

Community-based Assistance for a Free School

Masayuki Hiromoto

Abstract

The present study aims to reveal how a free school provides non-attendant students with useful services. In general, free schools in Japan do not enjoy sufficient funds because many of them do not receive grants-in-aid from national, prefectural, and municipal governments. This lack of financial aid from the three levels of government differentiates them from traditional schools. Free schools are required to devise methods of effective and efficient management. I report on the case of a free school that receives cooperation from the community. The present study elucidates how this free school utilizes aid from the neighborhood.

I. Introduction

Provision of opportunities to study for non-attendant (*futōkō*) students is a significant issue in Japan. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) defines a *non-attendant student* as a student who is absent from their elementary or lower secondary school (*chūgakkō*) for thirty days or longer in one academic year for reasons that do not have to do with sickness or the student's family financial condition. According to the MEXT (2018), 1.35% of all the elementary and lower secondary school students were non-attendant in Academic Year 2016, and the percentage of non-attendant students has gradually increased from 1.09% since Academic Year 2012 (MEXT 2018, 64).

In December 2016, the National Diet of Japan established the Act to Ensure Opportunities to Receive Education Substituted for Compulsory Education (the Act to Ensure Opportunities for Education, or *Kyōiku kikai kakuho hō*). Article 3 of this Act stipulates that non-attendant students are provided with aid depending on situations surrounding the students, and that these measures are implemented through cooperation with the national government, prefectural and municipal governments, private organizations attempting to ensure opportunities for education, and the people involved.

Free schools (*furī sukūru*) have become increasingly important in aiding non-attendant students since the establishment of the Act to Ensure Opportunities for Education. Free schools differ from traditional elementary and lower secondary schools that are within the purview of the Act of Education at Schools (*Gakkō kyōiku hō*) in that the former employ free curricula. Free schools tend to prioritize effectual assistance to non-attendant students rather than strict adherence to curricula complying with the MEXT's guidance.

While many free schools are managed by private organizations or individuals, Educational Assistance Centers (*kyōiku shien sentā*) are public institutions aiding non-attendant students. Most of Educational Assistance Centers, which were formerly known as Adaptation Guidance Classrooms (*tekiō shidō kyōshitsu*), are established by boards of education in prefectural and municipal governments (MEXT 2015a, 6). Whereas Educational Assistance Centers tend to prioritize non-attendant students' returns to their elementary and lower secondary schools (MEXT 2015a, 17), free schools put emphasis on cultivating the emotional intelligence of non-attendant students. Boards of education and their Educational Assistance Centers are responsible for teaching students subjects that are taught at traditional schools and creating the conditions for non-attendant students to return to their schools. Free schools put emphasis on non-attendant students' emotional and social maturity.

Many free schools have insufficient funds for their management. They do not obtain grants-in-aid (*hojokin*) that the MEXT provides for traditional schools. These financial difficulties impel free schools to devise methods in order to provide non-attendant students with services using limited financial resources. The MEXT held Meetings for the Examination of Matters Concerning Free Schools (*Furī sukūru tō ni kansuru kentō kaigi*). Members of these meetings included representatives of free schools. Several of them asserted that free schools are confronted with severe financial difficulties and that public systems are required to assist with the funding of free schools (MEXT 2015b; 2015c; 2015d).

The present study aims to reveal how a free school has devised methods to provide effective services for non-attendant students despite the limited

amount of funds.

II. Methodology

Several essays written by individuals who are responsible for free schools and institutes aiding non-attendant students briefly point out the insufficient financing of free schools. These essays suggest that free schools lack funds to employ salaried staff members, that insufficient financial resources of free schools preclude the reduction of tuition fees paid by non-attendant students' families, and that, given the absence of grants-in-aid, free schools seek donations and prefectural or municipal governments and companies' subsidies (*joseikin*) to promote the activities of various private organizations (Arai 2011, 90; Okuchi 2015a, 33; Okuchi 2015b, 52; Okuchi 2016, 565).

Kogirima (2016) surveyed free schools in 2015. Questionnaires were returned by 129 of them. The questionnaires included the question, "How important do you think is financial assistance from national, prefectural, and municipal governments towards your free school's operating expenses?". "Very important" was selected by 44.2% of the respondents, and 31.8% answered "Important" (Kogirima 2016, 47 and 52–53).

Funabashi (2012) sent questionnaires to free schools that the Board of Education in Hokkaidō Government (a prefectural government) had identified as of February 2011. Responses from 13 free schools were obtained. Many respondents referred to funding in answering a question about problems concerning the activities and management of free schools. These free schools desired to constantly receive subsidies from the national, prefectural, and municipal governments (Funabashi 2012, 69 and 75).

