

# Municipal Residents' Cooperation with an NPO Administering a Free School

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## Abstract

This study clarifies cooperation between a non-profit organization (NPO) and residents in a city. The NPO examined in this study owes its origin to an elementary school teacher's aid for her students to study at her home after school. This undertaking led to the NPO's management of a free school for elementary and lower secondary school students. Furthermore, the NPO also embarked on aid for upper secondary school students and disabled individuals. Interviews with the chief director of and cooperators with the NPO, observations of the NPO's operation, and examination of documents and websites disclose the aid that the NPO has obtained from city residents.

## I. Introduction

Nowadays, free schools (*furī sukūru*), known as alternative schools in Japan, are presumed to enlarge their roles in aiding non-attendant (*futōkō*) children. Non-attendant children are defined as students absent from their elementary school (*shōgakkō*) or lower secondary school (*chūgakkō*) for 30 days or more in a particular academic year for reasons irrelevant to their health or family's finances. The Act on Assurance of Educational Opportunities (*Kyōiku kikai kakuho hō*) of 2016 prescribes that private organizations are aligned with the national, prefectural, and municipal governments in providing non-attendant children with opportunities to receive education. As private organizations, free schools are expected to conduct significant functions in serving non-attendant children.

Free schools are not regarded as conventional schools, which acquire grants-in-aid from the national government, prefectural governments, and municipal governments. The prime financial source of many free schools is the tuition fees that students' families pay. On the premise that students' families do not pay tuition fees to public elementary schools and lower

secondary schools in Japan, families of free school students find themselves bearing the burden of extra expenses. Free schools are confronted with difficulties in imposing a costly tuition fee on students' families even though free schools must obtain sufficient money for management.

Assistance from various individuals are valuable for free schools, which the national, prefectural, and municipal governments are not obliged to supply with grants-in-aid for management. What assistance can free schools gain from individuals to effectively and stably serve non-attendant children? For example, donations from individuals can aid free schools. The funds can be utilized to employ staff members, repair school buildings, and purchase equipment. Supplies of labor from individuals also provide significant aid for free schools. Even though free schools do not hold a sufficient number of staff members or facilities, individuals can volunteer to serve as instructors at the free school or tender free schools their lands and properties, such as farms, stores, and factories, for students to experience activities and jobs.

This study illustrates the aid that a non-profit organization (NPO, *tokutei hieiri katsudō hōjin*) obtains from residents in a city. While many free schools are confronted with financial difficulties and hesitate to extend their functions, the NPO examined in this study was established as a free school and has enriched its functions. The NPO's methods to enhance services for children and disabled individuals are instructive for other free schools. This study focuses on the NPO that operates a free school and has enlarged its services.

## II. Methodology

One of the topics addressed by the literature on free schools is the relationship between free schools and prefectural or municipal governments. While prefectural and municipal governments operate the school system, free schools are not regarded as schools in the School Education Act (*Gakkō kyōiku hō*). Therefore, studies have pointed out an antagonistic relation between free schools and prefectural or municipal governments. For example, in 2018, Fujine (2019) surveyed alternative schools such as free schools, free spaces (*furī supēsu*), Waldorf schools (Steiner *gakkō*), private organizations to aid upper secondary school (*kōtō gakkō*) students in

correspondence courses (*sapōto kō*), and democratic schools. Free schools accounted for 57.9% of all the respondents of the survey. Among the alternative schools, 29.4% participated in consultative meetings in cooperation between private organizations and prefectural or municipal governments, and 10.3% were entrusted with undertakings by prefectural or municipal governments. Fujine interpreted these results as an unworkable cooperation between alternative schools and prefectural or municipal governments (Fujine 2019, 73–74 and 78–79).

As Fujine indicated, many alternative schools and prefectural or municipal governments do not tend to cooperatively interact with each other currently. However, several studies disclosed the transition of the relationship between free schools and prefectural or municipal governments. For example, Ki, Saitō, and Yoshida (2019) conducted semi-structured interviews with the founders of free schools in Kantō and Kansai Regions and inquired about the relationship between their free schools and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) or the education boards of municipal governments. The interviewees' responses implied that the free schools confronted MEXT and boards of education immediately after the foundation of the free schools and that the free schools nowadays communicate with boards of education and try to find methods to cooperate with them (Ki, Saitō, and Yoshida 2019, 36).

Yamada (2017) describes the process of establishing cooperation between free schools and prefectural or municipal governments in Kanagawa Prefecture. He interviewed representatives of four free schools. One of the representatives interviewed clarified that his/her free school was not concerned with organizations of a prefectural or municipal government immediately after the establishment of the free school. A few years later, this free school applied for Kanagawa Prefectural Government's subsidy for aiding children or young adults. This is the first connection between the free school and the prefectural government. A representative of another free school expounded that the prefectural and municipal governments had provided the free school with financial support for the building rent since the foundation of the free school. While the free schools examined had a relationship with the prefectural or municipal government, the relationship was

not necessarily strong. However, after the free schools connected with each other, shared information, and discussed the issue of non-attendant children, the free schools began cooperating with the prefectural government. As a consequence, the free schools and the prefectural government established a consultative conference for cooperation (Yamada 2017, 149–51).

