



## Nursing students with special educational needs in Japan<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

*Aim:* To reveal the prevalence of nursing students with special educational needs in Japan.  
*Method:* A mail survey of 833 nursing programs was conducted. Nurse educators were asked to report on their program's profiles and the number of extremely difficult students who belonged to the March 2011 class of graduates. They were also asked to fill a modified questionnaire developed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology about each extremely difficult student.  
*Results:* Among the 14,325 students enrolled the class of 2011, 146 students (1.02%) were identified as having one or more special educational needs for "listening," "speaking," "reading," "writing," "math," "reasoning," "inattentiveness," "hyperactivity/impulsivity," or "social interaction/restricted interests." The most prevalent need was "social interaction/restricted interests," followed by "listening" and "inattentiveness." These students had the most difficulty participating in "nursing care for patients during clinical practicum."  
*Conclusion:* The proportion of nursing students with special educational needs is small but may have a large impact on the clinical practicum. Evaluation and support systems at multiple levels, including entrance examinations, course placement, and special educational programs, are warranted.

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### Background

Developmental disorders, including learning disabilities (LDs), attention deficit/hyperactive disorder (ADHD), and high-functioning autistic spectrum disorder (HFAD) or Asperger's syndrome, have been widely recognized in adolescents and young adults in recent years (Adreon and Durocher, 2007; Graetz and Spampinato, 2008;

VanBergeijk et al., 2008). In Japan, the Act on Support for Persons with Developmental Disabilities was enacted in 2004, and the responsibilities of higher educational institutions to accommodate the needs of students with developmental disorders were clearly stated. Japan Student Service Organization conducts surveys on students with disabilities in higher education every year. According to the survey, 41 students with clearly diagnosed developmental disorders were identified in all allied health science schools of universities and junior colleges in Japan in 2013 (Japan Student Services Organization, 2014). However, the survey reports the prevalence of only those students with definite diagnoses. There may be numerous students with undiagnosed developmental disorders or relevant special needs. The Organization also publishes a guidebook for faculty and staff to support those students (Sato et al., 2012). However, the guidebook does not provide sufficient information to assist nursing faculties who teach students in unpredictable clinical sites.

Although the existence of nursing students with developmental disorders is recognized (Bradshaw and Salzer, 2003; Evans, 2013; Ijiri and Kudzma, 2000), the distribution of those students remains unknown. The present study was inspired by an author's

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experience with a student who had difficulty behaving appropriately in clinical practicum. Students with developmental disorders may have special needs that require additional support to implement a nursing career. Knowing the prevalence of such students may facilitate understanding of their needs and may subsequently help develop support programs for the students. Therefore, this study aimed to reveal the prevalence of nursing students who had special educational needs with specific traits relevant to developmental disorders.

## Literature review

Learning disabilities (LDs) are characterized by unsatisfactory academic achievement because of difficulties with one or more learning skills, such as reading, writing, and mathematics (Sadock and Sadock, 2009). Dyslexia, a difficulty with language, is a well-known example of a learning disability. People with dyslexia experience difficulties in organizing lines and dots written on a paper and sounds spoken by other people. One student with dyslexia described his perception of written language as being similar to “dispersed black sesame seeds on a white canvas” (National Institute of Special Needs Education, 2005). Students with a learning disability may face a variety of difficulties with higher education. Ijiri and Kudzma listed possible difficulties experienced by college students with learning disabilities (Ijiri and Kudzma, 2000). Some or all of the difficulties, such as issues with reception and expression of oral language, reading, and computation, can be obstacles for students to study nursing.

Nursing students with dyslexia have been studied in Western countries. The experiences of these students have been explored in Europe. Two qualitative studies explored the experiences of nursing students with dyslexia. Morris and Turnbull interviewed 18 nursing students with dyslexia in the UK and identified five themes that the students faced (Morris and Turnbull, 2006). The study found that the students were concerned with whether they should disclose their dyslexia and that they developed self-managing strategies, needed more time to complete their assignment, had emotional responses, and were thoughtful about their choice of future work settings. Although the study provides useful information to nursing faculty who support students with dyslexia, the authors suggested more research studies to establish evidence for the effectiveness of such support. Child and Langford, also in the UK, conducted a phenomenological study to explore the learning experiences of nursing students with dyslexia (Child and Langford, 2011). They interviewed nursing students with and without dyslexia to clarify the experience that is specific to dyslexia. In addition to common themes found in both groups, dyslexic students expressed difficulty in short-term memory, spelling and writing, reading, and pronunciation. Their need for more time and clinical mentors' understanding of dyslexia were revealed. In that study, the importance of clinical mentors' support and schools' advocacy role was emphasized.

