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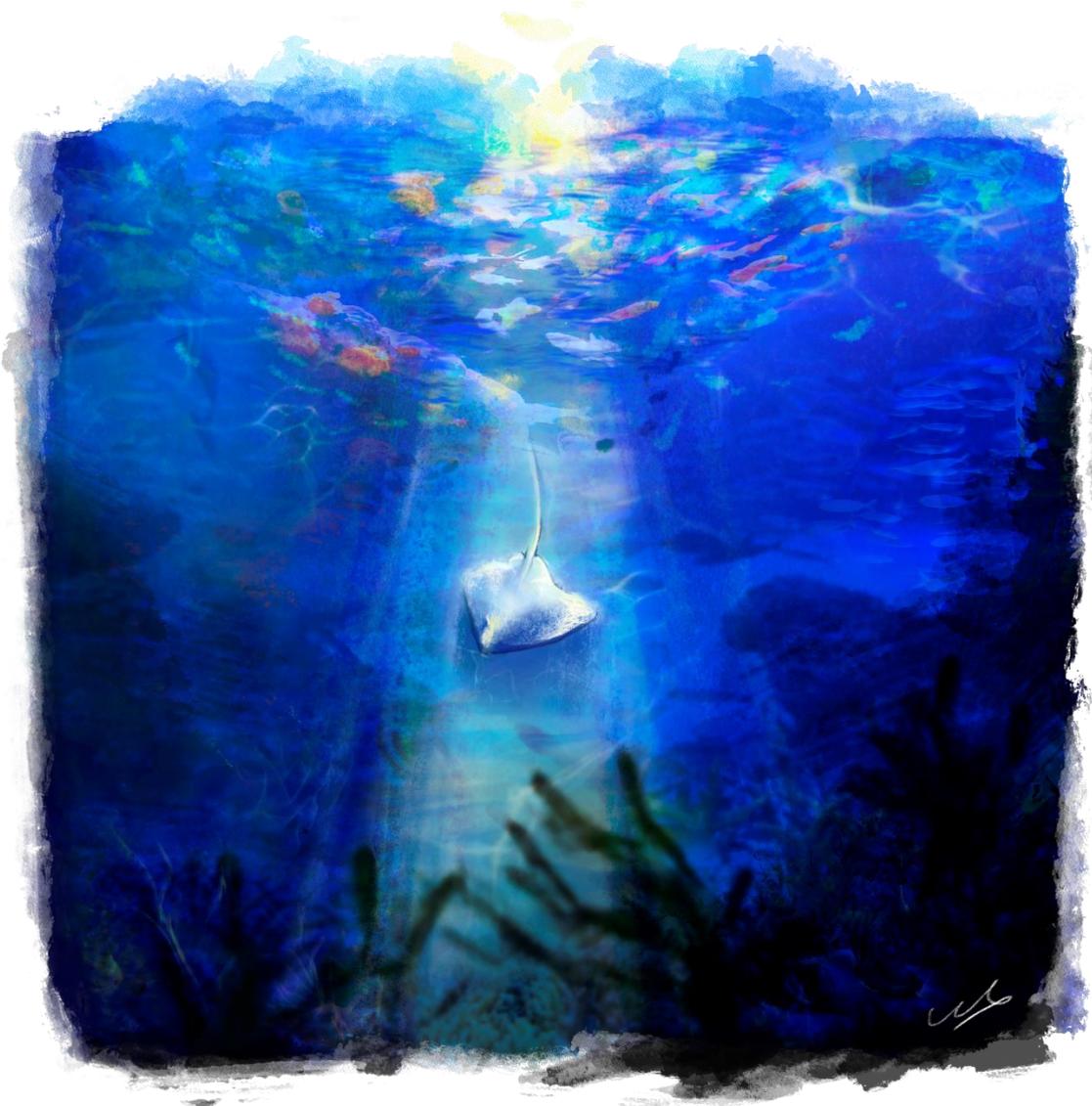
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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Knowledge and Skills of Support Workers of Persons with Disabilities in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The recent increase in Japan's employment rate compels improvements in the knowledge and skills of support workers to ensure smooth transitions to corporate employment for persons with disabilities. The study aimed to clarify the degree of self-perceived knowledge and skills of employees at work support centres for persons with disabilities. The Japanese version of the Self-Assessment for Students or Counsellors (SASC-J) comprising 80 items was distributed among 328 support workers in Japan. The results show that knowledge and skills related to the subsystems of employment and placement, useful for transitioning to corporate employment, were low among participants. Professional training opportunities for vocational rehabilitation must be enhanced to build more stable knowledge and skills for work supporters at such sheltered workshop centres in Japan.

