

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF DISABILITIES AT A SMALL JAPANESE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

For this study, we attempted to ascertain students' perceptions of disabilities at our university. We were specifically interested in what students considered to be a disability. One goal was to measure the students' colloquial understanding of disability in order to better realize the informal social milieu that students with disabilities are entering as they attend our university. It is also hoped that this survey will be used in the future with the same students, so that we can measure what students learn about this topic during their time at the university and how their perceptions of those with disabilities evolve. Additionally, by learning what students think, we look forward to creating tools and resources for better serving and understanding disabled students.

INTRODUCTION

The field of disability studies has a robust corpora to draw from. Many researchers have studied teaching disabled foreign-language students (Abrams, 2008; Berberi et al., 2008; Kormos et al., 2018), student and faculty perceptions of disabled people in various places (Kataoka et al., 2004; Lipka et al., 2019; Mino et al., 2000; Murray et al., 2009; Tsu-Hsian et al., 2020), and disability in Japan (Heyer, 2015; Mithout, 2016; Stevens, 2013). There are some researchers who have specifically written about university student perceptions of disability in Japan in English (Iwakuma et al., 2021; Mino et al., 2000), but those studies are often quite small and some of them are old. Unfortunately, none of the three of us speak Japanese sufficiently well to do quality research in Japanese, which certainly narrows our understanding of the field. Even so, adding more recent English-language research can only help other professionals that are in similar situations to ours. It is with this background that we came to our idea for research.

While the study of perceptions of disability is not new, we hope our study will help expand and modernize the available data in English that exists in Japan. In addition, some researchers wonder what effect changing laws and educational landscapes have had on the many stakeholders involved.

Since we teach at university and our students attended public schools when many changes were beginning, perhaps that has affected students' perceptions of disability? Of course our one small study cannot answer that question, but continuing research in this topic and comparing our results to other similar studies could produce interesting results.

In this study, we are looking to get a baseline reading of what students think about disabilities at our university to further assess and track their beliefs as they go through their education. We hope our research can be used to help teachers design ways to incorporate awareness and create ways to better assist disabled students. We will cover the literature around perceptions of disability and how our work will add to current research. We will explain the methods of our study and share notable data. Finally, we will discuss where we would like to take our research from here and how we hope to affect outcomes for our university, and ways that it could be applied to other situations to improve the understanding of disabilities in education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background

Depending on which model you use, definitions of disability can vary. According to Stevens (2013), "In short, the UN's definition of disability is any physical, medical and/or intellectual impairment that impedes an individual's ability to take responsibility for his or her daily functions" (p. 4). Japanese law defines disability as "a person with a disability (physical, intellectual, mental (including developmental), and others) affecting the functions of the body or mind, and who are in a state of facing substantial limitations in their continuous daily life or social life because of a disability or a social barrier" (Cabinet Office, n.d., ch.1 sec. 2). An estimated 5.9% of people in Japan have some kind of disability (Disabled World, 2018). The number of disabled postsecondary students was 1.05% in 2018 which was a significant increase from the .44% in 2014. In 2019, greater than 1% of university students had some kind of disability that impacts learning (Moriya et al., 2019). Compared to many other countries, 5.9% of the population is a very low number of disabled citizens. One reason for that is the strict limitation of what is considered a disability (Heyer, 2015). This could certainly affect how Japanese people understand disability in comparison to some other countries.

Since 2006, Japan has begun to push for integrating students with disabilities into mainstream schools, rather than special education schools (Mithout, 2016). Learning disabilities were not recognized by law until 2007, meaning these students did not have any extra support until then (Heyer, 2015). In 2013, Japan enacted The Act for Eliminating Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities, and ratified the

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2014. The goal is to eliminate discrimination and to be certain that disabled people are not excluded from receiving an education (Isogai, 2017). Recent surveys have revealed that the number of disabled children in Japanese schools has increased, and also that more and more students are attending regular schools, as opposed to the special education schools that were previously more common (Isogai, 2017). Essentially, for the past 16 years the Japanese government has been trying to enact a more inclusive educational environment and now recognizes learning disabilities.

Perceptions of Disability

A number of studies have measured teacher, faculty, and administrative staff's perceptions of disabilities. Lipka et al. (2019) explored faculty attitudes and knowledge about disabilities at a university in Israel. Their focus was on learning disabilities and they found that while faculty have generally positive attitudes towards students with learning disabilities, the faculty members had little knowledge about learning disabilities (Lipka et al., 2019). Kataoka et al. (2004) focused on elementary school principals' and teachers' perceptions of disabilities in Nara prefecture. Other studies (Murray et al., 2009; Tsu-Hsian et al., 2020) also focused on university faculty members' perceptions of disability. It can be seen that there are a number of studies focusing on perceptions of disability, some a little old and others more recent. While this information is valuable and helpful in understanding the landscape of disability studies, they are not directly related to student perceptions of disabilities.

