The Social Identity of Adolescent Students with Low Vision during Interschool Interactions with Sighted Students: Voice and Symbolic Interaction

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This paper discusses the social identity of high school students with low vision (LV) during an interschool interaction. We adopted symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective to clarify how both LV and sighted students’ awareness and social identities develop mutually in their interactions. We videotaped a one-day interschool interaction between groups of students with and without visual impairment. Subsequently, we conducted stimulated recall interviews with nine LV and 13 sighted participants. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, we extracted three themes: the ambiguity of actual identity, the uneasiness and devaluation LV students feel, and the roles of supporter and learner of knowledge about disability. The results revealed that the LV students’ actual identities during the interaction were not simply those of impaired beings who were always supported by others. Furthermore, their virtual and actual identities fluctuated in comparison to sighted students. We argue that this identity destabilization is significant for LV students’ identity development, thus, making it imperative to discuss the quality of interschool interactions to create meaningful opportunities for LV students.

Key Words: social identity, interschool interaction, low vision, stimulated recall interview, symbolic interactionism

Introduction

The Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine how high school students with low vision (LV) develop their identities within their interaction with sighted high school students. High school students are in the life stage of adolescence, and their central task during this stage of development is to develop a strong sense of self (Erikson, 1968). This also applies to students with impairment. Unfortunately, adolescents with visual impairment have few opportunities to participate in group activities or visually demanding activities (Huurre & Aro, 1998; Khadka, Ryan, Margrain, Woodhouse, & Davies, 2012). This social interaction limitation may thwart their psychosocial development. This problem may be compounded by the fact that adolescents with LV suffer from reduced self-esteem because people do not know how to approach them. Because they are neither fully sighted nor fully blind, they may experience difficulty knowing who they are and where they fit into society (Huurre, 2000; Sato, 1996). Interschool interactions, where students with and without impairments interact with each other in well-structured conditions, are an important opportunity for LV students to develop their identities. On such occasions, LV students can not only learn about sighted students’ school and private lives but can also reflect upon themselves by observing how sighted people approach LV individuals and behave within interactions.

The Environment Surrounding LV Individuals

Sighted people usually have incorrect perceptions of visual impairment because of their limited contact with people with visual impairment. For example, most sighted people believe that people with white canes are completely blind. Thus, when they see LV individuals with a white cane looking at the screen of their smartphones, they may assume that they are committing fraud so as to get a disability ben-
eit (Heenan, 2005). LV individuals often experience anxiety because of the threat of being misunderstood. This, in turn, may hinder their participation in various activities (Murr & Blanchard, 2011).

Even though Japanese people have some interest in disability, real interactions between those with and without impairments remain limited. Research conducted by the Government of Japan in 2017 reveals that while more people understand what Kyosei Shakai, that is, an inclusive society entails, compared to 2012, over 88% of the respondents in their study believe that discrimination or prejudice based on disability remains a problem in society (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2012; 2017). UK disability researcher, Deal (2007) noted a modern type of prejudice, aversive disablism, which he named by referencing the concept of aversive racism in the context of racism in America (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Those who display aversive disablism seem sympathetic toward disabled individuals, but tend to avoid contact or interaction with them. Their self-image is one of being non-prejudiced and fair, but they have subtle prejudicial beliefs or feelings that influence their behavior. Subtle prejudice is as abusive as blatant prejudice. In Japan, schools for students with and without impairments are basically segregated depending on learners’ needs. Deal (2007) stated that segregated situations may support aversive disablism by eliminating opportunities for meaningful interaction between students of different abilities. In order to realize a truly inclusive society in Japan, we must promote meaningful interactions between students with and without disabilities, and promote mutual understanding between them.

**The Phenomenological Approach and Symbolic Interactionism toward the Experience of Individuals with Impairment**

People with impairment may have negative perceptions of themselves due to their differences from normal people. Many researchers have examined the process by which people manage their impressions from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, in which human identity is the social product of interpersonal or intergroup interaction. In impression management, individuals disclose some information about themselves and hide other information in order to adjust others’ view of them. Sociologist, Goffman (1963), who discusses the process of impression management in detail, developed the concept of stigma. He explained that stigma arises from the discrepancy between the virtual social identity others assume them to be and their actual social identity. Some people who feel stigmatized implement impression management, for example, covering to hide their negatively perceived attribute (Goffman, 1963). However, in the case of disability, covering-up may result in severe disadvantages because people who cover up their impairment will not obtain support from their government, from other organizations, and/or from their peers (Lourens & Swartz, 2016).

