

A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES BETWEEN JAPAN AND THE U.S.

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ABSTRACT

Learning disabilities (LD) are one of the essential issues in education, and also a very difficult challenge to overcome it in practice. This study compares to Japan and the U.S. as an example case of a country where LD support is still early stage and relatively advanced respectively, with the supports based on three different level of organizations: schools, communities, and nationwide. Supports for LD students may be in a challenging stage, but educational support based on their educational culture will result in a meaningful outcomes for their future support systems.

Keywords. Learning disorder, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Japan, the U.S., comparative study

1. INTRODUCTION

In current Japanese society, Japanese schools face significantly serious educational problems such as bullying, truancy, decreasing the students' motivation for study, and so forth. Japanese schools required to resolve these problems (Kitagawa, 2003). Among these educational problems, learning disabilities have been recognized one of the biggest problems to manage class and instruction (Morinaga, 2002). However, learning disabilities are not a new disorder. In the U.S., clinicians and researchers started to research people with learning difficulties in 1920s. During 1920 to 1960, researchers started to find new instructional methods for people with learning disabilities to learn. After this period, learning disabilities became a significant problem in formal situation, so from this period, the government started to implement several educational policies for students with learning disabilities (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). In Japan, during 1980s, many cases that students could not read letters were reported and many educators were interested in learning disabilities (Morinaga, 2002). Recently, many Japanese educators understand the importance of educational support for students with learning disabilities and they try to implement some educational support (Eda & Ono, 2004). Students with learning disabilities can receive educational support from several agencies; however, comparing Japan and the United States, the policies of educational support are similar in certain aspects but different by each agency level such as schools, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the government.

2. LEARNING DISABILITIES: A BRIEF SUMMARY

Learning disabilities are educational problems in specific educational fields that students exhibit in a class. In general, students with learning disabilities have the same or higher average intelligence as other students, so other than their problematic academic areas, they can keep up with lectures without problems (Kemp, et al., 2016). Concerning learning disabilities, there are many aspects on which almost all professionals agree; however, the definition of learning disabilities is not the same at the international level. Learning disabilities are defined by many agencies. The context of each definition is quite similar, but differences can be found. For example, In Japan, the Ministry of Education (1999) defined learning disabilities as

...various conditions, fundamentally without delay in overall intellectual development, manifested by significant difficulties in acquisition and using specific abilities of hearing, speaking, reading, writing, calculating, or reasoning. Learning disabilities is presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction as a causal background, while disorders, such as impaired vision, hearing loss, mental retardation and emotional disturbances, or environmental factors are not direct causes of learning disabilities (as cited by Hara, 2002a, p7).

In the U.S. learning disabilities were defined by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) in 1990:

...a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability.

Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other [disabling] conditions (for example, sensory impairment . . . serious emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of these conditions or influences.

These definitions are widely used to understand learning disabilities. There are several types of learning disabilities. Dyslexia is a reading disability (Kemp, et al., 2016). Dyslexia is the most common learning disability because most of the students with learning disabilities suffer from dyslexia (Hara, 2002b). According to Davis & Braun (1994/2004), students with dyslexia look at letters as various shapes. Some students look at letters as three-dimensional figures, and others look at these as similar confusing figures. Figure 1 illustrates how students with learning disabilities cognate letters. In this case, CAT is used as an example. For these students, CAT is seen not only in correct order and direction but also letters with errors. Also, Sometimes dyslexia causes other learning disabilities such as dysgraphia and dyscalculia (not all the time, and sometimes these learning disabilities exist without dyslexia). Dysgraphia is a writing disability (Kemp, et al., 2016). It is quite common that students with dysgraphia write unbalanced letters, or sometimes are not being able to cognize the letter themselves (Davis & Braun, 1994/2004). Dyscalculia is an arithmetic disability (Kemp, et al., 2016) Students with dyscalculia exhibit problems, in addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division (Davis & Braun, 1994/2004).