Perhaps the most relevant studies we came across were Mino et al. (2000) and Iwakuma et al. (2021). Mino et al. (2000) conducted a study in 1988 and 1993 aiming to measure medical students' changing perceptions of mental disability over time. Their results indicated general success in changing student attitudes towards mental illness throughout their time as medical students. While this study is somewhat dated by now, the implication that education can change attitudes towards disabilities remains relevant. A more recent study by Iwakuma et al. (2021) described their results after measuring student perceptions of disability both before and after a course about disabilities taken by freshmen students. Their data also showed changes in student attitudes, but they pointed out that this change in attitudes can diminish over time. Their study is both new and relevant to the goals of this project. Our study has no intervention intended to change student perceptions of disability, but the opportunity to follow up over the respondents' time at the university exists and is an exciting point to consider in future research. Our study gives us the first baseline reading of what our students think about disabilities.

METHODOLOGY

We considered three research questions for this mixed methods investigation: 1) What do students at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) think about disability? 2) Do they identify specific learning difficulties such as Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as a disability? 3) How will their perceptions change over time? The third research question cannot be addressed by this study alone, but we were able to focus on the first and second questions. In order to answer these questions, we created a survey. Although we created the survey ourselves, we understood the role our own biases and interpretations of the research would play in influencing the creation of this survey.

KUIS is a foreign language university in Chiba, Japan where all students study English as well as at least one other language. We created a 39 question, professionally translated bilingual survey with open ended, checkbox, multiple choice, and 4-point Likert scale questions. Students could answer in English or Japanese. Responses were randomized and coded so as to protect student anonymity. Given the sensitive nature of some of the questions, we included many reminders to students that certain questions were optional and that their privacy would be protected. The full survey is available upon request. In the 2021-2022 school year, the student body was approximately 4,300 students. We recruited among all students and received 60 responses, 57 of which were usable.

The survey was conducted by using Google Forms. We asked other teachers to share the survey and we advertised it by making posters with QR codes and placing the posters in five out of eight campus buildings. The posters were designed with bright colors and images in order to attract the attention of our students. Anyone who completed the survey was given a 500 yen Amazon voucher by email. On one day, two researchers reserved a room for about three hours where students could sit to complete the survey. About ten students came to the classroom that day. All surveys were completed online using the Google Form.

We chose this style of survey for several reasons. One reason is that while there were many questions that were multiple choice, checkbox, and Likert scale, allowing for easy analysis on our end, we wanted to leave space for students to express anything else they felt necessary. Many students were also still not taking courses on campus, so we needed a survey that could be conducted remotely. We also wanted to use a format the three of us and the students were familiar with since we would not be able to help them with technical problems.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Seventy percent of the respondents were first-year students at KUIS, followed by 24% second-year, and 5% third-year students. This composition of students is encouraging, especially since we intend on having longitudinal studies of this group to examine how their perceptions may change in the months and years to come.

With regard to gender (look at fig. 1 to see how we asked the question), three-quarters identified under the broader category of female, answering in both English and Japanese with wording such as "woman," "women," "female," "女" (*onna*). 22% identified under the male category, answering in both English and Japanese with words such as "man," "men," "男" (*otoko*). One student answered "その他" (*sonohoka*) a Japanese word which roughly translates to other, and another replied, "男の娘" (*otokonoko*), which roughly translates to a feminine man.

Question 3

Students had a variety of responses to the question "When you hear the word "disability" what do you think of?" They were encouraged to be open and to not feel pressure about what they would be expected to say as their confidentiality was guaranteed. We coded responses with the following categories: negative, neutral, positive, and empathetic.

Twenty of the responses (35%) could be considered negative in this context; they were statements which explicitly or implicitly appeared to focus on what the disabled individual was *not* able to do or how the disabled individual was going to suffer from social exclusion and marginalization. One answer was very explicit in this regard: "Likely to become a target of discrimination. It causes trouble in daily life."

Answers such as "not being able to do what you want to do", "limited physical or mental capabilities in order to carry out everyday tasks," "negative, being handicapped, barrier" and "It makes people [*sic*] difficult to do daily life" emphasized what was lacking in the lives of the disabled. Being disabled was not seen as positive and there were no notions of society itself needing to adapt or to become more accepting of the disabled individual.