Recently, individuals with impairment have discovered ways to disclose or selectively disclose their disability information (Bos, Kanner, Muris, Janssen, & Mayer, 2009; Olney & Brockelman, 2003). These strategies are conducted not only for the pragmatic reason of obtaining accommodation, but also for establishing and maintaining a high personal and collective self-esteem by creating a positive identification as a member of the disabled community (Nario-Redmond, Noel, & Fern, 2013). Sociologist Najarian (2008), who focuses on qualitative data from the narratives of minority groups, conducted life history interviews with deaf college women, reveals that deaf women, who develop a positive identity as members of the Deaf community, negotiate various dilemmas to disclose their deafness during transitional periods.

These previous findings reveal that stigmatized individuals chose strategies and acted with the intent of managing their own impressions on others. However, in the context of interschool interactions in Japan, LV students cannot or do not have to cover their impairment because the students from the standard school are notified beforehand that the students have visual impairment. These students’ awareness or feelings may differ from that of those who have the choice to manage their impressions by covering or exposing themselves.

Previous research conducted in Japan tends to overlook disabled students’ awareness or feelings during interschool interactions. However, current research on impairment has shifted emphasis toward listening to the real voices of the persons with impairment. By employing a phenomenological perspective, the data explores their self-identities based on their own lived experiences (Blume & Hiddinga, 2010; Paterson & Hughes, 1999). These studies suggest that although many individuals with impairment do not identify
they themselves as merely disabled individuals (Watson, 2002), they often feel that people without impairment do not see them as real individual people, but merely as impaired beings (Hansen, Wilton, & Newbold, 2017; Lourens & Swartz, 2016; Rainey, Elsman, van Nispen, van Leeuwen, & van Rens, 2016). Swain and French (2000) proposed an affirmation model of disability, which aims to repudiate the dominant value of normality. They stress the need to consider disabled individual’s positive identity of being impaired. This model is important because it shows that impairment is not just a negative quality, but rather one that can contribute positively to persons’ experiences.

This study will examine not only the voices of the students with impairment but also the voices of sighted students according to the theory of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) with the following in mind: how sighted students’ interpretation of LV students affects the LV students’ self-image in the interactions, and, how both LV and sighted students’ awareness and social identities develop mutually in their interactions with each other.

**Methods**

**Participants and Procedure**

Data were collected through interviews with nine students with LV from a school for the blind (SB) (ages 15–18 years) and 13 sighted students from a standard school (SS) (ages 15–17 years). The partici-

| Table 1 Participants’ Information and Experience of the Interaction |
|---|
| Students in SB, an upper secondary school for the blind |
| Name | Grade | Sex | Frequency of contact with those without impairments |
| SB-1 | 3 | F | Currently none |
| SB-2 | 3 | F | Occasionally with friends in her old junior high school. |
| SB-3 | 3 | F | Occasionally with friends in her old elementary and junior high school. |
| SB-4 | 3 | F | Currently none |
| SB-5 | 3 | F | Currently none |
| SB-6 | 3 | M | Frequently in his sports community. |
| SB-7 | 3 | M | Currently none |
| SB-8 | 2 | M | Currently none |
| SB-9 | 1 | F | Currently none |

| Students in SS, a standard upper secondary school |
|---|
| Name | Grade | Sex | Frequency of contact with those with impairments |
| SS-1 | 2 | F | None |
| SS-2 | 2 | M | None |
| SS-3 | 2 | F | None |
| SS-4 | 1 | F | Currently none. She used to participate in interschool interactions with a school for the blind in her old junior high school. |
| SS-5 | 1 | F | Currently none. She used to participate in interschool interactions with a school for the intellectually disabled in her old junior high school. |
| SS-6 | 1 | F | Currently none. She used to play with students with moderate intellectual disabilities in her old elementary school. |
| SS-7 | 1 | M | None |
| SS-8 | 1 | M | He has frequently played with an intellectually disabled friend since junior high school. |
| SS-9 | 1 | M | None |
| SS-10 | 1 | M | None |
| SS-11 | 1 | M | None |
| SS-12 | 1 | M | None |
| SS-13 | 1 | M | Currently none. He frequently had lunchtime chats with students with moderate intellectual disabilities in his old junior high school. |

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pants had a one-day interschool interaction in the summer of 2016. This interschool interaction was chosen as our research object because previously the participants of both schools had had few experiences to participate in interschool interactions; this interaction was their first (see Table 1). The six activities of the interaction were videotaped. These activities included self-introduction, floor volleyball, lunchtime chat, oral games, pseudo-experience of impairment and explanation of assistive items, and a closing session (see Table 2). Although two blind students also participated in the interaction and interview, their interview data were excluded from the analysis in order to focus on the awareness of LV.