<Key-words>

training, education, Japan, systems approach to placement, vocational rehabilitation

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I. Introduction

In recent years, the number of job listings and the employment level for persons with disabilities in Japan has been increasing significantly¹⁾. Against this backdrop, there are growing opportunities for persons with disabilities to transition from employment-related welfare services to direct employment in companies. According to the Act for the Comprehensive Support of Persons with Disabilities, Work Support Centers for Continuous Employment is a way to offer employment-related welfare support to persons with disabilities in Japan. This framework offers employment and production opportunities to those who cannot be hired through competitive employment. To this end, there are initiatives for training to improve their knowledge and skills.

Japan has implemented an employment quota system for persons with disabilities. According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare¹⁾, in Japan, the legally mandated employment rate has been increasing every year; in fact, this rate reached an all-time high in the 2020 survey¹⁾. To further promote social participation, it is necessary to support the smooth transition of persons with disabilities from educational institutions and welfare services to the workforce. Working can encourage persons with disabilities to participate in social life and to improve their quality of life.

In Japan, there are three welfare services related to vocational rehabilitation: Work Transition Support Services (WTSS), Work Support Centers for Continuous Employment Type A (WSC-A), and Work Support Centers for Continuous Employment Type B (WSC-B). WTSS provides work support services, such as training in business and job skills, clarification of desired jobs, and assistance in job search activities, for up to 2 years to persons with disabilities who wish to work in competitive employment scenarios that pay more than minimum wage in integrated environments. WSC-A, in addition, provides work opportunities based on employment contracts with no upper limit to the period for which persons with disabilities who have not achieved competitive employment can avail of the services. WSC-B provides training to improve one's work opportunities with no upper limit on the period for which one can avail of the services. This service system of vocational rehabilitation in Japan is explained in detail by Boeltzig-Brown²⁾.

As there is no upper limit to the period of WSC-B use, service consumers tend to stay there with less hope of moving on to competitive employment. In fact, a survey by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare found that while the percentage of welfare service users working for companies has increased, many centres with no records of users transitioning to the companies in the first place, reflecting a disparity among centres³⁾. In recent years, WSC-B has been required not only to provide a place for sheltered employment, but also to provide support for the transition to competitive employment⁴⁻⁵⁾. Therefore, knowledge of the characteristics of the client's disability, assessment of the environmental aspects necessary for support, collaboration with medical and other welfare institutions, and enhancement of the training programs offered are necessary⁶⁾.

In order to serve as a step toward this transition to competitive employment, supporters in WSC-B need to develop their expertise related to vocational rehabilitation. To promote the transition of persons with disabilities from educational institutes and welfare services to corporate employment in the future, improvements in the knowledge and skills of WSC-B supporters are required. In Japan, vocational counsellors (VC) and job coaches (JC) for persons with disabilities exist as professional posts in vocational rehabilitation. However, many of the supporters enrolled in WSC-B do not have professional qualifications in vocational rehabilitation. A few studies reported the lack of expertise in vocational rehabilitation of these support workers and the need for systemic improvements to solve this problem⁷⁻⁸⁾.

Yaeda, Kundu, and Nishimura⁹⁾ investigated the knowledge and skills of job coaches in Japan⁷⁾. They pointed out that job coaches in Japan do not have sufficient knowledge and skills related to social work compared to job placement. Moreover, there is a need for a system that can provide further systematic education and training. If JCs had adequate knowledge and skills in vocational rehabilitation, more persons with disabilities could transition from the work activity centres to competitive employment, or at least to the WTSS or WSC-A, as a subsequent step.