Some students expressed a negativity that did not only emphasize the burden that would be placed on the disabled individual, but also a burden that would be placed on others "Having difficulty with everyday tasks and requiring assistance. Being restricted in movements; therefore, not being able to go to places" and "a person who requires assistance in daily life, roadblocks."

Other comments expressed more pity and paternalism than empathy. For example, "I feel sorry for people who have disabilities because they have so many difficulties in daily life. I feel pitiful and pathetic for them." This comment corresponds to similar ideas that could best be described as othering. Comments such as "different from others," "being dysfunctional (= disability), an obstacle (thing/person)," "A hard life," and, particularly, "Minority, crazy, scary" placed emphasis on the negative differences of a disabled person and how these individuals would stand out in less than positive ways.

Twenty (35%) responses could be categorized as neutral; these were descriptions that simply stated a matter of fact and to the researchers could not be contested factually, morally, politically, or ethically. Statements such as "A person whose body may be different from standard body types" possessed a more descriptive tone.

Twelve (21%) of the neutral statements used the word "inconvenient" or "inconvenience" which registered into the neutral category, as it is difficult to dispute that the disabled will experience inconvenience on a more regular basis due to current infrastructural standards. These statements emphasized the fact that life for the disabled individual was what was "inconvenient." The individual was not the "inconvenience."

Question 3 & 39

We compared and contrasted answers to Question 3 of the survey, which asked: "When you hear the word "disability," what do you think of?" with question thirty-nine of the survey, which asked "How do you think Japan defines disability?" These answers were coded as similar, different, and falling somewhere in the middle.

Respondents possessed an interesting contrast between their personal understanding of the word "disability" and their definition of how Japanese society defines the word. Twelve (21%) of the respondents possessed an understanding that could be best described as "similar and consistent" between their personal view and the Japanese societal view that they referenced. For example, one respondent's personal understanding of disability was "I have an image that they largely require assistance from others for their own understanding of the word." This same respondent also wrote, "the disabled can't live without assistance from others." These two responses are fairly similar with each other and show that there is a consistency in outlook between the respondent's personal perception and the perceived perspective of Japanese society writ large.

Another respondent's personal perception described disability as "a state of suffering due to one's attribute" while describing the Japanese

definition of disability as “at a disadvantage, because of their disabilities,” further mentioning how people with disabilities in Japan are considered to be “pitiful.” Finally, another respondent simply answered the question on personal perception and the question on Japanese perception with “inconvenience.”

Four respondents (7%) had views that could be best described as being in the middle-of-the-road and not having too much difference between their personal perception and the larger Japanese society perception. One respondent’s personal idea of the word disability was “limited physical or mental capabilities in order to carry out everyday tasks” while their perception of the Japanese society’s vision of the disabled was described as “people who are restricted from having a life.”

Thirty-three (57.9%) of the respondents had personal perceptions that were quite different from the perceived perceptions they shared for Japanese society at large. One respondent in particular shared that they saw a disabled person as someone who “requires assistance in daily life” concluding the statement with the word “roadblocks,” an answer that centers around the deficiency of the individual instead of the society at large. This answer contrasts with their response to the way they believe that Japan itself defines disability. The respondent states that the disabled are treated well “on the surface;” however, there is a difference emphasized by the media, which focuses on differences. The respondent went on to say that due to this, “people with disabilities are treated as [people] who really cannot fit into society. The media treats it as miraculous when people with disabilities overcome their difficulties, get married, or become a CEO.” This respondent concluded with “I think that is just so wrong.” This respondent’s analysis places more of the onus on Japanese society’s inability to be more inclusive and welcoming to those with perceived disabilities, suggesting that it is not the individual but the society that needs to change its attitude to be more accommodating to the disabled person.

Another respondent described their own personal perspective as being one of inclusion and accommodation. “If there is anyone with disabilities around me, I would like to support them. I know it is hard to live with disabilities, but I wish them a happy life.” While their perspective of Japanese society was one that described exclusion and marginalization, saying, “An illness that makes a person difficult to function normally.”

Conversely, there were some respondents whose personal perception of those with disabilities was less-than-flattering (“minority,” “crazy,” “scary”) while their description of the Japanese society appeared to be more compassionate. For example, one person said, “An illness that requires constant assistance from others in order to lead a life.”