In order to reveal an LV student’s identity and its formation process, we performed stimulated recall interviews (SRIs). This method enabled the interviewees to state the narratives of their experiences; this ensured the quality of the interview data (Kvale, 2007, p.124). SRIs are used in educational research to clarify the participants’ processes of learning, thinking, and decision-making by recreating their original thoughts from their native context (Calderhead, 1981; O’Brien, 1993). Sociologist Dempsey (2010), who applies the ethnographic approach to clarify human groups’ complex organization processes, noted that SRIs can aid researchers in discovering various acknowledgements of social interactions such as how participants understand others’ actions and how they expect others to react to their actions.

A 15-minute video consisting of extractions of data from the six activities was created from the videotaped data. While showing the video, we asked the interviewees about the salient moments of each activity. The interview guide drew elements from the life story interview of qualitative researcher McAdams (1993), and included items about memorable events and people, awareness and feelings, and reflection and improvement (see Table 3-B) in order to elicit the interviewees’ stories about their experience of the interaction. After the interviewees answered all the questions about each activity, they were queried about their overall experience of the interschool interaction (see Table 3-C). The interviews were conducted individually during the one-month period after the interschool interaction had taken place. Each interview lasted approximately 60 min.

**Ethical Considerations**

The content of the study and ethical considerations were explained in advance to the principals of both schools as well as to the research participants and their parents. We got permission from the principals of both schools and received informed consent from all the participants before conducting the interviews. This study was approved by Life Science Research

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**Table 2** The Six Activities of the Interschool Interaction

| Activity (min) | Content | Frequency of interaction |
|----------------|---------|-------------------------|
| Self-introduction (25) | Students from SS visited SB, and sighted and LV students introduced themselves at the gymnasium in SB. | No direct interactions. |
| Floor volleyball (130) | Students from both schools combined to make six teams, practicing floor volleyball, and competing against the other teams. Subsequently, the SS vs. SB teams played a game. | SB students frequently gave advice to the SS students on how to hit the ball and how to proceed with the game. |
| Lunchtime chat (50) | Students from both schools gathered in the cafeteria at SB and had lunch together. | There was almost no interaction between the schools. Only two SS and two SB students chatted friendly. |
| Oral games (60) | *Yamanote line game* and *Shiritori*. The student council of SS chose the games, which did not require vision. The students were divided into four groups. In their extra time the students had time to chat freely. | Active interaction could be seen, and the students’ chatting continued even after the games. |
| Pseudo-experience of impairment and explanation of assistive items (70) | SS students were divided into two groups. One experienced a pseudo-experience of blindness, the other listened to an introduction about assistive items such as a braille typewriter, a braille slate, and textbooks for LV or blind students. | SB students introduced the items and explained their uses to SS students. |
| Closing session (10) | The vice-presidents of both schools delivered closing comments. | No direct interactions. |
Analysis

We performed interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) by focusing on the participants’ subjective experiences. All the recorded interviews were transcribed. The first author, who is a researcher specializing in qualitative research and special needs education, read and reread the transcriptions of the 13 sighted and nine LV students by focusing on three fields in relation to the formation of their social identity: LV students’ actual identity; the discrepancy between virtual and actual identity; and the social roles of sighted and LV students in the interaction. These were the key concepts in Goffman’s (1959, 1963) study. Following the interpretative phenomenological approach, brief notes were made in the margins of the transcripts (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). After abstracting and integrating the brief notes, both the first author and second author, who is a researcher specializing in...
special needs education and a teacher at a school for the blind, discussed and integrated those notes and extracted the following three themes: the ambiguity of actual identity, the uneasiness and devaluation LV students feel, and the roles of supporter and learner of knowledge about disability. In order to ensure reliability, we used the established qualitative method of mutually checking the data and interpretation thereof (Gibbs, 2007, p. 169).