Takei (2016) noted the relationship between an organization operating a free school and a municipal government. When the organization was established, its representative maintained a distance from the conventional school system, which the education board of the municipal government maintained. Later, the media started reporting practices of the organization's free school and the representative became a member of an advisory council of the municipal government. Moreover, the organization was entrusted with managing a free school that the municipal government established (Takei 2016, 116).

These studies clarified the transition of free schools in terms of the relationship with prefectural or municipal governments. According to the studies, free schools did not tend to interact with prefectural or municipal governments in the past; however, both free schools and prefectural or municipal governments are gradually developing a mutual relationship. This transition may have been promoted by the enactment of the Act on Assurance of Educational Opportunities in 2016 and is a notable topic of research on free schools.

This act also influences an increased expectation that free schools should have more substantial functions. However, many free schools are confronted with financial difficulties and do not receive grants-in-aid from the national, prefectural, and municipal governments. Free schools requiring donations and volunteers may desire aid from community residents. In this sense, advancement of cooperation between free schools and communities should also be a related subject of research.

Hiromoto (2018) inquired into a free school that obtained aid from residents living in the free school's neighborhood within a large city with a population of more than one million. Neighbors invited free school students to festivals and athletic meets held in the community and provided them with opportunities to observe jobs at the workplaces of self-employed neighbors

(Hiromoto 2018, 5 and 8–10). Even in a large city, the free school received aid from residents living in the nearby neighborhood. To what extent can free schools obtain assistance from residents in other areas?

This study illustrates the relationship between a private organization managing a free school and city residents. The organization examined was originally established as a free school. Today, the organization administers several fields of undertaking with aid from residents. This organization is aided by residents in a city rather than neighbors in a small community. The organization can be regarded as advanced in receiving aid from residents in a wide area rather than in a small community. Examining the organization contributes to illustrating what functions a free school can bear with cooperation from the residents in a municipality.

The organization in question obtained the status of an NPO. This study does not use the real name of the NPO but a pseudonym, NPO C. This NPO C is located in a city whose population was 97,387 on August 31, 2019. NPO C was primarily a free school for non-attendant children who refused to attend their elementary schools or lower secondary schools, and it now aids not only non-attendant children but also upper secondary school students and disabled individuals. Before the organization was established, the chief director of NPO C was an elementary school teacher. After school, she tutored some of her students, who faced difficulties in taking classes or acclimatizing to their conventional school, at her home. Later, she established an NPO and managed a free school. The NPO has extended its operations, embracing aid for upper secondary school students and disabled individuals who are beset with difficulties in acclimatizing to their conventional schools or their workplaces.

The operations of NPO C were investigated by anthropological methods including interviews, observations, and examination of documents and websites. Interviews were conducted with the chief director of and cooperators with NPO C from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on August 30, 2019. Observations were carried out in the intervals between interviews.

### III. Results

NPO C utilizes a cultivated field. By courtesy of the field's owner, NPO C

does not have to pay a rent for the field. Children attending the NPO's free school and disabled individuals working at the NPO's workshops can work in the field to cultivate pesticide-free vegetables and cotton. Residents in the city can purchase these vegetables and also cultivate vegetables in this field. Purchases and cultivation of vegetables are opportunities for the residents to recognize the NPO. This method of spreading recognition was devised by cooperators with NPO C, including a parent of a student at the NPO's free school and a former city government official.

Pesticide-free vegetables grown in the field are used to make certain products. Allergen-free foods for dogs are made using the vegetables and sold by the NPO. Disabled individuals participate in operations, such as packing the foods. A veterinarian practicing in the city cooperates with NPO C and supervises production of the allergen-free foods.

Staff members of a daytime-care facility for the elderly are also cooperators with NPO C. They cultivate and gather vegetables and cotton in the field. Elderly individuals who utilize the daytime-care facility participate in making cotton goods if they desire. The staff members of the facility accept students at the NPO's free school as volunteers who assist the elderly individuals. This is an opportunity for the students to interact with people and consider what jobs they will obtain in the future. Owners of stores in the city also cooperate with NPO C in providing the students with opportunities to work at their stores.

NPO C runs a cafe to provide opportunities to work and interact with people for individuals who feel anxious about working or cooperating with others. The building of the cafe was formerly used as a pharmacy. The proprietor of the pharmacy wanted to sell the building at a low price to individuals who render services to society. Thus, NPO C obtained a place for practice in working and interacting with various people.

Students at the free school perform musical and theatrical activities at events held in the city and read books to elementary school students in an after-school care program (*gakudō hoiku*). City residents invite the students to give performances, present plays, and read books to children. Such activities help improve students' self-confidence.

NPO C receives the aid from city residents rather than in the limited area

Masayuki Hiromoto : Municipal Residents' Cooperation with an NPO Administering a Free School of a neighborhood. In this sense, cooperation between NPO C and residents is not confined to a particular location.