Questions 4 and 5

Students were asked to mark which conditions, out of a bilingual list containing a variety of physical, mental, and developmental (including learning) disabilities they felt were disabilities. You can see the entire list in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1. List of conditions considered to be disabilities

4. Which of the following do you think is a disability? Please check the box next to the words that apply. You can check more than one. -以下のどれが「障害」に該当すると思いますか。該当すると思う項目をチェックしてください。複数回答可。

Check all that apply.

- A person using a wheelchair - 車いす使用者
- Anxiety - 不安
- Depression - 鬱
- Dyslexia - 読み書き障害
- Blindness - 視覚障害者
- Deafness - 聴覚障害者
- ADHD - 多動性障害
- Hearing Loss - 難聴
- Autism Spectrum Disorder - 自閉症スペクトラム障害
- Brain Injury - 脳損傷
- Down's Syndrome - ダウン症
- Cerebral Palsy - 脳性麻痺
- Experiencing a Traumatic Event - 心的外傷
- Rheumatoid Arthritis - 関節リウマチ
- Diabetes - 糖尿病
- Obesity - 肥満
- Speech Disorders - 発語障害
- None of the above - 上記に該当する該当がない
- Other: _____

The three specific learning disabilities we listed, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), ADHD, and Dyslexia, all received high rates of recognition as disabilities. ASD received the highest rate with 48 respondents (84.2%) marking it as a disability. ADHD had 46 (80.7%) and Dyslexia had 43 (75.4%) responses identifying them as disabilities. This answers our second research question: Do students identify specific learning difficulties such as ADHD as a disability? The answer is generally yes. However, in Question 5 we asked if there were any terms in Question 4

that were unfamiliar and 15 respondents marked that they were unfamiliar with ASD. This means that there were a number of respondents who marked both that ASD is a disability but also indicated that they were unfamiliar with the term. Also several other respondents marked various disabilities in both questions. One reason could be that while students may understand that these conditions are disabilities, they may not know exactly what the condition is or how it specifically affects people.

Likert Results

In the Likert section of the survey, we asked students to rate their level of agreement to various statements relating to disability. In one section we looked at students' beliefs about disabled people being separated from nondisabled people. We used the statement structure, "People with _____ disabilities should be separated from the rest of society in _____." In the first space we added the category of disability: physical, mental, or learning. These three categories are based on the definition of disability as outlined by Japanese law (Cabinet Office, n.d.). In the second space we added sectors of life: school, work, or daily life. We asked students to rate their agreement along a four-point scale of *strongly agree*, *mostly agree*, *mostly disagree*, or *strongly disagree*. Results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Agreement with the Separation of Disabled People Based on Disability and Sector of Life

Disability and Sector of Life	Strongly Agree	Mostly Agree	Strongly Disagree	Mostly Disagree
Physical Disabilities in School	1.8%	1.8%	63.2%	33.3%
Physical Disabilities in Work	0%	5.3%	61.4%	33.3%
Physical Disabilities in Daily Life	0%	3.5%	78.9%	17.5%
Mental Disabilities in School	3.5%	17.5%	36.8%	42.1%
Mental Disabilities in Work	5.3%	15.8%	40.4%	40.4%
Mental Disabilities in Daily Life	0%	0%	94.7%	5.3%
Learning Disabilities in School	1.8%	17.5%	40.4%	40.4%
Learning Disabilities in Work	0%	8.8%	47.4%	43.9%
Learning Disabilities in Daily Life	0%	1.8%	80.7%	17.5%

In the sectors of life, disabilities in daily life was the most accepted. Over 95% of respondents disagreed with some degree of separation in all three categories, and 100% disagreed with separation of people with mental disabilities.

Of the categories of disabilities, physical disabilities received the highest rates of disagreement with separation in all sectors of life. 96.5% of participants disagreed with separation in school and 96.4% disagreed with it in daily life. The work sector followed closely with 94.7% total disagreement.

Disability in school appears to be the least accepted. Participants had the highest levels of agreement that there should be some separation of people with mental (21%) and learning disabilities (19.3%). Both categories received 17.5% *mostly agree* responses. Mental disabilities had a 3.5% strong agreement rate versus 1.8% for strong agreement of separation for people with learning disabilities.

Separation of people with learning disabilities had the highest participant agreement rate at 19.3% total agreement in the school sector versus 8.8% total agreement in the work sector and 1.8% total agreement in daily life.

The work sector also received a 21.1% total agreement rate for separation of people with mental disabilities. Additionally, it received the only responses for *strongly agree* with separation (5.3%) across all categories of disability.