Results and Discussion

The Ambiguity of Actual Identity

The analysis focused on the actual social identity of LV students. Goffman (1963) classified social identity into virtual social identity and actual social identity. While virtual social identity encompasses what the person is expected to be, actual social identity is who the person actually is. In this study, the LV students' actual identity was affected by their social relationships during ongoing interaction and by their biography.

First, contact with the sighted students often highlighted the LV students' identity as students with LV or visual impairment. SB-5 identified herself as a member of the group of SB students. She classified the groups of SS and SB students, and said that the purpose of the interschool interaction was to promote mutual understanding. However, she added that she hoped the sighted students would learn that disabled students, like nondisabled students, could also play sport (Q-1). By this statement she attempted to place SB and SS students in the same superordinate category while maintaining consciousness of the difference between students with and without impairment (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). This suggests that there is a complicated nested structure involved in social identity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

Second, almost all the LV students had matriculated from standard elementary schools or junior high schools. This affected their formation of identity in the interaction. SB-2 reported that she was from a standard junior high school. Consequently, she often separated herself from the SB students' group. She begrudged identifying herself with the students with visual impairments and envied the group of sighted students (Q-2). In contrast, even though SB-8 came from a standard elementary school, he had a negative perception of the sighted students because he had experienced bullying. He said that, as yet, he did not have a disability certificate and thus, he was not a person with visual impairment institutionally. However, he tended to regard himself as a member of the SB (Q-3):

SB-5: (What do you think is the purpose of the interaction?) In order to find out new things about each other to get to know each other. (For example? What did you want them to find out?) About sports, about braille, and about people with visual impairment. (I see. What about the people with visual impairment?) Even though we have impairment, we can play sports too. (Q-1)

SB-2: (What was the most impressive thing you remember?) I thought they all got along. (The SS students?) Yes. (How about the SB students?) Well, they didn't have a bad relationship, but their relationship was different from that of the SS students. (In what way?) Superficial. (Ha ha.) 'Cause there are not so many students, it's okay our relationship is superficial. It cannot be helped because there are few students, and this is a school for students with impairment. Still, if you spend three years with such relationships wouldn't you dislike it? (I see, but you do have some good friends?) Not really. I wouldn't say that. (Q-2)

SB-8: (Why do you want them to deepen their understanding of disability?) I'm from a standard elementary school. There was little understanding of disability in standard schools, so I wanted them to learn about disability. I enjoyed floor volleyball. (Is it helpful for you to have them learn about disability?) For me, actually, in terms of whether it is good or not for me, it doesn't matter because I don't have the certification of impairment yet. But I think that if they deepen their understanding of disability, it will be good for my friends. (Q-3)

In the interviews, the LV students' social identity was represented not only in the affirmative (I'm a member of XX), but was also characterized by the negative (I'm not a member of YY). Some of the LV students self-identified by differentiating themselves from the sighted students. The LV students often compared themselves with sighted students in the interaction. SB-7 asserted negatively that students with visual impairment live in “another world” because they are separated from standard schools.
and they only learn about standard schools “from the news” (Q-4). Other LV students differentiated the LV students from the blind students. Most of the LV students deliberately highlighted the differences between LV and blindness. This was not because they looked down on the blind people, but because they believed that the distinction between LV and blindness helps to establish a correct understanding of both LV and blindness (Q-5). A few of the LV students shared that they were not a cohesive group. Like SB-2 above, LV students do not necessarily have an identity as people with LV. SB-6 said the SB students behaved as individuals without any regard for one another (Q-6):

SB-7: (You said that you should interact with sighted students in SS in turn. What do you think you could do?) If I could visit SS, well, I can only come up with ideas about sports, for example badminton which we can't play in SB. We would enjoy it because people in schools for students with visual impairment hardly play the sports which are played in the standard schools. We can only know them from the news. We seem to live in another world. We are living like frogs in a pond who think it is the whole world. (Q-4)

SB-1: (You said there were many things that people could not know unless they were in schools for blind. For example?) Let me see, one example is the white cane. People with low vision also use it, but many people don't know this. Also, I know that many people assume that all students in schools for blind use braille and think that those who use braille all can't see at all. Actually, before I entered this school, I also had misconceptions. One of them was that all the students wore glasses. I know it's difficult to have correct images without complete understanding. (Q-5)

