Practical Educational Approach to School Absenteeism — Considering What Support Teachers Should Provide to Short-Term Absentee Students —

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Abstract

Research on school absenteeism is at a major period of transition. In the past, absenteeism had been about refusal to go to school, typified by the determination to not attend school due to desire to avoid the school or teachers. However, absenteeism in recent years has become less about such clear determinations from students, and the focus now must be placed on the discomfort students feel about somehow being left out from the group, and on *short-term absentee* students who skip school for 30 days or less at a time, and are not included in statistical data.

Teachers should take two types of approaches to supporting students who display this pattern of absenteeism. The first is learning support triggered by their absence from school, while the second is support for the households of those children. Teachers must equip students with the ability to build personal relationships with these two types of support in mind.

Key Words：absenteeism, short-term absenteeism, social capital, learning support, household support

1. Introduction

Research up to now in Japan on the topic of absenteeism is largely divided into the three focus areas of (1) causes, (2) patterns, and (3) approaches. Eiji Koizumi (1973) has conducted previous studies[1] on focus area (1). He points out the four underlying reasons for absenteeism (called *school refusal* at the time) as 1) physical, 2) financial, 3) household, and 4) psychological reasons, with six classifications for the psychological reasons in 4 as either neurotic, transient (temporary), or attributable to psychological disorders, poor study habits, developmental impediments, or either active or intentional refusal to attend school.

Yohji Morita (1991) has conducted previous studies[2] on focus area (2). Rather than actions dictated by any specific medical condition or behavioral trait, Morita pointed to absenteeism up to then as simply the status of incapability to attend school, and he defined it as a phenomenon which included motivational structures resulting from that status. Before the research by Morita, absenteeism had been referred to as "refusal to attend school," which

carried heavy implications of children rejecting school. However, Morita coined the term *futoko* meaning *school absenteeism* in Japanese, which included children who are unable to attend school. Morita also raised 1) anxiety about friendships, 2) relationships with teachers, 3) studies, 4) physical reactions, and 5) temptations outside of school as five causes for school absenteeism. Even now, psychological research is often based on the causes posed by Morita.

There have been a number of previous studies on focus area (3) which mainly analyzes psychology-based supportive care methods. In a study by Keiko Nakamura, Masahiro Kodama, and Fujio Tanaka (2011) it became clear from the process of students in adapted learning classrooms returning to school that it is essential for them to have cooperation not only from their classmates and teachers in the adapted learning classroom, but from the school itself as well[3]. Recent research on approaches has focused attention on researching adapted learning classrooms such as these or returning students to their original classes after first having them attend school in the nurse's office. These methods have proven effective to a certain degree.

From these research efforts, initial research on school absenteeism had a strong tendency to accept that the strong rejection of school in the refusal to attend school was the outward appearance of the phenomenon, while its causes were psychological. However, starting with research by Morita which began in the 1990s the term *futoko* came into regular use to describe the status itself of children who do not attend school, and since that time we have learned that school absenteeism is not only

attributable to psychological causes. We now know that there are also children who struggle to continue attending school due to relationships with classmates and teachers, and due to delays in their learning.

2. Evolution of absenteeism: The emergence of short-term absenteeism

The world in which children live has changed dramatically in recent years due to the influence of the Internet. Children's senses of values are inevitably changing, as are the very ways in which they play and enjoy themselves. This seems to be making children feel suffocated and oppressed.

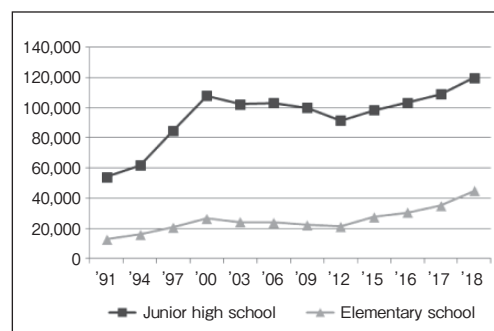Here let's take a look at some data on absenteeism.

