



Original research

Behavioral traits of the nursing students with special educational needs in Japan[☆]Yuko Ikematsu^{a, *}, Koji Egawa^b, Midori Endo^c, Mitsuko Yokouchi^d^a Department of Nursing, Nagoya University Graduate School of Medicine, Japan^b Kobe City College of Nursing, Japan^c School of Nursing, Yamanashi Prefectural University, Japan^d Department of Nursing, Faculty of Nursing, Kobe Women's University, Japan

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ABSTRACT

Nursing students with tendencies toward developmental disorders or special educational needs could face difficulties while studying nursing. The study examined the behavioral traits of nursing students with special educational needs who graduated in Japan in March 2011. Nurse educators from 341 programs provided information concerning students who had been identified as difficult to teach while enrolled in nursing programs. Behavioral traits were examined in students with special educational needs ($n = 139$) and those who did not have special needs but were identified as difficult to teach by the nurse educators ($n = 84$). The most prevalent behaviors in students with special needs were “making excessive excuses” in unstressful situations and “lapsing into silence” under stressful circumstances. The number of students with special needs who were prone to “blaming others” and “disappearing” was higher relative to that of students without special needs under unstressful circumstances. Under stressful circumstances, “blaming others,” “disappearing,” and “staying at home” were reported more frequently for students with special needs than they were for students without special needs. Nurse educators should pay attention to these behaviors in students facing difficulties while studying nursing.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Developmental disorders, such as learning disabilities (LDs), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and high-functioning autistic-spectrum disorder (HASD), or Asperger's syndrome, were initially considered childhood problems. However, recent studies have revealed that these conditions persist into adulthood (Sadock and Sadock, 2009). Nursing students with developmental disorders have also been identified (Bradshaw and Salzer, 2003; Ijiri and Kudzma, 2000). It is reasonable to assume

that these students face extreme difficulty in clinical practice in which multiple tasks and unexpected changes are inevitable. However, there are few research studies about nursing students with developmental disorders. The reason of the paucity may be due to inconsistent definitions of those disorders. For example, the term “developmental disorders” is used in medicine and related fields, whereas “developmental disabilities” is used predominantly in education and welfare fields.

The use of confusing terminology is most apparent for LDs and dyslexia. For example, “LD” is used to abbreviate a variety of terms including “learning disability” (Ijiri and Kudzma, 2000), “learning disorder” (Desoete and De Weerd, 2013; Margari et al., 2013), and “learning difficulty” (Carman and Chapparo, 2012). In the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, “specific learning disorder” is listed as a subcategory of neurodevelopmental disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and describes impairment in reading, written expression, and mathematics. The term “dyslexia” is cited as an alternative term for reading impairment in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In contrast, the British Dyslexia Association defines dyslexia as “a learning difficulty that

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primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling” (British Dyslexia Association, 2016; para. 4). These discrepancies between definitions hinder scientific progress in this field considerably.

To assist nursing students with developmental disorders in adjusting to nursing studies, it is important to assess their predisposition to developmental disorders, because they have special needs related to their disorders. However, typical manifestation of the condition is often masked in college students, because they have coped with related difficulties since they were young. Therefore, understanding their coping behaviors could help nurse educators to recognize their disorders and initiate appropriate supportive measures. We conducted a national survey that included nursing students with special educational needs in Japan (Ikematsu, 2014). As the survey did not employ a definitive diagnosis for developmental disorder, the term “special educational needs” was used; “special educational needs” and “possible developmental disorder” are used interchangeably in this article.

1.2. Literature review

The term “developmental disorder” is a collective term to describe several types of disorder. Dyslexia is one form of LD in some countries such as United States and Japan. People with dyslexia have difficulty reading, writing, calculating, listening, talking, and reasoning, despite normal intellectual development.

The difficulties experienced by nursing students with dyslexia have been examined (Child and Langford, 2011). Nursing students experience difficulties that are common to general college students in addition to problems related to nursing studies. The difficulties that could be experienced by non-nursing students were “the need for more time to complete tasks,” “short-time memory difficulty,” “spelling difficulty,” “writing difficulty,” “reading difficulty,” and “pronunciation difficulty.” In addition to these common difficulties, nursing students face difficulties unique to clinical practice, such as a lack of understanding regarding dyslexia, a need for more information about dyslexia for clinical mentors and staff discrimination and judgmental attitudes upon disclosure of their dyslexia. Nursing students with dyslexia have special needs to be considered by nurse educators. It is important to determine those needs prior to their clinical practicum.