SB-6: (Tell me about something common or different between SB and SS during the introduction time.) It is difficult to find common points because the students in SB are so varied. (Weren't there any common points in SB?) No. Students in SS are all cheerful but those in SB are not so. (For example?) For example, there was a student who was alone. Not always alone, but.... Anyway, the common point is that we all enjoyed ourselves. (What was the difference?) Students in SB are somber and not so spirited. (Q-6)

The LV students’ narratives above revealed that they did not always place themselves solely within the LV student group. LV students’ actual identities were based on their interpretation of the situations or their prior experiences. However, this is not unique to disabled people. Previous studies have demonstrated that in general, a person's identity is changeable, multiple, and complex (Vryan, Adler, & Adler, 2003). The complexity of the LV students’ actual social identity includes a sense of belonging to the LV group along with a sense of distance from the sighted, the blind, and even the other LV students (Huurre, 2000; Sato, 1996; Scholl, 1986).

Uneasiness and Devaluation

In this study, we take virtual social identity into account and explore the discrepancy between LV students' virtual and actual identities. The focus is on their assumption that sighted students might perceive them as merely impaired beings (Lourens & Swartz, 2016; Pack, Kelly, & Arvinen-Barrow, 2017). Although this virtual social identity originally depends on the nondisabled individuals’ perspectives, disabled individuals internalizes the frames of outside perspectives (Coleman-Fountain & McLaughlin, 2013). The analysis assesses how the discrepancy between the virtual identity and the actual identity developed in the interschool interaction. Two topics emerged from the analysis, namely, uneasiness and devaluation.

First, we discuss the development of the LV students’ uneasiness. All the LV students believed that sighted students have various stereotypes about visual impairment (Q-5). However, these perceived stereotypical images were different from their actual identity. Consequently, they were uneasy about participating in the interschool interaction. Those stereotypes and previous negative experiences threatened the interaction. However, after they interacted with the SS students, their uneasiness lessened and were relieved because the sighted students strived to understand them as individuals who have LV (Q-7):

SB-7: (Did your impression toward SS students alter after the interaction?) …They tried to see us as a person, as an ordinary individual person. Moreover, they were interested in our sports. I was really happy about that. Usually SS students don't care about us deeply. Like 'Uh-huh.' If things don't
go well, they would get annoyed to think the fact that there are more people with impairment in society. SS students began to deeply think about a lot of things. This somehow made me feel happy. (Q-7)

The LV students were pleased to discover that the sighted students strived to look past their own preconceptions to find out their actual identities. The sighted students’ actual images of LV students were constructed in the interaction. Before the interaction, the sighted students had stereotypical images of the LV students because they rarely had opportunities to have contact with students or adults with visual impairment before the interaction (see Table 1). However, in this study, the participants shared that their misconceptions soon changed after the interaction began (Q-8). The interaction with and observation of the LV students highlighted the LV students’ active and independent behavior (Gainforth, O’Malley, Mountenay, & Latimer-Cheung, 2013; Taub, Blinde, & Greer, 1999). This allowed the sighted students to modify their stereotypical perceptions of the LV students. Certainly, the sighted students’ new images of the LV students were not only positive, but at times negative ones. For example, SS-4 remarked on the inability of the LV students to play volleyball without making the rules easier (Q-9). However, such negative images were not the same as the previous stereotypical ones. Their new images were based on the actual impression of the LV students during the interaction. Thus, the sighted students’ images of LV students changed from virtual to actual through the interaction, which helped them to understand LV students. As a result, the sighted students’ images of LV students changed, causing the LV students’ assumption about their virtual identity shifted closer to their actual identity. It led to the reduction of LV students’ uneasiness toward the interaction:

SS-10: (Did you find anything in common or different between SB and SS during this time?) The common points? Uhh… (If you don’t have anything, you don’t have to say anything.) It was originally my impression that they cannot communicate with others well because of their visual impairment. However, I noticed that they communicated with many people because I saw them introduce themselves and talk to others naturally (Q-8).