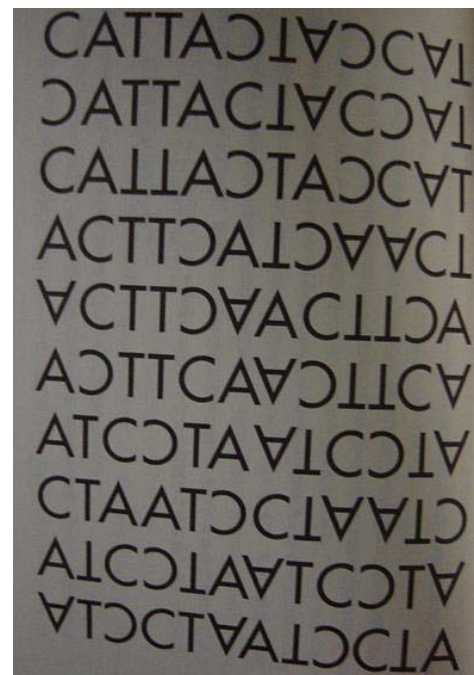
3. SCHOOL SUPPORTS

For students with learning disabilities, educational support by the school is the most direct, and affects their lives. Since students spend most of their time at a school, the school level support is the most essential support; therefore, the school support is quite important for the students to overcome both primary effects (difficulties in a class room) and secondly effects (difficulties outside a class room such as communication problems and bullying) from leaning disabilities.

In general, children with learning disabilities encounter their learning problems at school. Before they entered school, they have been able to understand things through their unique methods. However, in a school, teachers use specific methods to teach subjects, and students need to understand lectures with teachers' methods. In many cases, the teachers' methods and students' original methods are different, so students face academic problems at school. Moreover, if teachers do not have knowledge of learning disabilities, sometimes they regard students with learning disabilities as lazy students. In this case, students' hardships are extremely increased (Davis & Braun, 1994/2004).

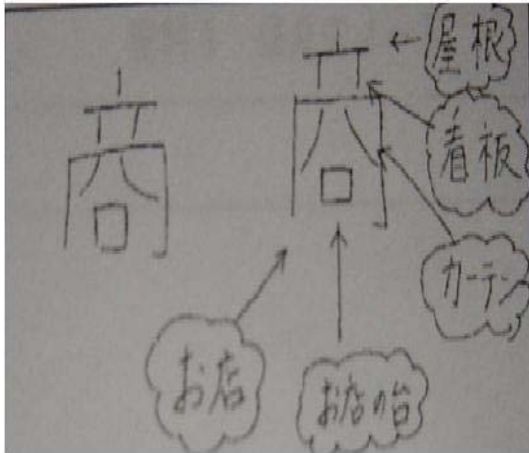
If students suffer from learning disabilities, they exhibit academic difficulties in class; some schools try to support these students. Since teachers device the methods of instruction, student can understand the lectures. For example, the Nagano Prefectural Board of Education (Nagano PBE) (2003b) reports one case study. In one elementary school in Japan, the teacher came across the student suffering from dysplasia. His name is Akira. Akira is an active student, but he is a stammer, so he hesitated to speak. In addition, he had a difficulty understanding the contexts of teacher's and friends' utterances. Moreover, he had difficulties understanding the directions and methods teacher showed. Because of dyslexia, it was also quite difficult for him to memorize *Hiragana* (Japanese letters) and *Kanji* (Chinese characters). To support him, the teacher has taught *Kanji* as a picture. For instance, to teach 商 (pronouncing Shou, the meaning of commerce), the teacher taught 商 as a picture of a shop. Figure 2 describes the picture that teacher used in class. According to the figure 2, the top of 商 is a roof, the middle part of 商 is a signboard, and internal part is a curtain and a table. In addition, the teacher has tried to review again and again because he was not good at memorizing the contents of lectures. Two years later, when he became a third-year student, he tried to study passionately and increased the number of comments in the classroom. In addition, he positively tried to

Figure 1, The vision of people with dyslexia (Example of CAT)



(Source: Davis & Braun, 1994/2004, p123)