What methods do free schools employ to cope with insufficient financial resources? The following study reveals a free school's method to stabilize its financial condition.

A free school observed by Hokudai futōkō chōsa chīmu (*Non-attendance Research Team at Hokkaido University*, 2012) provides non-attendant students with space in which they can stay from 9:00 am to 8:00 pm, and a program under which staff members are dispatched to non-attendant students' homes to spend time with them. The free school held two salaried staff members and 42 volunteers when this study was conducted. While the workload of

the free school requires two salaried staff members at the minimum, its limited funds cannot afford more than two (Hokudai futōkō chōsa chīmu 2012, 80–86).

The observed free school confronted financial difficulties. It was planning to provide day care services for children with disabilities (*jidō dei sabisu*) with the goal of rehabilitating them. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) promotes the spread of day care services by increasing the respective facilities. Organizations that provide day care services can obtain grants-in-aid from the MHLW, prefectural governments, and municipal governments. The observed free school considered that grants-in-aid for day care services contributed to stabilizing its financial condition. Day care services share activities with the free school's services for non-attendant students. Therefore, the free school considered that it can utilize volunteers aiding non-attendant students to provide day care services as a method to control personnel expenses (Hokudai futōkō chōsa chīmu 2012, 89–90).

The national government and many prefectural or municipal governments do not possess grants-in-aid that are restricted to promoting services for non-attendant students at free schools. Obtaining grants-in-aid to provide services for disabled children not non-attendant students is one method to acquire funds and stabilize funding. However, free schools whose staff members, whether salaried or unsalaried, are limited in terms of numbers may confront difficulties in supplying services for disabled children other than non-attendant students. Moreover, it may appear somewhat strange that free schools receive grants-in-aid for providing services that do not aid non-attendant students in order to gain financial resources for the management of free schools. Free schools themselves may consider this method of obtaining funds as undesirable. How can free schools supply non-attendant students with services using insufficient funding?

Yōda et al. (2005) conducted interviews and surveys at four free schools in 2004. Among four, one free school opened a stall at a festival held in a community every year. Non-attendant students at another free school volunteered at a festival held by a nonprofit organization aiding people with disabilities (Yōda et al. 2005, 131). These activities appear to be opportunities

for non-attendant students to become acquainted with residents or workers from the community around the free schools, and to develop their socio-emotional behavior.

Non-attendant students' communication with various individuals in communities can be regarded as similar to students' companionship with other students and teachers at traditional schools. Even though a free school usually has an insufficient number of staff members and volunteers, residents in the community where the free school is located can play roles in developing non-attendant students' social and emotional intelligence. Residents cooperating with a free school can compensate for a limited number of staff members and volunteers.

The present study investigates how a particular free school obtained cooperation from residents in the community. The methods employed for this study were social anthropological: interviews and examination of documents and websites. Interviewees were staff members of a free school. Semi-structured interviews with the staff members at the free school were conducted from 6:00 pm to 8:30 pm on January 30 in 2018, and from 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm on April 24 in 2018.

Before the interviews, the researcher explained to the interviewees the purpose of the research. Further, he explained orally and in writing that the interviewees: a) can refuse to answer any questions, b) will not have any consequences if they refuse to answer questions, and c) can stop cooperating in the research whenever they desire to do so. Moreover, they were reassured that their real names will not appear in the research paper. The researcher promised not to act against the free school's interests if the free school refuses cooperation in the research. The website of the free school was accessed on May 23 2018 to finally ascertain activities of its students.

III. Free School A

One free school was selected as the subject of the research. We will refer to it with its pseudonym, Free School A. Free School A is located near the central railway station in a city whose population is more than one million as of the end of December 2017. It is situated in a central area with big hotels and apartment buildings.

Free School A's principal source of income is monthly tuition fees paid by non-attendant students' families. The monthly tuition fee is ¥33,000 if a student attends the free school on three or four days per week. If a student goes to the free school on fewer than three days per week, the fee is lower (the school representative was interviewed on January 30, 2018). The MEXT (2015g) conducted a survey of private organizations and facilities that non-attendant students attended in March, 2015. The questionnaire sent to 474 private organizations and facilities for non-attendant students included a question about the monthly tuition fee. The average monthly tuition fee among 262 organizations and facilities that responded to the question is about ¥33,000 (MEXT 2015g, 1 and 14). This amount equals the monthly tuition fee for attending Free School A three or four days a week.

Several municipal and prefectural governments in Japan are aligned with free schools located within their municipal or prefectural areas in implementing programs that aid non-attendant students (MEXT 2015e; 2015f). Under these programs, free schools provide services for non-attendant students, and receive trust money from municipal and prefectural governments for these services. Free School A is not entrusted with programs for which the city government or the prefectural government is responsible, thus it does not receive any such funds. Further, the free school does not employ promotional subsidies, which a municipal or prefectural government offers to private organizations providing public services in various sectors.