Figure 1: Elementary and Junior high school student non-attendance by year

(Source) Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology: Results of 2018 survey on problematic behavior and absenteeism by school children
(Visit: http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/31/10/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2019/10/17/1410392.pdf 2019.11.5)

Based on data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology, we can easily observe at a single glance that absenteeism is much higher at junior high school than in elementary school. Now let's break down the differences by grade level.
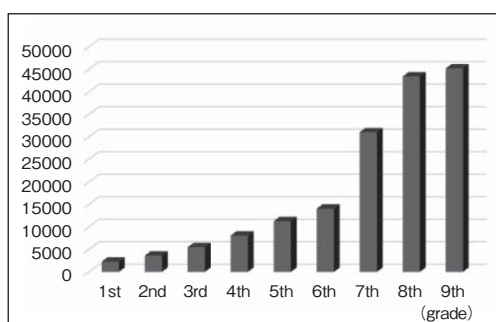
Figure 2: Student non-attendance by grade level
(Source) Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology: Results of 2018 survey on problematic behavior and absenteeism by school children
(Visit: http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/31/10/__ icsFiles/afieldfile/2019/10/17/1410392.pdf 2019.11.5)

Looking at the newest data from 2019, we see that absenteeism immediately increases once students enter their first year of junior high school. Why does this happen? The education world uses the term *chuichi gyappu* which means *first-year junior high disconnect* to describe this phenomenon, in which they say that many things about the lives of students change from the way things had been in elementary school.

For example, in elementary school there is a homeroom teacher for each class, but in junior high school different teachers are in charge of each subject, which can make students feel less connected with their teachers. Textbook content also becomes more abstract, and the textbooks themselves are weightier. Once the ratio of class time dedicated to instruction increases, more students start to feel like they don't want to go to school, or don't understand what they're learning. This causes the number of absentee students to rise once entering junior high school.

On the other hand, what we had unexpectedly been overlooking was how elementary schools have environments in place that allow teachers to thoroughly care for each and every student while educating them. Numbers of students are also somewhat smaller. However, the concept of the group suddenly begins to exercise influence once reaching junior high school. Putting it differently, students begin to feel suffocated and oppressed when they transition from individuals to groups. I believe this may be the most important point to consider when thinking about absenteeism.

According to the School Basic Survey, children who miss at least 30 days of school in a year are referred to as long-term absentees. The survey breaks down long-term absenteeism into four categories—*futoko*, illness, financial reasons, and other.

This paper aims to draw attention to those who have not reached the aforementioned 30-day threshold, the very gray area of those who are absent between 10 and 29 days in a year. There is an inclination among researchers to refer to these students as "minor league absentees." Here we will call them *short-term absentees*.

One common research issue that children have been raising recently is how to arrange a place for them to be. Taking social services measures into consideration, there are generally three ways to consider how to allot such a space for them. One is to set up separate rooms in schools, have students attend school in those rooms, and count it as school attendance. Empty classrooms can be used to support absentee students, or students are sometimes brought in to the nurse's office, counseling rooms, the faculty room, or even the principal's

office. This will be mentioned on more detail later, but we have also frequently heard of school libraries being used recently for these students. This is the separate room in the same school attendance viewpoint, where all of these forms of attendance are considered as having attended school and been in the classroom.

Another argument is to set up adapted learning classrooms outside of the school. The idea is to treat each day attending these classes as equivalent to having gone to school and been in attendance. So why create these adapted learning classrooms? The question is, "How are these classrooms different from separate rooms inside the school?" Absentee children say that if they are nearby the school, they will see and be seen by their classmates coming to and leaving school. They don't want this. In other words, they don't want anyone to see them, and they don't want to see anyone. Not even their friends. Setting up classrooms in places far removed from the school, in secluded places or on mountaintops, could be quite adaptive to students who are reluctant to attend school. The idea of creating adapted learning classrooms in transport-accessible locations such as in front of train stations has also been proposed. However, we should also remember that it might be better to place these classrooms in locations that are purposely difficult to access, intentionally distant from their schools.

3. Where does short-term absenteeism originate?

There are different categories of absenteeism. Previously, when students who been attempting to attend school but were unable to do so for psychological reasons this was defined as neurotic absenteeism. There was a time in the past when this was called refusal to attend. In contrast to this is what could be defined as dropout-type absenteeism. This is a type of absenteeism endemic to children with insufficient academic skills or those who are broadly unable to acclimate to the culture of schools. This also includes children with troubled family circumstances. It is said that neurotic absenteeism accounts for around one-third of total non-attendance, while dropout-type absenteeism account for the other approximately two-thirds.

The following have been suggested as possible reasons for these changes to the breakdown of absenteeism types.

As an example, consider an area where students from three different elementary schools advance to a single junior high school. In school campus lingo, when there are three elementary schools in a school district with one junior high school, it's called *icchuu sanshoh* (one junior three elementary). In just this manner, Kyoto Prefecture has lots of elementary schools that are completely different in size from each other. Here we analyze the data of first-year students who show a strong tendency towards absenteeism as they begin attending these junior high schools, in relation to the size of the elementary schools they came from. Doing so, the data shows that at junior high schools with high numbers of students who start struggling to attend school by the middle of their first month in April, short-term absentee students, in other words those who struggle to continue attending school, tend to be those who attended elementary schools that

are different in size, particularly those from the smallest elementary schools.

