〔Paper〕

Teacher Perspectives on Emotionally Disturbed Students Across Educational Settings

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Abstract

The term' emotional disturbance' denotes a condition that disrupts daily life due to psychological factors. In Japan, students identified as emotionally disturbed receive specialized support education tailored to their needs. Despite this, the conceptualization of emotional disturbance remains underdeveloped, presenting challenges for teachers in providing adequate support. In this survey, we targeted teachers in regular classrooms, resource rooms, special-needs classes, and special-needs schools to clarify（1）the educational status of emotionally disturbed children in general, and（2） the educational status of each classroom school. Findings indicate that behaviors causing conflicts with others, such as tantrums and anger, are markers of emotional disturbance across all educational settings. Affected children often struggle with interpersonal relationships and general life skills. Moreover, a chi-square test showed significant differences in support challenges and perceptions of emotional disturbance across different types of schools. These results highlight the need for teacher flexibility in supporting emotionally disturbed students, considering both the students' individual circumstances and the specific characteristics of emotional disturbances within their educational context."

Keywords: emotional disturbance in education, teacher surveys, special support education, interpersonal challenges in students, special-needs classes

1. Introduction

Emotional disturbance is defined by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology（MEXT, 2021）as "a condition in which a psychological factor interferes with daily life." This condition manifests through symptoms such as selective mutism and school non-attendance. Students identified as emotionally disturbed experience significant disruptions compared to their

physically and mentally healthy peers, struggling to control their emotions. Their emotional instability frequently impacts academic performance and interpersonal relationships, leading to challenges in school life. In Japan, these students are eligible for special support education, receiving assistance in regular classes, resource rooms, and autism/emotional disturbance special-needs classes to mitigate learning and living difficulties (MEXT, 2021). MEXT (2024) reports that 19,376 students are receiving instruction in resource rooms, with an additional 132,061 enrolled in special-needs classes for autism and emotional disturbance, indicating a rising trend in the number of students needing such support. This increase underscores the demand for more detailed educational support for emotionally disturbed students.

Within the Japanese educational system, a student is classified as emotionally disturbed based on exhibited problematic behaviors resulting from psychological stress to the extent that school adjustment becomes unmanageable (MEXT, 2021). Problematic behaviors are categorized into two types: "internalized problem behavior," which includes maladaptive behaviors due to internal conflicts and stress, such as selective mutism, school non-attendance, and somatic complaints (MEXT, 2021), and "externalized problem behaviors," characterized by actions that lead to conflicts with others, including defiance, verbal abuse, and classroom departures (MEXT, 2021). Emotional disturbances may also encompass difficulties related to social skills, cognition, and daily living activities, further complicating the support needed (MEXT, 2021).

However, the concept of emotional disturbance has been vaguely defined without clear medical diagnostic criteria, as pointed out by the National Institute for Special Education (NISE, 2012). As a result, what conditions are considered emotional disorders differs depending on the teacher and the school he/she belongs to (Muranaka, 2017), and the lack of systematization of support has been cited as a problem for many years. In fact, a survey by Kobayashi and Shimo (2022) indicated that the factor that caused difficulties in supporting children with scene disturbance was "a lack of basic information about scene disturbance." In a survey conducted by Kocho and Tsuruta (2022), it was shown that teachers are looking for ways to be close to children with behavioral and emotional problems and for specialized knowledge. Continued failure to address symptoms of emotional disturbance can lead to teacher burnout (Hastings and Bham, 2003) and stress in support (Onodera and Kawamura, 2012). Therefore, we believe it is necessary to clarify the concept of emotional disturbance in order to construct appropriate support methods for children and reduce the burden on teachers. In addition, since the actual conditions of children with emotional disorders are expected to differ depending on the classes and schools in which they are enrolled, it will be necessary to consider environmental factors as well. Therefore, we will conduct a survey from two perspectives:(1) the educational status of emotionally disturbed children in general, and (2) the educational status of each classroom and school. This study has significance as a basic research for organizing the concept of emotional disabilities.

2.　Method

2.1　Survey Participants

The target population was elementary school homeroom teachers of children with emotional disabilities in regular classes, resource rooms, special-needs classes for the intellectual disabilities, and special-needs schools for the intellectual disabilities, physical disability and health impairment in Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, and Chiba Prefectures. The schools were selected on the basis of their location in the suburbs of Tokyo and their availability of resource rooms and special-needs classes.