Free School A is not a corporation engaging in specified non-profit activities (*tokutei hieiri katsudō hōjin* or *NPO hōjin*) under the Act on Promotion of Specified Non-profit Activities (*Tokutei hieiri katsudō sokushin hō*). Public service organizations that receive authorizations from prefectural governors or city mayors can become corporations engaging in specified non-profit activities. If these corporations satisfy a number of conditions concerning their activities, management, and accounting, they can become confirmed corporations engaging in specific non-profit activities (*nintei tokutei hieiri katsudō hōjin* or *nintei NPO hōjin*). Confirmed corporations can more easily collect donations than other public service organizations because individuals who make donations to them can enjoy tax breaks. Free School A is not such a confirmed corporation, thus it is confronted with more difficulties in

obtaining donations than free schools certified as confirmed corporations.

Two staff members work for Free School A. One of them is the representative of the free school. There are no salaried or unsalaried staff members except for them.

Free School A may be characterized by having limited funds for management and a few staff members. The amount of the tuition fee paid to Free School A is average. Further, the free school's financial resources do not include trust money and subsidies from the municipal and prefectural governments. Moreover, Free School A tends to receive fewer donations as it is not a confirmed corporation, as we discussed above. In sum, it faces problems of insufficient financial and human resources. These circumstances require Free School A to devise methods in order to provide students with useful services.

IV. Cooperation with the Community

What method should Free School A employ in order to provide students with effective services under the constraints of limited financial and human resources? The semi-structured interviews with two staff members of the free school on January 30 2018 revealed that cooperation from the community in which Free School A is located is the method for enabling it to effectively serve non-attendant students despite the limited financial and human resources. In the interviews, the staff members expressed their gratitude to the neighborhood association (*chōnaikai*) and the owners of a beauty salon and a tea store in their community for assisting the free school.

Free schools located in depopulated areas appear to enjoy cooperation from accommodating residents in communities (*Asahi shimbun* July 3, 2002; *Shizuoka shimbun* April 24, 2017; *Yomiuri shimbun* March 1, 2014). A plausible reason for receiving assistance from obliging residents in depopulated areas is that residents in these areas conventionally help each other. Further, residents feel delighted when the population increases and depopulated communities are invigorated. Despite being located at the center of a big city, Free School A receives amicable cooperation from the community.

Blogs and a pamphlet of Free School A reveal how the community assists the free school. Detailed information on cooperation from the

neighborhood was obtained in semi-structured interviews with the two staff members on April 24, 2018. Based on information obtained in the blogs, the pamphlet, and the interviews, I present the various ways in which Free School A was assisted by the community.

Summer Festival

The neighborhood association of the community in which Free School A is located holds a festival every year in August. A member of the neighborhood association recommended that Free School A open a stall of grilled chicken on skewers (*yakitori*) at the festival, and helped by lending grilling equipment. Students at the free school accepted their roles in serving customers and assisting in grilling the food. Further, the students enjoyed games and had fun at the festival. The association's recommendation for Free School A can be interpreted as an offer of opportunities for the students to enjoy the festival and meet the community residents.

Inoko Festival

Inoko is a day in the lunar calendar. On *Inoko*, festivals are traditionally held to express residents' gratitude for the harvest. The neighborhood association holds an *Inoko* Festival every autumn. A member of the association also invited students at Free School A to help with another food stand at *Inoko* Festival. The students served customers and assisted in preparing food. The association encouraged students to also participate in rice cake making (*mochitsuki*) and scattering (*mochimaki*) events at the festivals. These invitations can be construed as the association's friendly and helpful attitude toward the students.

Bon Festival Dance

Bon Festival is a Buddhist service at which people pray for the repose of their ancestors' souls in the summer. *Bon* Festival dances are performed in various communities and are dedicated to residents' ancestors. A member of the neighborhood association invited Free School A to assist members of the association in making flavored shaved ice (*kakigōri*) and serving it to visitors at the *Bon* Festival dances. Members of the association provided students

at Free School A with opportunities to play the Japanese drums for the dances. Playing the drums at the *Bon* Festival dances is not common for people who are not trained players. Thus, giving an opportunity to the students to play the drums can be interpreted as an intention to provide the students with a special experience.

Athletic Meet

The community in which Free School A is located participates in athletic meets in which several communities vie with each other. The neighborhood association encouraged students to become members of its team, regardless of whether the students resided in the community or not. The students not only participated in contests but also prepared for the athletic meets, had lunch with community residents, conversed with them, and played with the children. The association's invitation to participate in the athletic meets may be construed as their desire that the students enjoy the contests and the conversation with the community residents.