We could extract the actual numbers and discuss them, but please just consider the abstract picture and concept. When entering the junior high school, most of the students will be those from larger elementary schools, and the next-most will be from mid-sized elementary schools. Now imagine the perspective of children who went to small elementary schools that were rural and remote or were in communities which had no choice but to combine classes of different grade levels. When these students go to junior high school and look around, they see hardly any friends in their classes. More than a few of these children from smaller schools feel from the beginning that they can't get through school.

On the other hand, one other very interesting realization gained by analyzing the data from Kyoto was not all of those from smaller elementary schools were struggling in their junior high environments. Absentee numbers were very small among students from smaller elementary schools whose teachers worked closely with the teachers at junior high schools who would be in charge of their students the following year. More than just as a formality, some elementary schools are assembling all their sixth-grade homeroom teachers and actually practicing elementary-junior high school liaison meetings with those teachers at the junior high where their students will attend next. In this case *actually practicing* means that municipalities have collaborative frameworks to facilitate smooth transitions between elementary and junior high school, in which elementary school teachers

generally share their opinions on how junior high classes should be divided by thoroughly communicating with junior high school teachers about which students should be together, and which should be separated when they are dividing up the classes. Putting it the other way around, if elementary and junior high school teachers hold liaison meetings as a mere formality once or twice a year and the junior high teachers divide their classes as they see fit without consulting the elementary school teachers, everyone will be divided proportionately into each class, and the children from smaller elementary schools will feel like everything is stacked against them. Therefore, it can be said that children's concept of the group changes when the size of their school changes.

If we look at those children who are in large schools and large groups from the start, we see that these children are surprisingly stable. Of course, that may also lead to problems, but it would seem that children who are surrounded by many whom they already know at the beginning of the school year in April are much less likely to feel anxious. Then when they advance to second and third year, they begin club activities and make new friends during subject-based instruction.

What I want to say most is that the beginning of April for first-year junior high school students warrants attention. In the past there has been research on the so-called *May Blues* depression in the second month of the school year and absenteeism after summer break, and of course these tendencies do also exist. However, what is considered a new absenteeism trend is the large number of cases occurring just after starting a new grade level

in April. This is because the absenteeism results from not knowing anyone or having any friends around from the start.

Another research effort on the assumption of absenteeism led to the following realization, which is that students these days are strongly averse to scrutiny from others. This applies to students in both elementary and junior high school. To illustrate, imagine the following example. Imagine that a child named Taro Hara is sleeping. Teachers in the old days would get angry and say, "Hara, wake up!" in front of everyone. The assumption is that teacher reads between the lines that Taro will be embarrassed to be caught sleeping in front of everyone, and intentionally embarrasses him by yelling at him.

On the other hand, teachers these days do not scold students in this manner in front of everyone. Rather, it seems there are more teachers who will disguise their actions to warn a particular student who is sleeping, such as waiting for when students all look at their books, then tapping that student on the shoulder in a way no one else notices while patrolling between desks. That student will then realize that the teacher warned them in a way that others would not notice and will consider the teacher friendly. If this teacher had said "Hara, wake up!" in front of everyone, from that moment on, the student who was sleeping would dislike that teacher. That dislike would stem from the fact that the teacher did not show enough consideration for the student.

Another matter to consider when thinking about short-term absenteeism is the influence that students teasing other students has in

making it difficult for some students to bring themselves to school. Some children are displaying behavior that students are referring to in recent children's lingo as *ijirare-kyara* (easy to tease). Those who tease that student see it as only messing around, but from my perspective it is clearly bullying.

Let's consider an actual case involving an online video game as an example. The following type of situation might occur. There might be one *ijirare-kyara* in the class who is good at the game. To a certain degree, this person considers it a personal duty to let others poke fun at him a little. However, this student has a bit of a gloomy side. He's the type that everyone somehow will occasionally ask, "Hey, are you OK?" One day, some class leader types invite this student to play the game he is good at together with them. "Hey, let's play that online game today." The student thinks they invited him because he is good at the game. The five of them form a team and start playing the game.

However, the four other students did not actually ask that student to join to make him the centerpiece of their team because he's good at the game. Rather, their intention was to "shoot down his character early on." The four of them approach him in the game acting like friends, then ambush him from behind. If this continues for several days, the student will realize "They don't think of me as a friend, they just want to ambush me from behind because I'm good at the game."