Invitations were sent to 1,000 teachers from each regular class, resource room, and special-needs class and 890 teachers from special-needs schools. They were provided with a survey request form and a questionnaire, which could be completed on paper or online via Google Forms. The response rates were as follows: 30.6% (306 teachers) from regular classrooms, 13.5% (135 teachers) from resource rooms, 14.9% (149 teachers) from special-needs classes, and 34.4% (306 teachers) from special-needs schools.

2.2 Survey Period

The survey was conducted from July to August 2023.

2.3 Survey Details

The specifics of this questionnaire survey are depicted in Table 1. The survey was conducted anonymously. The questionnaire was developed based on the section on emotional disabilities in the Guide for Children with Disabilities of the Ministry of Education (2021) and the survey items of NISE (2012). This was an arbitrarily designed questionnaire. Therefore, the validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by one teacher of an autism emotional disability class, one university professor enrolled in the psychology department, and one graduate student.

2.3.1 Demographic Data

Participants were queried about their tenure at the school, the number of students they managed, and their observations on the trend of increasing emotionally disturbed students (one item, six-case method). Teachers in special-needs settings also provided the duration of their special-needs education experience.

Table 1 Survey details

Category of Question	Item Question	Item Content
Demographic Data	Teacher's tenure at the school	Teachers were queried about their tenure at the school
	The number of students teachers managed	Teachers were quereied the number of students they managed
	The duration of their special-needs education experience	Teachers in special-needs settings also provided the duration of their special-needs education experience
	Teachers' Perceptions of Emotionally Disturbed Students' Increase	(1)Very much increasing (2)Somewhat increasing (3)Unchanged (4)Somewhat decreasing (5)Very decreasing (6)Don't know
Questions about Emotionally Disturbed Students	Emotionally Disturbed Students'School Life	(1)Selective mutism, (2)School non-attendance, (3)Excessive anxiety(separation anxiety, fear of insects, etc.), (4)Depressive symptoms and lethargy (5)self-injury (6)Frequent tantrums and anger (7)Violent and aggressive behavior (8)defiance with abusive language (9)Depending too much on others (10)Physical complaint(frequent occurrence of abdominal pain, headache, sluggishness, etc.) (11)Anorexia (12)Compulsive behavior (such as washing hands repeatedly) (13)trichotillomania and genital manipulation (14)Claims of persecution complex (15)Game addiction (16)Repeated failure to urinate (17)Other
	Support Needs of Emotionally Disturbed Students in School	(1)Learning (2)Daily life (3)Interpersonal relationships (4)Exercise (5)Low self-esteem (6)Trouble with other children (7)Delinquency/Problem Behavior (8)School non-attendance (9)Isolated and introverted (10)Other
	Self-Understanding of Symptoms by Emotionally Disturbed Students	(1)Understand themselves very much (2)Understand themselves somewhat (3)Don't have self-understanding (4)Unknown
	Difficulty in Providing Educational Support for Emotionally Disturbed Students	(1)Very troubled (2)Somewhat troubled (3)Not very troubled (4)Not at all troubled (5)Unknown

2.3.2　Questions about Emotionally Disturbed Students

Teachers selected one emotionally disturbed student per class to report on, covering aspects of the student's school life (17 items), support needs (10 items), self-awareness of symptoms (one item, four-choice method), and the challenges in providing educational support (one item, five-point scale).

2.4　Ethical Considerations

The survey protocol, including ethical considerations, was thoroughly explained to participants, who then provided informed consent. ******* Ethics Committee approved this study.

3.　Results

3.1　Demographic Data

After accounting for missing values, responses for the analysis were received from 246 regular class teachers, 118 resource room teachers, 131 special-needs class teachers, and 197 special-needs school teachers. A total of 631 teachers reported their length of service, averaging 14.2 years (SD = 9.3). For special-needs education, 131 special-needs class teachers and 197 special-needs school teachers reported an average duration of 4.2 years (SD = 6.0) and 12.8 years (SD = 9.4), respectively. The average class size reported was 30.1 students (SD = 15.7) for regular classes (N = 245), 53.7 (SD = 27.0) for resource rooms (including an average of 5.4 students, SD = 4.8 in study group units), 10.4 students (SD = 8.4) for special-needs classes (N = 78), and 5.1 students (SD = 1.8) for special-needs schools (N = 197).