This study determines the extent of the knowledge and skills related to vocational rehabilitation possessed by Japanese WSC-B managers who provide work support and manage the facility. Further, it identifies the difference between the knowledge and skills possessed by these managers and the Japanese job coaches using previous studies. In addition, the quality of the knowledge and skills that the managers possess is clarified, which will, in turn, outlines the nature of the knowledge and skills that need to be acquired in the future and the collaboration that will facilitate it. This study is based on the hypothesis that the current managers of WSC-B in Japan do not possess sufficient knowledge and skills in vocational rehabilitation. It helps to determine whether the knowledge and skills of support workers have improved with the development of work support efforts for persons with disabilities in Japan.

II. Method

1.Participants

The sample consisted of managers at 122 WSC-B in L Prefecture and 206 WSC-B in M Prefecture as of April 2020. A self-addressed stamped envelope for the managers was mailed to 328 WSC-B. The return response rate was 50.8% in L Prefecture and 29.1% in M Prefecture. The overall return response rate for the survey was 37.2%, which provided data that captured the trend of WSC-B in rural areas.

2.Survey items

The Japanese version of the Self-Assessment for Students or Counsellors (SASC-J), which has 80 items, was used to assess the self-perceived knowledge and skills of the

managers at WSC-B. The SASC-J is one of the assessment tools in Systems Approach to Placement (SAP) for rehabilitation counselling students and practitioners⁹⁾. The SASC-J was translated into Japanese by Yaeda et al.⁹⁾ using the back-translation method, and its reliability and validity were confirmed through the survey.

There are eight subsystems in the instrument, namely the Client subsystem (15 items), Health subsystem (8 items), Education subsystem (6 items), Family subsystem (5 items), Social subsystem (10 items), Employer subsystem (14 items), Placement Personal Subsystem (10 items), and Funding subsystem (12 items). The ordinal scale for each item of the instrument ranges from 0 to 4, as measured by responses like 'I have no knowledge or skill', 'I have minimum knowledge or skill', 'I have average knowledge or skill', 'I have more than average knowledge or skills', or 'I have enough knowledge or skill to train someone', respectively. The content of each item was matched appropriately with the Japanese social and vocational service delivery system. By calculating the average score for each subsystem (the range of the average score is 0 to 4 points), the knowledge and skills of the supporters in each subsystem can be clarified.

3.Data analysis

Descriptive statistics and a t-test were used to answer the research questions. A one-sample t-test was conducted between the mean scores of each subsystem and the whole of SASC-J and the mean scores of the survey results of Yaeda et al.⁹⁾. To identify the strong and the weak areas of specific knowledge and skills perceived by the managers at WSC-B in Japan, the top 10 and bottom 10 mean scores were rank-ordered. The results were then compared with the corresponding top and bottom 10 rankings of Yaeda et al.⁹⁾.

4.Ethical Considerations

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Screening Committee of Akita University, for research targeting subjects in the Tegata region (No. 2-3 on May 22, 2020). Informed consent was obtained from the participants through a clear statement on the first page of the questionnaire. Responses to the questionnaire were thus considered to constitute consent for research participation.

III. Results

1. Demographic Variable

Table 1 shows the ages of the respondents. We asked each WSC-B manager to respond to this research and found that more than 50% of the respondents were managers in the age group of 40–49 years old. Table 2 shows the qualifications of the participants (multiple responses).

Table 1. Age distribution of respondents

Ages (N=120)	%
Under 29 years	0
30–39 years	15.8
40–49 years	55.0
50–59 years	27.5
Over 60 years	1.7

Table 2. Respondents' qualifications

Qualifications (N=122)	Number of persons	%
Certified Care Worker (CCW)	67	54.9
Certified Social Worker (CSW)	38	31.1
Psychiatric Social Worker (PSW)	23	18.9
Job Coach (JC)	13	10.7
Occupational Therapist	8	6.6
Clinical Psychologist/Licensed Psychologists	2	1.6
Vocational Counsellor for Persons with Disabilities (VC)	0	0.0

Based on the qualifications of the respondents, the percentage of those who are qualified as certified care workers was higher than the percentage of those who hold national qualifications in providing welfare support, such as certified social workers and psychiatric social workers. Additionally, few respondents had qualifications related to vocational rehabilitation, such as JC and VC.

2. Perceived Knowledge and Skills of Support Workers

The average scores for each subsystem and the total of SASC-J are shown in Table 3. A one-sample t-test was conducted between these mean scores and the mean scores of Yaeda et al.⁹⁾.