4. Changing relationships among children: The place for bullied students to take refuge is changing

Recently I have been hearing the following story more and more often. The child is very well-behaved at home, but one day a phone call comes from school saying, "Your child did this terrible thing." In disbelief, the parent replies, "What are you talking about? My child is extremely well-behaved." But when the parent actually goes to the school, it was just as the teacher said. Their child has been ganging up with two or three other students to do bad things. Why does this happen? Because the good side of each individual child gets completely buried in the forest-like entanglements of a group. Sociologist and researcher Asao Naito points to this as the good sides of individuals being "buried before entering the forest[4]." On their own they might be well-behaved, but when a number of others get involved, they end up doing terrible things. This mentality is characteristic of today's children.

Could research on bullying be applied to research on absenteeism?

The main challenge in research on bullying is finding where the bullied children are within the school. We have also conducted years of research of this topic. When research on bullying began 25 years ago, bullied children were in the restrooms. In fact, there was a TV drama in which a student in a toilet stall had water poured on him with a bucket from above, and ended up soaking wet from head to toe. Unfortunately, similar incidents were reported all over Japan starting the day after this drama aired. Various schools were plagued by the resulting cultural phenomenon in school settings in which a drenched student emerging from a toilet stall became a designated scene for others to laugh at. In other words, the toilet was no longer a place for bullied students to find refuge.

Where did bullied children go to take refuge, then?

The nurse's office or teachers' room, or even the janitor's room began serving this purpose. These students wanted to be in places that adults could see. In the nurse's office there is the school nurse, and in the teachers' room the teachers are there. The type of students who didn't enter the nurse's office or teacher's room but stared for a long time at the posters on the wall by the teachers' room entrance were often bullied children.

However, these children have recently stopped going to the nurse's office and janitor's room. This is because troublemaker children have started coming to the nurse's office. Specifically, children have started going to the nurse's office during break times to ask the nurse for snacks. Children who feel bullied are least capable of dealing with these types of students. When bullied students are in the nurse's office and find out that their natural enemy is coming, they immediately leave and go somewhere else. So where do they go now?

In recent years the school library has begun taking on this function. Just before summer vacation ended last year, a school library in Tokyo published a website inviting students to "Come to the library if you feel that school is too much for you." Sure enough, large numbers of students fled to the library as if it were a shelter. Children think about things in

their own way. As for why the library, a school library is the only space in the school where everyone has to be quiet. To put it more succinctly, nobody will ask them, "Why are you here?" in the school library. Furthermore, the aforementioned troublemaker-type students who frequent the nurse's office hardly ever go to the library. Talking is prohibited in the library, so they find it boring.

In this case, teachers need to be careful not to try talking to students who have come to the library for refuge. This is because they lose their place to be once teachers enter the school library. In other words, it is important to leave students in the library alone. If you are wondering where these children are, they will be in the narrow aisles between bookshelves and definitely not anywhere that can be seen from the hallway. The children you can see from the hallway reading books are the ones who like reading books. However, there is also a type of child who reads books in the very narrow space between bookshelves, as if trying to hide. This is the type of child who is having a hard time getting by. If such students are left on their own, they will not be able to return to the classroom.

Conversely, if you ask children who have a strong tendency toward absenteeism, "Why don't you go to school?" you will certainly not receive a straight answer. However, for whatever reason they simply do not or cannot go to school. In some cases, even those students themselves do not know why. Taking that into consideration, we really do need to focus on functional and spatial viewpoints within schools.

5. Children exposed to peer pressure

The leading expert researching this topic is Takayoshi Doi. His book *Tsunagari wo Aorareru Kodomotachi* (Children Engaged In Connections) was likely his most famous work. In it, he pointed out that there are differences in the inner strength children have to form connections[5]. In other words, while some children make friends easily, some have a weak ability to form connections and struggle to make friends.

Such children with weak ability to connect find questions such as, "Did you find a friend? Did you talk to anyone? What did you do at lunch today? Did you play soccer with your classmates?" to be incredibly cruel. Children with strong ability to form connections think little of such questions, but children who are weak in this area really struggle at times, such as the second term of the school year in autumn when there is a succession of school events. These are major events for students, including sports day, the school festival, and choir contest. Teachers take this as an opportunity to strengthen the solidarity and unity of the class. As an educational strategy by teachers, this is entirely consistent with the standpoint of special activities theory. This is why class solidarity indeed increases after the music festival and sports day are over. Conventionally, this has been a singular opportunity during the year which teachers have considered highly important. However, Doi argues as follows. He points out that when school events are lined up and connections within the class get stronger, there is a type of child who ends up excluded from this

strengthened group. Recently, children like this have significantly increased in number. This is a new viewpoint. In essence, it's not a bad thing, nor is it a problem, and there aren't any particular causes. It is simply that when strong class connections bound by friendship are formed, there is a type of child who simply cannot seem to get involved in this strengthened solidarity and connection.