Figure 2, Example of *kanji* as a picture,



(Source: Nagano PBE, 2003b)

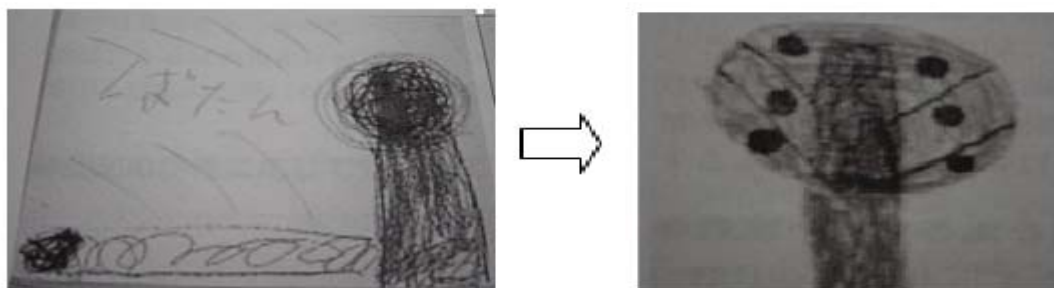
do various activities.

In case of the U.S., some universities have a learning disabilities center to support students. In general, when students can not understand lectures or receive credits, students go to learning disabilities center to listen to advice. In a learning disability center, professionals detect student's abilities, and if the student is diagnosed as learning disabilities, the student can receive special treatment such as providing printed materials instead of oral lectures, or recording the questions on examination because if not, students with learning disabilities face unfair situations regarding the class and grade, complying with Act 504 (e.g., St. Petersburg College, 2007).

Moreover, sometimes students with learning disabilities face not only academic difficulties but also secondly difficulties. Therefore, some schools try to resolve secondly problems. For example, Yuki is a first-year student in an elementary school. Since she

had difficulties communicating with her friends, she refused to go to school. Therefore, her teacher went to her house and talked with her and her parents. After the teacher visited her house, she has been able to start to go to a *Hoken-room*, where school nurse stays to help students who are injured from school activities. In Japan, sometimes students go to Hoken-room instead of a classroom because they have some reasons that prevent them from going to the class room especially bullying. In the Hoken-room, she received special treatment. At the same time, parents, teachers and specialists such as psychiatrists and psychologists closely communicated to support her appropriately. One day, when she participated in a school sports festival, she became nervous. However, her mother and teachers helped her carefully, she could relax during participation, and then, at last, she could take part in the school sports festival. Figure 3 shows the pictures she wrote before and after the school sports festival. Before the school festival, she had written a tree falling down because she did not have confidence. However, she has written a standing tree after the school sports festival. The change of picture means she could restore confidence from taking part in the school sports festival. After school sports festival, the teacher has continued to try to support Yuki kindly. As a result, one morning in December, she started to go to a classroom by herself, and she could spend time in the classroom even though sometimes she faced communication difficulties (Nagano PBE, 2003a).

Figure 3, the pictures she wrote before/after the school sports festival



(Source, Nagano PEB, 2003a)

As the examples are shown previously, both some Japanese and American schools try to support students with learning disabilities enthusiastically; however, in reality, the ratio of students who receive special treatment is quite different between Japan and the U.S. The differences are quite obvious about 10 years ago. According to Morinaga (2002), on the one hand, the ten percent of American students can receive special treatments; on the other hand, in Japan, only one percent of students can receive special treatment. One example shows this great difference between Japan and the U.S. Ryo is a 3rd-year student in a Junior high school. Now she goes to school

in Japan. When she was the 5th year student in an elementary school, she moved to the U.S. because of her father's job. In the American school, she had hardly improved her English ability even though she had tried to study hard. Therefore, teachers suggested receiving a medical examination. After finished medical examination, she was diagnosed with dyslexia. After that, she could receive special treatment from the school such as the admission of special education classes. When she became the first year student of the junior high school, she returned back to Japan. In Japan, her parents asked the board of education to provide special education. When the parents meet the staff of board of education, they said that they told her case to the school; however, they did not, and then the parents requested the school dean to provide help, yet the school did not support at all because the school argued all students should be treated equally, so the teachers cannot treat her as a special case (Shinagawa, 2004).