Table 3. SASC-J scores in WSC-B

Subsystem	Setting	MEAN	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Client (N=118)	Type B	2.10	0.68		
	WSC	2.10	0.62	-0.05	
	WSA	2.13	0.60	-0.54	
Education (N=117)	Type B	1.22	0.84		
	WSC	1.40	0.81	-2.38	*
	WSA	1.46	0.81	-3.16	**
Health (N=119)	Type B	1.87	0.76		
	WSC	1.66	0.69	3.00	**
	WSA	1.61	0.72	3.72	**
Family (N=118)	Type B	2.09	0.78		
	WSC	1.96	0.71	1.84	
	WSA	1.98	0.82	1.56	
Social (N=117)	Type B	1.47	0.79		
	WSC	1.42	0.78	0.68	
	WSA	1.46	0.80	0.13	
Employer (N=116)	Type B	1.42	0.88		
	WSC	1.87	0.81	-5.48	**
	WSA	2.02	0.81	-7.31	**
Placement (N=120)	Type B	1.51	0.92		
	WSC	2.20	0.86	-8.13	**
	WSA	2.31	0.89	-9.43	**
Funding (N=117)	Type B	1.72	0.79		
	WSC	1.79	0.68	-0.99	
	WSA	1.87	0.66	-2.08	*
Total (N=103)	Type B	1.65	0.69		
	WSC	1.8	0.62	-2.11	*
	WSA	1.86	0.64	-2.98	**

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

WSA: Japanese Job Coaches in Work Support Centers

WSA: Japanese Job Coaches in Work Support Agencies

SASC-J: The Japanese version of the Self-Assessment for Students or Counsellors

WSC-B: Work Support Centers for Continuous Employment Type-B

Scores on Education, Employment, and Placement subsystems were significantly lower than the respective subsystem scores reported by Yaeda et al.⁹⁾. However, Health subsystem scores were significantly higher while the total score was significantly lower in this study, than those of Yaeda et al.⁹⁾. In contrast to the results of Yaeda et al.⁹⁾, the Client (2.10) and Family (2.09) subsystems scored higher than the other subsystems in this study.

To identify the strong and the weak areas of specific knowledge and skills perceived by the managers at WSC-B in Japan, the top 10 and the bottom 10 mean scores were rank-ordered. These rankings are shown in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. The top ten knowledge and skills of managers in WSC-B

	Subsystem	Item	Mean	SD		Ranking in Yaeda et al. ⁹⁾
1	Client	Teaching basic communication skills	2.50	0.74	↑	Top No. 8
2	Client	Teaching the use and management of local transportation	2.47	0.80	↑	Top No. 5
3	Client	Teaching interpersonal relation skills	2.45	0.79	↑	Top No. 10
4	Family	Supporting a client's adjustment to the family	2.44	0.88		Out of ranking
5	Client	Teaching independent living skills	2.43	0.75		Out of ranking
6	Client	Advising on health maintenance	2.40	0.65		Out of ranking
7	Funding	Social Security Disability Insurance (S.S.D.I.)/Medicare	2.39	0.96	↑	Top No. 9
8	Client	Teaching personal hygiene	2.36	0.72		Out of ranking
9	Family	Supporting the family's adjustment to the person with a disability	2.35	0.84		Out of ranking
10	Client	Introducing suitable housing (apartment, GH, etc.)	2.31	1.05		Out of ranking

Table 5. The bottom ten knowledge and skills of managers in WSC-B

	Subsystem	Item	Mean	SD	Ranking in Yaeda et al. ⁹⁾	
1	Education	Referring a client for Supported Employment training	0.87	1.03	Out of ranking	
2	Education	Referring a client to the entry process for the OJT program	0.91	0.97	Out of ranking	
3	Education	Referring a client to entry procedures for vocational-technical training programs	1.03	1.00	Out of ranking	
4	Social	Referencing a client with religious barriers for assistance	1.07	0.93	↓	Bottom No. 3
5	Social	Referencing a client with cultural / ethnic barriers for assistance	1.07	0.94	→	Bottom No. 5
6	Social	Determining religious barriers	1.08	0.93	→	Bottom No. 6
7	Placement	Understanding of the laws regarding vocational rehabilitation and job coaching	1.15	1.07	Out of ranking	
8	Employer	Conducting the task analysis	1.18	1.05	Out of ranking	
9	Employer	Providing support for job restructuring that fits the needs of a client	1.18	1.08	Out of ranking	
10	Health	Referring clients for orthotic/prosthetic/ adaptive technology aid evaluation	1.19	1.03	↓	Bottom No. 2