#### IV. Discussion

As the previous section shows, NPO C is connected with and receives aid from various individuals in the city. Why does NPO C enjoy aid from the residents?

The size of the population (97,387) in the city in which the NPO is located may bring about the associations between the NPO and residents. In the interview, the chief director of NPO C referred to the decreasing population of the city as inducing the cooperation among various organizations and residents to enhance the city's attractiveness and increase people's migrating to the city. Many residents in the city share a concern over the decreasing population and are intent on addressing the issue.

An advantage of the scale of about 100,000 residents should be noted. Too large a population inhibits interaction among individuals in disparate fields. What the chief director of NPO C explained implies that individuals in a particular field tend to approach and co-act with other fields in the city; they do not confine themselves to their own domains. The scale of the city's population promotes interaction among residents rather than estranging them and brings about extensive interaction in the entire city rather than in a narrow neighborhood location. In this sense, municipalities with small-size populations are suitable for the establishment of free schools.

However, there is room for further examination of why NPO C receives aid from city residents. On January 1, 2019, 83.6% of the municipalities in Japan had a population fewer than 100,000 (Kokudo chiri kyōkai 2019, 29). This signifies that there are many municipalities whose populations are the same size or less than NPO C's city. While residents in these municipalities can benefit from small-scale populations in sharing a common interest of dealing with municipal issues, all these municipalities may not necessarily succeed in developing close connections among residents.

Another reason for city residents' cooperation with NPO C may be the NPO's contribution toward the city, which may induce the city residents' aid for NPO C as rewards. As the previous section illustrates, students at NPO

C's free school give concerts and perform plays in city events and read to elementary school students. These activities contribute toward enlivening the events and enriching education for elementary school children.

Traditional brooms (*hōki*) are a specialty of the city in which NPO C is located. However, the plant of which the brooms are made is seldom cultivated, and the number of craftspeople is decreasing. NPO C raises this plant, called *hōki gusa* or *hōki morokoshi*, and contributes to providing the material of traditional brooms. Thus, NPO C contributes toward sustaining the production of the city's specialty.

NPO C also cooperates with a driving school in the city. The driving school admits students who have autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disability (LD), or a slight mental disability. The chief director of NPO C is the advisor on the driving school's program for these students. She advises the driving school on how to teach these students traffic rules or techniques for driving and dealing with difficulties confronted by the students. Expertise accumulated at the NPO is utilized at the driving school.

The interviews with the chief director of NPO C and the observations of NPO C's operations reminded the researcher of her connections with city residents. While the scale of the city and the NPO's contributions toward the city give rise to promoting relationships between the NPO and city residents, substantial interaction between them may be brought about by other techniques such as influential individuals and mechanisms through which residents share a common intent to address an issue. However, this study has not obtained any apparent indications of the other causes for residents' aid to NPO C. Further research is required in this regard.

## V. Conclusion

This study attempted to clarify what kinds of aid an NPO can receive from city residents. The NPO originated from a free school. At present, the NPO conducts operations embracing aid for upper secondary school students and disabled individuals through cooperation with city residents.

The interviews, observations, and examination of documents and websites revealed cooperation between NPO C and residents. The owner of the land



lent NPO C the cultivated field without charge. A parent of a student at the NPO's free school and a former city government officer work in the cultivated field and contribute to the NPO in extending networks between NPO C and residents. The veterinarian supervises the production of allergen-free foods for dogs. Staff members at the daytime-care facility for the elderly work in the cultivated field. Elderly individuals at the daytime-care facility participate in making cotton goods that NPO C sells. Not only the staff members of the facility but also the store owners in the city provide the students with opportunities to work. A former owner of a pharmacy sold NPO C his building for the business at an inexpensive price. Residents encourage students at the free school to play musical instruments, perform plays, and read books to young children. Through these occasions, the students develop self-esteem. NPO C obtains aid from residents living in the city rather than in the limited sphere of a neighborhood.

One of the reasons for the cooperation between NPO C and city residents may be the scale of the city in which the NPO is located. A relatively small city population assists residents to identify with each other and brings about an atmosphere that promotes cooperation among them. Municipalities with small population sizes suit free schools that require aid from residents.

Another reason may be related to NPO C's contributions to city residents. NPO C's services for the city may bring about aid from the community as return favors. While community residents provide students at NPO C's free school with opportunities to give concerts, perform plays, and read to young children, the students enliven events held in the city and enrich education for young children through these activities. NPO C's cultivation of the plant, *hōki gusa* or *hōki morokoshi*, contributes to maintaining production of the city's specialty. The chief director of NPO C proffers the driving school advice on teaching traffic rules to individuals with developmental disabilities and instructing them in how to drive.

However, other factors influence the mutual relationship between NPO C and residents. Further research should reveal those that promote the formation of networks among city residents. Causes for the mutual relationship may be concerned with influential figures or mechanisms developing interaction among residents or organizations in the city. Clarification of

these causes is a task that a following study will address.

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