Here I would like to share something that a university student had to say. She is enrolled in a teacher training course at a university, and she presents the problem as follows about how today's heavily peer pressure-influenced peer relationships work.

"I understand how children described in *Tsunagari wo Aorareru Kodomotachi* feel. At my university, each department goes for a two-day, one-night training camp after the opening ceremony is over. It is part of the orientation, so everyone has no choice but to participate. Immediately after the opening ceremony nobody knew each other, and the bus ride was like a funeral wake. However, we all stayed there for one night, ate meals and bathed. By the next day we had established friendships, and the return trip on the bus was as if we had known each other for a decade. With this situation on the bus ride back, I thought, 'I can't be on this bus.' I was really uncomfortable. I thought I was a strange person who couldn't blend in to that atmosphere. But once I learned about *Tsunagari wo Aorareru Kodomotachi* I felt a bit relieved. When I become a schoolteacher in the future, people might say that I have to establish strong solidarity in my classroom, but I want to teach with the viewpoint that there are more children like me who don't fit into the group."

Just having teachers like her who are capable of gauging the feelings of children who do not easily form connections will make it possible to curb absenteeism to a certain extent. If we ignore that and go with the "What are you doing, get over here with everyone else" style of teaching, children like this will have nowhere to be. It is important that teachers can share this viewpoint.

6. What type of education approach is necessary for children?

What should be done to provide support for absenteeism? The idea is not, for example, that the ability students must be made to acquire is actually the ability to form relationships, and ultimately become socially independent in the long term. To put it differently, these days education is realizing that simply returning children to the classroom is not the goal for dealing with absenteeism.

There are also two different angles when considering how to provide support.

One is that analysis of data on children with strong tendencies toward absenteeism shows that the largest number of them are students who are unable to keep up with their school lessons. Therefore, we know that formidable learning support is needed. Consequently, when we attempt to arrange separate room school attendance or create support classrooms, we want to create systems in these classrooms for teaching children how to study. From the absentee students' perspective, they might want to have a space

that allows them to do more than just study. This is a critically important point. In other words, it is important to employ a long-term perspective in equipping these children with academic skills. However, since the children have stopped attending class they quickly fall behind at their studies, and there are some cases where lesson support that allows them to return to class at any time, and teachers bring printouts for them to do there, is not necessarily the right type of support for those children. This is a truly difficult matter. Those children who cannot be in the classroom because they are poor at studying need to receive learning assistance, but you also need to remember that some children will dislike forced study environments. Therefore, with this in mind it is extremely important to utilize tools such as ICT.

Another aspect is how to support households.

For example, when addressing parents, a number of cases have been reported in which the school has expressed that the child is troubling them. Yet amongst these cases, there are also cases where children that the school feels troubled with are actually the ones who are the most troubled. Typical examples of this would include abusive and negligent household environments.

Now then, let's change our thinking toward this just a bit. The mainstream support approach to absenteeism has been counseling, telling students they can "come and talk anytime if they feel like they are struggling." However, going forward we may need to actually employ outreach-style assistance, to tell children, "if you're struggling with anything,

we'll visit you" and be ready to visit households where the child in need of assistance can't get out of the house, for example. Another approach would be to get parents involved in such cases and support them along with the children. Therefore, we are seeing more cases of absenteeism where rather than the conventional idea of having plenty of school counselors on hand, having social workers on hand is a more adaptive approach. Actually, this is more often the case now.

Taking this into consideration, it seems necessary that teachers and schools adopt the perspective of emphasizing outreach-style support in addressing the circumstances particular to each municipality.

Notes

(1) Eiji Koizumi, *Toko Kyohi* (Refusal to Attend School), Gakuji Shuppan, 1973

(2) Yohji Morita, *Futoko Gensho no Shinrigaku* (The Psychology of Absenteeism), Gakubunsha, 1991

(3) Keiko Nakamura, Masahiro Kodama, and Fujio Tanaka, *Tekiou Shido Kyoshitsu de no Jujitsukan to Toko Kodo to no Kanren* (Fulfillment in Adapted Learning Classrooms and Their Connection with School Attendance Behavior) Counseling research No.44, pp.28-37, 2011

(4) Asao Naito, *Ijime no Kohzoh* (Structure of Bullying) Kodansha 2009

(5) Takayoshi Doi, *Tsunagari wo Aorareru Kodomotachi* (Children Engaged In Connections), Iwanami Booklet 2014

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