The top three items were ‘Teaching basic communication skills’, ‘Teaching the use and management of local transportation’, and ‘Teaching interpersonal relations skills’ in the Client subsystem. All items appeared significantly higher in the rankings compared to

the rankings of Yaeda et al.⁹⁾. The fourth, fifth, sixth, eighth, ninth and tenth ranked items in this study did not appear in the ranking by Yaeda et al.⁹⁾.

The items that were ranked in the bottom three were 'Referring a client for the Supported Employment training', 'Referring a client to the entry process for the OJT program', and 'Referring a client to entry procedures for vocational technical training programs' in the Education subsystem. None of these items were ranked by Yaeda et al.⁹⁾.

IV. Discussion

In SASC-J, the average score of 1.0–2.0 is for 'I have a minimum level of knowledge or skill'. Kundu et al.¹⁰⁾ suggested that an average of 0.0–3.0 in any sub-system would mean 'you need to read a textbook on placement and/or complete a course in placement'. The mean scores in this study were low, suggesting Japanese WSC-B supporter workers have less knowledge and skills about vocational rehabilitation.

WSC-B is an institution that provides vocational task improvement and works training for persons with disabilities. Yaeda et al.⁹⁾ surveyed job coaches, while the participants in this study differed. Consequently, as the work areas are different, the knowledge and skills would also differ. However, in recent years, WSC-B is no longer in a situation to provide work support in a protective environment within the facility; they are now required to improve support programs to increase users' wages and enhance support outside the facilities for users' transition to corporate employment¹¹⁾. The system makes it difficult for Japanese vocational rehabilitation professionals to work across its domains. Therefore, it would be especially beneficial in this current situation for WSC-B to possess the knowledge and skills represented by employment and placement.

Currently, there are limited opportunities for workers in social services such as WSC-B to gain knowledge about vocational rehabilitation. For example, opportunities such as training for JC exist in Japan; however, there are issues related to an uneven distribution of opportunities in urban areas, as evidenced by the fact that only limited people are certified. The local vocational centres for persons with disabilities, which are national vocational rehabilitation organisations, are working to disseminate knowledge by providing basic training in employment support and opportunities for on-the-job training. The local vocational centre for persons with disabilities provides uniform services in Japan, which is expected to make this type of support more readily available.

In sum, this study explored the knowledge and skills of WSC-B support workers related to vocational rehabilitation in Japan and the specific strengths and weaknesses in these areas perceived by the support workers themselves.

The possession of SASC-J knowledge and skills was significantly lower in WSC-B managers, thus indicating that it is necessary to back WSC-B supporters in acquiring knowledge and skills. In particular, while there was support for daily living implemented through stable day-care, there was a significant lack of knowledge supporting employment and placement. Maebara¹²⁾ pointed out that the acquisition of knowledge

and support techniques related to work support will be further required in response to the need to conduct accurate vocational assessments for persons with various disabilities. As pointed out by Lee and Lee¹³⁾, support from the government is necessary to strengthen the functions of work support service agencies. Therefore, to improve this situation, it is necessary to enhance training services aimed at acquiring knowledge and skills. Matsui¹⁴⁾ also points out the importance of training supporters involved in vocational rehabilitation. However, considering the differences in local social resources, it is essential to create a training system and a network that would successfully connect existing services.

V. Conclusion

In Japan, it is considered necessary to establish a training system that enables individuals to accumulate requirements such as experience, knowledge, and skills for work support. It is expected that the training opportunities and the scale of the network described above will differ between rural and urban areas. Although the survey was conducted on managers, it is necessary to consider the influence of years and the content of experience when considering transfers within the organization.

Future research will include an investigation of differences in knowledge and skill possession using population size and other mediating variables, as well as a survey that considers respondents' years of experience, work location, and other background conditions. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of WSC-B support workers and aid in establishing a network of local services that help persons with disabilities secure their future by joining the workforce.

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