The identities of nursing students with dyslexia have been studied in Ireland. The discourse analysis revealed that there were students who embraced, passively engaged, or resisted their handicaps (Evans, 2013). Although some students positively coped with their disabilities, other students resisted admitting dyslexia as an identity. Most students did not use language related to the medical diagnosis of dyslexia, and they complained about a lack of understanding of dyslexia among clinical staff, as well as academic nurse educators.

ADHD is characterized by a failure of sustained attentiveness and control of impulsiveness (Sadock and Sadock, 2009). Although the symptoms of ADHD are most problematic in school-aged children, the symptoms persist in adolescents and adults in

approximately half of all cases (Sadock and Sadock, 2009). Inattentiveness, distractedness, impulsiveness, and other symptoms of ADHD affect executive functions that are essential behaviors for successful achievement in college (Bradshaw, 2006; Bradshaw and Salzer, 2003). Nursing students with ADHD may experience difficulties, particularly in clinical settings where time-management and prioritization are crucial. An anecdotal episode of inappropriate behavior of a nursing student with ADHD was illustrated in the literature (Bradshaw and Salzer, 2003). The student in the report loudly verbalized her astonishment when she saw her patient's perineal appearance because of a medical condition. One of the authors of the report later published a review article on nursing students with ADHD (Bradshaw, 2006). Recommendations to accommodate ADHD students in nursing education are described in the article, but a solution for interpersonal problems is not definitive.

HFAD, or Asperger's syndrome, is a pervasive developmental disorder. HFAD shares common clinical features with autistic disorder, except for language delay. People with HFAD exhibit difficulties in communication, especially in nonverbal communication, impaired socialization, and restricted interests and behaviors (Sadock and Sadock, 2009). The need to support college students with HFAD is well recognized (Graetz and Spampinato, 2008; VanBergeijk et al., 2008). The difficulties associated with HFAD may also impede nursing practice. For example, the failure to understand nonverbal cues may affect the establishment of rapport with patients, and being unable to collaborate with nursing and other health care staff may hinder a nurse in providing comprehensive health care. However, our literature search revealed there are no current articles on nursing students or nurses with HFAD.

The inclusion of disabled students in nursing education has been debated after the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act in the United States, the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act and the 2010 Equality Act in the United Kingdom, and the 1992 Disability Discrimination Act in Australia. A balance between students' right to study and patient safety was the most important issue regarding including disabled students in nursing education (Chih Hoong and Fong, 2008; Davidson, 1994).

In Japan, Disqualification Conditions for health care professions became “relative” instead of “absolute” in 2001. Prior to the amendment, physical, mental, and sensory impairments were disqualifying conditions in health care professions, including nursing. After the amendment, nursing schools were not able to reject students based on their disabilities, and the selection of prospective students remains each school's decision. Issues related to the acceptance of disabled students in nursing education have been discussed in the literature (Kurihara and Hirota, 2012). However, the discussion has focused mostly on physical and sensory disabilities, and the possibilities for students with developmental disorders were not widely recognized.

Developmental disorders were not well known in Japan until recently, although autism was well known. Currently, Asperger's syndrome is the most widely known disorder, and ADHD is the second most recognized disorder. Learning disabilities are much less known. Asperger's syndrome became publicly known in relation to crime; therefore, a negative image of Asperger's syndrome is predominant in Japan. ADHD also has a negative connotation. It was publicized in conjunction with restless children who disrupted classroom teaching. Adults with developmental disorders are now widely recognized, and many books on the topic have been published within the past few years in Japan.

In 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) of Japan conducted a national survey of elementary and junior high school students (6–15 years old) to detect those with special educational needs (Ministry of Education

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