3.2　Demographic Data (Teachers' Perceptions of Emotionally Disturbed Students' Increase)

Teachers were surveyed on whether they perceived an increase in emotionally disturbed students, with results detailed in Table 2. A chi-square test assessed the relationship between school type and responses. Due to minimal responses for "somewhat decreasing," "very decreasing," or "don't know," these were grouped under "unchanged." Analysis with "very much increasing," "somewhat increasing," and "unchanged" categories revealed a significant difference by school type (χ^2(6, N = 687) = 89.1, p < .001). Residual analysis showed a significant excess of teachers in regular classes reporting increases (p < .001) and those in special-needs schools reporting unchanged numbers (p < .001).

Table 2　Teachers' perceptions of emotionally disturbed students' increase

		Very much increasing	Somewhat increasing	Unchanged
Regular classes (N=245)	Answers	110	121	14
	Percentage	44.9	49.4	5.7
Resource rooms (N=115)	Answers	43	53	19
	Percentage	37.4	46.1	16.5
Special Needs classes (N=131)	Answers	50	70	11
	Percentage	38.2	53.4	8.4
Special Needs Schools (N=196)	Answers	26	108	62
	Percentage	13.3	55.1	31.6
Total number of responses (N=687)		229	352	106

Table 3 Emotionally disturbed students' school life

		Regular classes (N=246)		Resource rooms (N=118)		Special-need classes (N=131)		Special-need schools (N=197)		Total number of responses
		Answers	Percentage	Answers	Percentage	Answers	Percentage	Answers	Percentage	
Internalized problem behavior	(3) Excessive anxiety	67	10.1	39	11.0	41	9.2	39	8.6	186
	(2) School non-attendance	77	11.6	38	10.7	35	7.8	19	4.2	169
	(1) Selective mutism	33	5.0	33	9.3	8	1.8	9	2.0	83
	(10) Physical complaint	28	4.2	11	3.1	14	3.1	9	2.0	62
	(4) Depressive symptoms and lethargy	21	3.2	18	5.1	9	2.0	2	0.4	50
externalized problematic behaviors	(6) Frequent tantrums and anger	131	19.8	59	16.6	91	20.3	138	30.5	419
	(7) Violence and aggressive behavior	79	11.9	38	10.7	58	12.9	65	14.3	240
	(8) defiance with abusive language	73	11.0	43	12.1	63	14.1	28	6.2	207
other problem behaviors	(9) Depending too much on others	73	11.0	25	7.0	43	9.6	53	11.7	194
	(5) self-injury	8	1.2	15	4.2	17	3.8	45	9.9	85
	(14) Claims of persecution complex	21	3.2	10	2.8	17	3.8	2	0.4	50
	(17) Other	23	3.5	8	2.2	9	2.0	5	1.1	45
	(15) Game addiction	9	1.4	9	2.5	17	3.8	3	0.7	38
	(13) trichotillomania and genital manipulation	5	0.8	5	1.4	6	1.3	12	2.6	28
	(11) Anorexia	6	0.9	2	0.6	8	1.8	10	2.2	26
	(16) Repeated failure to urinate	6	0.9	1	0.3	4	0.9	11	2.4	22
	(12) Compulsive behavior	3	0.5	2	0.6	8	1.8	3	0.7	16

3.3 Emotionally Disturbed Students' School Life

Teachers provided multiple responses about emotionally disturbed students' school conditions, with average responses of 2.7 ($SD=1.7$) for regular classrooms, 3.0 ($SD=1.9$) for resource rooms, 3.4 ($SD=1.8$) for special-needs classes, and 2.3 ($SD=1.4$) for special-needs schools. Responses were categorized into "internalized problem behaviors," "externalized problem behaviors," and "other problem behaviors" as per MEXT guidelines (MEXT, 2021). Table 3 shows the results results. Notably, "externalized problem behaviors" that cause conflicts with others were prevalent in schools and by school type.

3.4 Support Needs of Emotionally Disturbed Students in School

Teachers identified support needs for emotionally disturbed students, with an average of 2.8 items selected per teacher ($SD=1.7$), varying by setting. Table 4 shows the results of simple tabulation. The results for schools as a whole and by school type indicate high needs in "interpersonal aspects" and "daily life" support across all school types.