However, we would like to indicate that this was a Likert scale question and is not capable of giving a full picture of the participants' true feelings. All participants did have space to add additional explanations for answers, though only two did. One participant states, "Some answers depend on how the level disabled people are. And if normal people care," while the other commented, "Their own individual wishes must be honored, rather than arguing about whether they should or should not be segregated." With these responses we can see that there is an indication that students believe there shouldn't be a blanket separation of disabled people and it should be up to the disabled people themselves instead of dictated by society or government. We would like to use this question as a springboard for further research where we look more deeply into these ideas.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis of KUIS students demonstrates that respondents surveyed have a generally high degree of acceptance of people with *physical*

disabilities in the venues of work, school, and daily life. However, about a fifth of respondents believed that there ought to be *some* separation for those with mental and learning disabilities. It is worth mentioning that students were given the opportunity to elaborate on many of these questions and provide more nuanced answers on the degrees with which people with non-physical disabilities ought to be accepted. This large amount of acceptance from our students could have much to do with long standing cultural and social mores; however, it is necessary to mention that our respondents were all born since 2002 and that the Japanese government's effort towards integrating students with disabilities into mainstream schools rather than special education schools has been in effect since 2006 (Mithout, 2016). Also, learning disability has been recognized by law since 2007 (Heyer, 2015), exposing more Japanese youth to neurodiverse classmates. Generally, we saw the different responses illustrate a reality where the respondents appeared to have compassion and inclusion towards those with disabilities. Japanese society was described by participants as being condescending and marginalizing to those with disabilities. Another key point that readers should take away from our study is that it is not intended to place judgment on students but rather to be used as a tool for teachers, administration, and staff to address disability issues in the university.

Limitations

This data provided us with a fair degree of insight into the undergraduate student body at KUIS. However, limitations of this data included some inaccurate translations (discovered by us after survey administration) between Japanese and English, which also resulted in some poorly worded survey questions and difficulty understanding answers. For example, one question where we hoped to have a detailed answer resulted in students giving only yes/no answers. We wanted to ask, "How do you think your exposure to information about disabled people affects your perceptions of disabilities?" However, the question was translated into Japanese as "Do you think your exposure to information about disabled people affects your perceptions of disabilities?" (see Figure 2). Our use of a Likert scale in many of the questions also is limiting as it does not provide a fuller picture of participants' true feelings. In addition, 70.2% of our respondents were freshmen, which does not make for a representative sample of each year level on campus. We also separated physical, mental, and learning disabilities which is certainly an oversimplification since many people have disabilities that span multiple categories. Finally, this was a small survey at one small university in Chiba prefecture, so it cannot be taken as representative of general feelings of Japanese university students. The hope is that it can add to the body of research and be applied specifically to our university, but it cannot be used to create policy on a wider scale. In the next section we describe some of the ways it can be used despite its limitations.

Figure 2. Open-ended question

38. How do you think your exposure to information about disabled people affects your perceptions of disabilities? 障害を持つ人に関する情報に向き合うことは、障害に対するあなたの認識に影響を与えますか。

Recommendations and Future Research

Findings from this small study indicate that there is potential to learn more about the environment and attitudes that students with disabilities could face when entering our university. Our aim as educators is to encourage learners to take more control over their own learning, however, social and environmental factors may prevent learners from fully thriving. There are numerous possibilities of potential follow-up research to this study. As stated, we intend to follow these students longitudinally as most are first-year students at the university. We hope to record their perspectives on mental, intellectual, and physical disability over time to document and analyze how their perspectives evolve. In addition, we would like to select some students for more in depth interviews. Data and analysis from these and future surveys can serve as tools to promote awareness and acceptance of students with disabilities. Moreover, this data can serve as an additional tool of newer and more up-to-date information for English-speaking educators in Japan looking to promote institutional policies that will benefit their disabled populations. Other studies we would like to follow up with are perceptions of teaching staff and administration. By doing this, we could create a more complete picture of the environment our students are entering. A survey of actual accessibility resources that are already available on campus should have been our first step, but since it was not, this is another area for future research.

As more Japanese students identify as being disabled (Moriya et al., 2019), it will be important to continue research projects like this along with smart, evidence-based policy solutions that provide comfort, support, and acceptance to students and families who come to our universities.

CONCLUSION

This paper addresses the literature around perceptions of disability and the desire for more updated English-language research in this area. By using Google Forms and analyzing our results, we were able to get a broad picture of some of our students' opinions about disability. It is clear that our data cannot be applied to a wide range of situations and the research has other limitations, but it did give us some insight into our student body and we will continue the project to see how students' perceptions of disabilities change over time. We sincerely hope that the students, teachers, and administrators at our university can benefit from our research.

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