In the present, as the People with Developmental Disabled Support Law was passed in 2005, and the special support education schools have developed since 2008 in Tokyo metropolitan area, the number of students who actually can receive special treatments based on their learning problems has been increased to a certain extent. However, as in particular the casual exchanges by parents and sometimes teachers (i.e., sources are not an academic literature, but from the discourse under people's active communication, which is likely to reflect their natural responses and understanding) show, the schools that can offer special treatment are still quite limited: regional differences are tremendous, and students without emotional disorders such ADHD or intellectual disability tends to be neglected of their special needs. Therefore, LD support is a challenging or even immature stage where further advancement is required.

4. ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL SUPPORTS

To support students with learning disabilities, many NGOs have been established and the members of the organizations support students with learning disabilities with various policies. Some NGOs provide special education for the students, and other NGOs suggest educational policies to the government.

In the U.S. many NGOs have been established and they provide unique educational programs to students with learning disabilities. One example is Davis Dyslexia Association International (DDAI). DDAI provides a unique method called the Symbol-Master-Method, which educators use symbols to educate students with learning disabilities to teach letters. This method can be applied to numbers, symbols, and so forth. Therefore, this method can educate students who suffer from various types of learning disabilities. For example, figure 4 shows the case study of the Symbol-Master-Method. In this case, an educator taught fractions. Numerals have replaced the dots. Therefore, students could understand fractions without reading numerals. With the Symbol-Master-Method, DDAI has supported more than 1,500 children and adults with learning disabilities (Braun & Davis, 1994/2004). Another example is the NJCLD.

Figure 4, The Symbol-Master-Method to understand fractions



(Source: Braun & Davis, 1994/2004)

The NJCLD, which consists of 11 learning disability organizations, was established in 1975. The purpose of the NJCLD is to provide sufficient welfare for the students with learning disabilities. Since the NJCLD was established, they have tried to inform educational and governmental professionals about issues regarding learning disabilities (LD Online, 2015). The NJCLD has also defined the term learning disabilities. The NJCLD revised the definition of learning disabilities several times (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002).

In Japan, the Japan Academy of Learning Disabilities (JALD) is one of the biggest organizations that research learning disabilities. JALD consists of specialists: professors, clinical psychologists, educators, and teachers. The purposes of JALD are to improve situations around students with learning disabilities and research new methods to educate them (JALD, 2016). In addition, other than research organizations, *Kazokukai* (parents' organization) play important roles. A *Kazokukai* consists of parents of students with learning disabilities, and a *Kazokukai* widely distributes information on learning disabilities, makes presentations, and request the government to improve the educational environment for students with learning disabilities (LD keyaki, 2013). Moreover, each prefectural *Kazokukai* communicates and exchanges information to support the early detection of learning disabilities and (Japan LD parents' Association, 2009). For example, the Tokyo LD Parents' Association (Tokyo LDPA) tried to request the Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education (Tokyo MBE) to improve the educational environment for students with learning disabilities. On September 21, 2001, the Tokyo

LDPA and the Tokyo MBE had met. In this session, the Tokyo LDPA request the Tokyo MBE to improve educational support and environment for students with learning disabilities such as teacher education, allocation of specialists, conducting special support in class and examination, and so forth. About these requests, the Tokyo MBE gave positive answers to the requests from the Tokyo LDPA. For instance, when the Tokyo LDPA asked to educate teachers to understand and teach students with learning disabilities appropriately, the Tokyo MBE answered that the Tokyo MBE will conduct study meetings among teachers frequently (Tokyo LDPA, 2001).