ADHD is characterized by “a pattern of diminished sustained attention and higher levels of impulsivity” (Sadock and Sadock, 2009, p. 79). Although ADHD is considered a childhood impairment, it persists into adulthood for some students in higher education. Although no research studies that included nursing students with ADHD were identified in our literature review, anecdotal evidence of a case of nursing student with ADHD is reported and discussed in the literature (Bradshaw, 2006; Bradshaw and Salzer, 2003). Bradshaw and Salzer (2003) provided an overview of ADHD, which included a single case in which a nursing student with ADHD behaved in an inappropriate manner in clinical settings. Although other traits, such as sloppiness and lack of organization in writing assignments, interrupting other students during speech, and poor time management, are common problems for students with ADHD in other disciplines, inability to behave appropriately during clinical practica could be a significant drawback for those studying nursing.

HASD, also known as Asperger’s syndrome, is another developmental disorder. HASD is characterized by disturbances in communication and socialization and a tendency to focus on specific interests (Graetz and Spampinato, 2008). Our literature search did not reveal any studies that included nursing students with HASD. Impairment of communication and socialization could affect clinical practica in nursing curricula, and limited interest could

exert an impact on learning a wide range of human responses to health problems.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) in Japan conducted a national survey of elementary and junior high school students (aged 6–15 years) in 2012, to identify those with special educational needs. A sample including 53,882 students in mainstream classes (i.e., not in special support classes) was evaluated by schoolteachers using a questionnaire that developed for a related survey conducted in 2002. The 2012 survey revealed that 6.5% of students had special learning and/or behavioral needs that were relevant to developmental disorders. This result indicated that students with a tendency toward developmental disorders remain undiagnosed and are included in mainstream classes. It is possible that these students are able to enroll in nursing programs because they are not intellectually impaired. Traits of those with developmental disorders, such as difficulty in communication, inattentiveness, and lack of empathy, affect their nursing studies severely. Early detection and individual approaches are crucial to their success in nursing programs.

It is known that adults with developmental disorders often exhibit comorbid behavioral and psychological problems. In a study that included a sample of students from a single university, tendencies toward HASD, measured via the Autism Spectrum Quotient and Social Responsiveness Scale-Brief Format Adult Self-Report Form, were positively associated with social anxiety, depression, and aggression (White et al., 2011). Nursing students with developmental disorders might not manifest typical symptoms of their disorders, because they could have acquired skills to compensate for related weaknesses at an early age. Instead, behavioral and psychological traits are often obvious and could affect their everyday lives.

Developmental disorders are currently considered to occur on a spectrum. Exhibition of a tendency toward developmental disorders without meeting diagnostic criteria is known as a “broader phenotype” or “subclinical manifestation” (Ingersoll, 2010). People with such tendencies without a definite diagnosis of developmental disorders have received considerable attention (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001; Ingersoll, 2010; White et al., 2011). Evidence suggests that a tendency toward HASD (broader autism phenotype) is associated with lower nonverbal sensitivity (Ingersoll, 2010). Nurses are expected to be sensitive to nonverbal cues, because they provide care for frail patients including those who are cognitively impaired and unable to verbalize their pain or needs. Therefore, it is important to identify nursing students with this tendency, even if they do not fulfill the diagnostic criteria indicating a need for provision of special educational support.

This article reports details of the behaviors of students with special educational needs, which were collected as a part of the survey. The purpose of this study was to clarify the behavioral traits of nursing students with special needs, to help nurse educators detect predisposition before students experience difficulties in clinical practice. The specific aims of the study were to determine the following:

1. How nursing students with special educational needs behave under unstressful and stressful circumstances
2. Differences in behavior between nursing students with and without special educational needs under unstressful and stressful circumstances

2. Research design

The study used a cross-sectional survey design. Directors of nursing programs for registered nurses (RNs), excluding high-school-affiliated five-year diploma and tele-education programs,

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