Table 4 Support needs of emotionally disturbed students in school

	Regular classes (N=246)		Resource rooms (N=118)		Special-need classes (N=131)		Special-need schools (N=197)		Total number of responses
	Answers	Percentage	Answers	Percentage	Answers	Percentage	Answers	Percentage	
(3) Interpersonal relationships	183	21.5	103	23.1	113	21.9	166	25.2	565
(2) Daily life	165	19.4	74	16.6	94	18.3	153	23.2	486
(1) Learning	134	15.8	58	13.0	79	15.3	101	15.3	372
(6) Trouble with other children	125	14.7	45	10.1	75	14.6	69	10.5	314
(5) Low self-esteem	77	9.1	67	15.0	60	11.7	53	8.0	257
(8) School non-attendance	59	6.9	31	7.0	28	5.4	22	3.3	140
(4) Exercise	30	3.5	20	4.5	32	6.2	54	8.2	136
(7) Delinquency/Problem Behavior	36	4.2	16	3.6	22	4.3	24	3.6	98
(9) Isolated and introverted	32	3.8	28	6.3	6	1.2	9	1.4	75
(10) Other	9	1.1	4	0.9	6	1.2	8	1.2	27

Table 5 Self-understanding of symptoms by emotionally disturbed students

		Understand themselves very much	Understand themselves somewhat	Don't have self-understanding	Unknown
Regular rooms (N=224)	Answers	2	86	122	34
	Percentage	0.8	35.0	49.6	13.8
Resource rooms (N=117)	Answers	3	60	43	10
	Percentage	2.5	50.8	36.4	8.5
Special-need classes (N=131)	Answers	4	62	58	7
	Percentage	3.1	47.3	44.3	5.3
Special-need school (N=186)	Answers	2	33	127	22
	Percentage	1.0	16.8	64.5	11.2
Total number of responses (N=678)		11	241	350	73

3.5 Self-Understanding of Symptoms by Emotionally Disturbed Students

Responses regarding students' self-awareness of their symptoms from the teachers' perspective were collected (Table 5). A chi-square test indicated a significant association between school type and level of self-understanding ($\chi^2(9, N=678)=56.4$, $p<.001$), with resource rooms and special-needs class teachers reporting that emotionally disturbed students "understand themselves somewhat" (resource room: $p<.001$, special-needs class: $p<.05$). However, significantly more teachers in special-needs schools answered that emotionally disturbed students "did not have self-understanding" ($p<.001$) of their symptoms.

3.6 Difficulty in Providing Educational Support for Emotionally Disturbed Students

The degree of difficulty in supporting emotionally disturbed students was assessed (Table 6). Due to limited responses for "not troubled" and "unknown" categories, they were categorized as "not very troubled." A chi-square test indicated analysis revealed significant differences in reported challenges by school type ($\chi^2(6, N=682)=35.8$, $p<.001$). Residual analysis revealed that regular class teachers reported being "very troubled" support for emotionally disturbed students" ($p<.001$). In contrast, those in special-needs schools reported that they were "not very troubled" ($p<.001$).

Table 6 Difficulty in providing educational support for emotionally disturbed students

		Very troubled	Somewhat troubled	Not very troubled
Regular classes （N=245）	Answers	67	135	43
	Percentage	27.3	55.1	17.6
Resource rooms （N=116）	Answers	27	61	28
	Percentage	23.3	52.6	24.1
Special-need classes （N=131）	Answers	28	76	27
	Percentage	21.4	58.0	20.6
Special-need classes （N=190）	Answers	16	106	68
	Percentage	8.4	55.8	35.8
Total number of responses （N=682）		138	378	166

4. Discussion

This study explored teachers' perceptions and experiences with emotionally disturbed students in Japan, seeking to unravel the complexities of their educational needs and behavioral characteristics.

4.1 The educational status of emotionally disturbed children in general

Initially, teachers often perceived students with emotional disturbances as exhibiting externalized problem behaviors, such as frequent tantrums and anger, while at school. These behaviors, which disrupt the educational environment and pose risks to others, tend to be more observable than internalized problem behaviors, such as selective mutism or school non-attendance. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2021) currently defines emotionally disturbed students as those who cannot control their physical and mental condition appropriately for a given situation. Thus, teachers might identify children exhibiting externalized behaviors as emotionally disturbed because such behaviors provide objective evidence of the student's inability to regulate their emotions.