SS-4: (How was the floor volleyball?) I remember that it was different from ordinary volleyball. So, I thought it was a little bit difficult to play compared to usual. Unless, we make the rules easier, it might be difficult for them to play with us. (Q-9)

Second, we explore the LV students’ devaluation of themselves. In the interviews, the LV students often compared themselves to sighted students and devalued themselves in comparison. For example, SB-1 said the female students in SS were “like typical high school girls” (Q-10). The interschool interaction highlighted the differences between the SS and SB students. The LV students assumed that the sighted students were normal because they had internalized the culturally constructed norm of nondisabled people (Becker & Arnold, 1986; Thomas, 2004). This internalization of the stigma made them feel that they were abnormal and accordingly, they devalued themselves. In their devaluation of themselves, the LV paid more attention to their virtual social identity, which deviated from the norm, than their actual identity. Rather than being freed from their uneasiness, their sense of devaluation was emphasized during the interaction. The reason for this was that their sense of abnormality could not be lessened just because they confirmed some sighted students’ positive attitudes. They were unable to alter their virtual social identity, which had been determined by the whole of society. Consequently, the interschool interaction suppressed the LV students’ actual identity and highlighted their negative virtual social identity:

SB-1: (What was your first impression of the SS students?) My first impression was that they were cheerful on the whole. Indeed, the students in our school are also cheerful, but they have a different kind of cheerfulness. The SS students were like typical high school girls. I can’t explain it well, but I thought they were cheerful, which was really like the normal high school students. (Q-10)

Supporter and Learner of Knowledge about Disability

Finally, we will discuss the social roles of LV and sighted students in the interschool interaction. Roles in social interactions are malleable. The role that individuals play is not predetermined by their attri-
butes. Rather, individuals take on roles in specific situations and mutually construct their relationship through interactive interpretations (Blumer, 1969; Dolch, 2003). Therefore, it is not always true that individuals with impairment are supported by those without impairment when they encounter each other (Roker, Player, & Coleman, 1998).

Contrary to the self-devaluation described in the second section, LV students also developed positive self-images as knowers through this interaction because the program contained information that sighted students did not possess about visual impairment, disabled sports, the differences between LV and blindness, the use of a white cane or braille, and effective ways to guide others (Q-11). The positive self-image LV students gained as knowers helped them to engage voluntarily so as to support the sighted students to learn about disability.

To the contrary, the sighted students recognized themselves as learners in the context of understanding disabilities. The majority of sighted students intentionally chose the learners’ position. Furthermore, they placed importance on a sense of equality (Q-12). Japanese people are more comfortable if they place themselves in a lower position than others when attempting to achieve equality (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). To emphasize a sense of equality, the SS students explained how they were supported by the SB students when learning about disabilities.

Accordingly, their mutual interpretation of the other and the self, helped to develop the LV students’ sense of their role as supporters of sighted students’ learning as well as sighted students’ sense of their role as learners of disability. This is an inverse relationship compared to the usual assumption that LV persons are supported by individuals without visual impairment when they encounter each other.

SB-3: (Then, please tell me about some similarities or differences of SB and SS that you noticed in this interaction.) The difference was whether they knew or didn’t know about blindness or people with visual impairment. For example, whether or not they knew about how to use the white cane. (Q-11)

SS-7: (What kind of relationship do you think you built during the interaction with the others?) At first, it was difficult to talk to them, but it got easier after we played floor volleyball. (Was there any hierarchy?) No. I thought we established equality. (Did you support them?) No. Rather, I was supported by them. (I see. Then, what do you think is the purpose of the interaction?) For me, to re-conceptualize visual impairments. (For example?) The difference between blindness and low vision, how to assist them, and the fact that the white cane is a sign of visual impairment. It was good for me to learn this. (Q-12)

The disadvantage that the positively inverse relationship of interschool interaction created for LV students is noteworthy. The interaction led to a new type of inequality in relation to learning. In this study, although sighted students could learn a great deal from the interaction, LV students could not learn as much as the SS students because they took on the role of supporter and thus, were not free to learn. Interschool interaction may be an important opportunity for LV students to reflect on their lives by learning about sighted students and standard schools. However, if interschool interaction functions as a one-way learning opportunity for sighted students, LV students may miss out on such opportunities (Q-13):

SB-9: (What do you think is the purpose of interschool interaction?) I want sighted students to know about SB, and I also want to know about standard schools. (Did you know anything about standard schools?) No, I didn’t. Because we didn’t visit a SS. I think I cannot know anything without actually making a visit. (Absolutely.) I’m from a standard elementary school, so I know a little about it. But some students have been in schools for blind from the beginning. (Q-13)

We also revealed that this inverse relationship led to a misunderstanding about SS students’ knowledge of LV. The LV students shared that the interschool interaction allowed the sighted students an opportunity to prepare to help blind people in the future. According to SB-4, the interaction with SS students was not beneficial to her, but it was beneficial for her blind friends (Q-14). Because of this perception, the LV students were reluctant to emphasize their own impairment, low vision, but mainly focused on their knowledge of blindness. At times, this led to the sighted students’ misunderstanding of LV. The
sighted students believed that they were learning about visual impairment as a whole and thus, they generalized their understanding of blindness to all types of visual impairment (Q-15). It is imperative to understand the structure of the inverse relationship, otherwise interschool interactions may lead to the emergence of new stereotypes in which knowledge of blindness and LV is confused.