5. NATIONAL LEVEL SUPPORTS

The U.S. has implemented several acts that support students with learning disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) offers special education for students with learning disabilities who are under 22. The IDEA provides Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and the Individualized Education Program (IEP) (National Center for Learning Disabilities [NCLD], 2014). FAPE realizes free educational service for students with learning disabilities, and because of the IEP, these students can receive special education based on their needs (GreatSchools Staff, 2015). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act ensures equal opportunities for students with learning disabilities to access educational programs. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prevents students with learning disabilities from discrimination in the operation of public and private agencies. Because of these laws, students with learning disabilities can receive equal opportunities to receive educational programs without discriminations. In addition, regarding their courses and examinations, they can receive accommodations based on their conditions (NCLD, 2014).

In addition, the U.S. has implemented the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act in which one of the prospect supports students with learning disabilities. The NCLB is an educational act proposed by George. W. Bush, the President of the U.S., to improve the quality of education. This act requires standardized exams for all students in every school (Neil, at el., 2004). George W Bush (Strauss (2015) re-examines his speech with a whole exhibition of Bush's 2002 speech and this paper refer to it) mentioned that many children cannot catch up with standard education; therefore, educational systems should be changed to resolve this educational failing. The prospective advantages of the NCLB are to improve students' performance, invest federal budget to improve schools and teacher quality, increase flexibility, and inform parents. Therefore children can be educated without failure. On the other hand, some educators argue that the NCLB decreases the quality of education and equity. Since the NCLB is based on testing, schools will try to only increase the scores of standardized tests, and then schools will not provide high-quality education but just focus on preparing tests. In addition, the standardized exams can not measure students' ability correctly because the quality of the tests is poor. Therefore, the NCLB might fail as an educational policy (Neil, at el., 2004). According to the NCLD (2014), since the NCLB requires annual tests, students with learning disabilities can be detected in early stage, so students with learning disabilities can receive special education appropriately. In addition, the NCLB provides teachers who have special knowledge or skills with learning disabilities, so the students can receive a high quality education. Of course, students with learning disabilities can receive proper accommodation on their tests; therefore, these students do not face discrimination.

In Japan, the Japanese government has tried to start to implement policies that support students with learning disabilities. In January, 2004, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (2004) announced guidelines to support people with learning disabilities. These guidelines provide information for educational administrations, schools, specialists, and parents and students. Furthermore, on December 3, 2004, the People with Developmental Disabilities Support Law was accepted by the senior cabinet. The purpose of this law is to extend the social welfare services for learning disabilities that had not been supported by the previous laws. Under the law, the national and prefectural governments must support learning disabilities. According to the context of this law, support centers for people who suffer from developmental disabilities will be constructed in each prefecture. In addition, this law includes implementation of early detection of learning disabilities with infant or school diagnoses, preparation of professional institutions, and employment support. The People with Developmental Disabled Support Law was implemented in 2005, which further re-written in 2015. As a practical example, the National Center Test for University, which any people who want to go a national university are required and can be optionally used for many private universities and/or some qualifications acquiring in Japan, has practiced special consideration since 2010 (National Center for University Entrance Examinations, 2016). Still an early developing stage, but these policies are expected to improve the social welfare of students with learning disabilities.

Comparing Japan and the U.S., the policies and legislation of the U.S. government are much more advanced than the policies and legislation of Japanese government. However, the Japanese government has started to support students with learning disabilities such as legislating special support law, and it can be expected that the

Japanese government will reinforce social welfare for students with learning disabilities as the U.S. government have already implemented.

6. CONCLUSION

There are several agencies that try to support students with learning disabilities in both Japan and the U.S. In the both countries, schools conduct educational support for these students; however, compared to the U.S., many Japanese schools do not conduct any special support for students with learning disabilities because of the policy of equal treatment for all students. Moreover, many NGOs also try to support students with learning disabilities to provide special education or suggest new policies for both parents and government. At the national level, the governments, in both Japanese and the U.S., are important agencies. Since several acts that assure the rights of these students are conducted, these students can receive equal educational opportunities in the U.S. In Japan, systems that support students with learning disabilities are being constructed; therefore, educational opportunities for these students have been increased. Because of these agencies' efforts, educational support systems have been advanced. Shortly, it can be expected that barrier-free education will have been completed.

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