In Japanese educational administration, internalized problem behaviors like selective mutism and school non-attendance are recognized as key indicators of emotional disturbance (NISE, 2012). However, externalized behaviors such as tantrums and anger are more frequently associated with school emotional disturbances. This discrepancy suggests a need to reassess the prevailing definition of emotional disturbance, considering the findings from this study.

Regarding support needs, teachers expressed that assistance with interpersonal relationships and daily life is crucial for students with emotional disturbances. Externalized behaviors can negatively impact the perceptions of peers and teachers, leading to challenges in forming and maintaining healthy relationships. Some students with emotional disturbances may also have a history of non-abuse or display traits of developmental disorders (NISE, 2012), complicating their ability to establish trust and connections with others. Consequently, there is a significant risk that these students might struggle academically and socially, underscoring the importance of targeted support measures.

4.2 The educational status of each classroom and school

In exploring the self-awareness among emotionally disturbed students concerning their symptoms, it was observed that those in resource rooms and special-needs classes exhibited

a notably higher degree of self-understanding. This heightened awareness is likely due to the individualized instruction these students receive, closely aligned with their specific needs. Additionally, initiatives within Japanese educational frameworks encourage interactions between students in mainstream settings and those in special-needs environments to foster a deeper understanding of disabilities (MEXT, 2019). Such personalized teaching approaches, coupled with opportunities for interaction with their mainstream peers, enhance students' recognition of the distinct learning environments and teaching methodologies they experience. Ito and Tsuge (2023) noted that some resource room students perceive these spaces as designated for those facing specific challenges, suggesting a conscious identification with having special educational needs distinct from mainstream students.

Conversely, students with intellectual disabilities in special-needs schools were often perceived by educators as lacking symptom awareness. These students face considerable challenges in social communication and societal integration due to intellectual delays, which impede their ability to recognize emotional disturbances from a broader perspective. This study focused on students with intellectual disabilities, as defined by MEXT (2021), highlighting the teachers' observation that these students struggle with self-awareness concerning their emotional states.

Concerning the perception of an increase in emotionally disturbed students and the challenges of providing educational support, educators in mainstream classrooms report a significant rise in the prevalence of these students and express substantial difficulties in offering support. In contrast, teachers in special-needs settings do not report a similar trend or face comparable challenges in support provision. This discrepancy may reflect the growing enrollment of students requiring special support in mainstream classrooms, now accounting for 8.8% and increasing annually, as reported by MEXT (2022). Despite the increase, the educational support available remains inadequate. Mainstream classrooms, comprising a mix of students with and without special needs, demand teachers to provide individualized special education within a group teaching context. Given the limited exposure of mainstream educators to special education training compared to their special-needs school counterparts, they often resort to trial and error in their support efforts (Kasai, 2020). Additionally, the concept of emotional disturbance lacks a coherent framework in Japan, further complicating the support process for educators in mainstream settings who are already stretched thin by their responsibilities.

This variance in the perception and management of emotional disturbance underscores the necessity for a flexible approach to supporting emotionally disturbed students tailored to the specific context of each teacher and the characteristics of the student body.

4.3　Limitation

The data collection rate was low this time, and there are issues with the reliability of the data. Therefore, it would be difficult to describe emotional disorders based on the results of this data alone. Furthermore, the study highlights the need for a broader and more in-depth investigation into emotional disturbance, calling for additional research that encompasses a larger sample of educators and delves into the qualitative dimensions of student experiences to fully grasp the complex nature of emotional disturbances.

Note Definitions of educational settings are as follows:

　　Regular classes: Education based on the regular curriculum, accommodating students with special needs (MEXT, 2015).

Resource room: A supplementary setting where students with special needs receive tailored educational support while enrolled in regular classes（MEXT, 2015）.

Special-needs classes: Established within schools to assist students with disabilities in overcoming learning and living challenges（MEXT, 2015）.

Special-needs schools: Institutions providing comprehensive education for students with disabilities to foster independence and overcome learning and living difficulties（MEXT, 2015）.

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