aino, 2018). Therefore, an open-door policy would enable parents to have regular contact with the school and develop home–school relationships. In order to ensure safe physical activities for JLL children, schools and teachers should try to bring in diverse speakers who speak the children's native languages and can serve as Japanese translators for the parents of JLL children if possible (Tebben, 2017), so that the parents of JLL children understand the importance of PE, which will help the JLL children receive appropriate instruction and support at home.

Lastly, in order to increase teachers' cultural and behavioral awareness of JLL children and their backgrounds, service learning is a useful tool that could be utilized by Japanese teachers as it provides them with both a general and concrete foundation about how to make sense of differences and social justice (Renner et al., 2004). For example, observing inclusive youth sport team practices (local and JLL children) and talking with coaches in the community may be a useful way to develop and promote service learning in pedagogical methodology in PE (Capella-Peris et al., 2019). In this way, Japanese elementary teachers can meet the community's needs and self-reflect on their teaching experiences in order to gain a deeper understanding of PE content so that they may be able to raise their level of multicultural consciousness and demonstrate their ability to negotiate and form partnerships with JLL children in the school environment and community (Brown and Howard, 2005).

We conclude that the present study not only contributes to our understanding of teaching PE for JLL children, but also helps us explore how to communicate and work with the parents of JLL children. Studying elementary teachers' positioning in teaching JLL children in the Japanese PE context is a unique addition to the PE literature. Positioning theory holds much potential for exploring a wide range of academic, social, and cross-cultural phenomena in teaching language learners in PE research. The potential for exploring Japanese teachers' ethics is important and high, because positioning theory focuses analytical attention on values in PE between teachers, students, and parents (Lönngren et al., 2021). This study also sees potential for combining emotional positioning with the development of pedagogical strategies to enhance student learning in PE in the future. We are currently developing online professional development modules (how to include emotional positioning through teaching cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains) with the Japanese elementary teachers in this study. We hope teachers (not only from Japan, but also from other Asian countries) who are facing similar challenges can build capacity, expertise, and knowledge to improve the teaching of language learners in PE.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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