SB-4: (What do you think the purpose of the interaction was?) Maybe, we interacted in order to spread awareness about visual impairment. (Was it successful?) Not really for me. (It seemed to have a merit for sighted students, but what about you?) Maybe, there were only few merits for me. (So, what do you think the purpose of the interaction was for SB students?) Perhaps, if the sighted students understand visual impairment, they will be able to help the people with more severe impairments. (Q-14)

SS-2: (Although XX and YY were using braille, others couldn’t use it. Did you notice that?) No. I had no room in my mind to think about it. I thought they all used it. (Students were divided into two groups. One used print characters, and the other used braille. Although blind students can learn through braille, students with low vision usually write by hand, so they don’t study braille. They all said they weren’t able to use braille.) Really? (Yeah.) Do they live together? (Yes.) Aren’t there any problems with this? (Actually, no. Because you don’t use literature to talk, do you?) Ah, I see. (Q-15)

Conclusion

The results of this study show that the LV students’ identities are more complex than that of impaired beings who are always supported by others. We revealed that in the context of interschool interaction, their virtual and actual identities fluctuated as a result of comparing themselves to sighted students. This suggests that the LV students’ interaction with sighted students demonstrated instability in their identity. In the long term, this may not be problematic. Identity crisis in adolescence is necessary for the healthy development of adult identities (Erikson, 1968). Most LV adolescents, including the participants in this study (see Table 1), do not have many opportunities to have meaningful contact with sighted students or adults. The interschool interaction was significant to help them to reflect and think deeply about themselves, and accordingly, to form stronger identities.

We indicated three negative aspects of the interschool interaction. First, the LV students devalued themselves in the interschool interaction by comparing themselves to the sighted students and internalizing the stigma. Second, though the LV students’ sense of being the supporters allowed them to create a positive identity, this may thwart their opportunities for learning during interschool interactions. Third, when the LV students supported the sighted students to learn about disabilities, the sighted students tended to misunderstand LV or visual impairment because the focus is on blindness. Therefore, knowledge of LV may be overlooked in such interactions. These three aspects were interwoven and influenced by the participants’ psychological mechanisms in the interaction and the cultural norms of society. Thus, finding solutions to these problems is not an easy or straightforward task.

It is recommended that future interschool interactions should focus more on the quality of the interaction. Previous research has revealed that structured interactions are imperative for sighted students to develop positive attitudes toward people with visual impairment (Kawauchi, 1990, p.183). The current study clarifies that this also applies to students with LV. Merely increasing the frequency of exchange will not solve the three problems illustrated in this study. Although continual opportunities for interaction may reduce the uneasiness LV students experience when interacting with sighted students, these interactions may increase the likelihood of LV students’ self-devaluation as a result of comparisons with SS students. Efforts are needed to eliminate the stereotypes imposed by society as a whole and to increase the self-esteem of LV students. The inverse relationship that occurs when focusing on the knowledge of disability is noteworthy. However, too much emphasis on their role as supporters may burden LV students and lessen their own opportunities for identity development. It is of importance that LV students did not learn as much about SS students or standard schools as the SS students learned about them. Consequently, the principal focus should be on an equal relationship between LV and sighted students during interschool interactions. Furthermore, it is beneficial to empha-
size knowledge about LV so as to elicit understanding of impairment and prevent misunderstandings about LV and blindness.

Although there were only a small number of local participants in this qualitative study, it is important to listen to the voices of individuals with impairment to empower them to construct their own identities (Watson, 2002). Understanding disabled individuals’ actual experiences enhances the power to refute dominant stories that position someone disabled as inferior (Coleman-Fountain & McLaughlin, 2013). It is recommended that further research incorporate more voices, accumulate increased knowledge, and develop a deeper understanding of this field of study.

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