Beauty Salon and Tea Store

A beauty salon and a tea store are located next to Free School A. The owner of the beauty salon often visits the free school and enjoys conversing with the students, and vice versa.

After a conversation between the salon owner and a customer, an opportunity emerged for students to help with the preparation and setup of a festival that a nursing home for the elderly was planning to hold. The nursing home for which she works required several persons to aid in preparing for and implementing the festival. The owner soon went to Free School A and asked students to assist workers at the nursing home in preparing for and implementing the festival. Free School A opened a stall for a game of scooping goldfish (*kingyo sukui*). Students aided the elderly to scoop up goldfish but they also enjoyed eating watermelons and playing card games with them in the nursing home. This exemplifies how cooperation from the owner of a beauty salon occurred connecting students of Free School A with residents in the community.

The proprietor of a tea store invited students to a lecture on tea. The

lecture was scheduled to be given to community residents at a community center. This was an opportunity for students to meet residents in the community.

Other Residents in the Community

Self-employed individuals in the community invited students to their workplaces and showed them what type of occupation they have. The self-employed individuals also introduced the students to other independent entrepreneurs. This type of cooperation provides the students with significant opportunities to learn about various occupations, and reflect on their future.

Parents of school-aged children introduced their children to the students at the free school and encouraged them to play together by offering them opportunities to make new friends.

What is the effect that assistance from the neighborhood has on students at Free School A? Information obtained in the semi-structured interviews with the staff members at the free school on January 30 and April 24 2018 indicated that it may foster students' willingness to trust other individuals.

The representative of the free school argued that his students are convinced of what staff members tell them if community residents tell them the same thing. Even though students do not sometimes appear persuaded of the advice coming from the staff members, a suggestion provided by the residents of the community can be instilled into them. One of the reasons for this attitude may be that advice coming from many individuals is more convincing than a suggestion from one individual or two. Another plausible reason is that students can trust community residents whom they are thankful to.

Cooperation from community residents appears to influence students at the free school in that they notice the significance of various individuals' helpful attitude. Residents who are not family members or teachers of the students willingly provide assistance to them and are concerned themselves with the students' activities. The students at the free school have suffered unpleasant experiences at elementary or lower secondary schools, and they

lack self-confidence. Residents in the community are accommodating their needs, so that the students can imagine that there are many benevolent people out there, and that when they undergo hardships, some of them are very likely to aid them. The students can gradually start thinking positively by enjoying assistance from residents.

Community residents provide students at Free School A with opportunities to conduct activities in the community. The students may trust benevolent residents and listen to their advice. Community residents provide them with advice to which the students attach importance, in combination with staff members' advice. In this respect, the residents play partly the roles of teachers and counselors at schools. The free school does not hire members of the community as teachers or counselors, thus the residents who assist the free school are not a burden to the school budget.

V. Reasons for Cooperation with the Community

A free school located in Ōta Ward, Tōkyō Metropolis, opens a stall at a festival held in its community (Kakino and Hatsumi 2007, 34 and 39). This is an example of cooperation that a free school receives from its community in an urban area. There are instances in which free schools in populated areas can enjoy cooperation from their communities. However, in general, residents in urban areas do not expect assistance from their neighbors without compensation. One plausible reason why certain free schools in populated areas obtain cooperation from their communities may be due to the particular characteristics of free schools and their communities.

Why does Free School A enjoy cooperation from its community? Remarks by its staff members in the semi-structured interviews held on April 24 2018 give us clues to answer this question.

First, the staff members pointed out that members of the neighborhood association are benevolent, as people who function as members of neighborhood associations may feel close to their community and have the desire to contribute to it. Free School A aids children who worry about their lives in traditional schools. Members of the neighborhood association share with Free School A the intent to assist people. The association members' involvement in aiding students at the free school may be explained by their

helpful attitude towards people in general. This consideration leads to the suggestion that free schools tend to obtain cooperation from residents whose communities hold active neighborhood associations.

Second, the staff members at Free School A explained that central members of the neighborhood association are elderly and individuals in the generation of the staff members' parents. In general, people who have raised children may be interested in children's development. For the elderly association members who have raised their children, students at Free School A may be perceived as their grandchildren. The association members can have a very positive attitude towards aiding the students because they may have an emotional concern about the students' development. This suggests that a community having many elderly residents is likely to accommodate to the needs a free school.

Further, the representative of Free School A commented that he is a disaster prevention officer (*bōsaishi*) serving his community. Disaster prevention officers learn methods for saving the lives of people in disasters and for minimizing the damages caused by them. They also instruct community residents in the methods. The representative of Free School A assists community residents with damage prevention activities, and conversely, residents in the community are willing to aid his free school. This mutual aid between the free school and the community residents connects both sides. The relationship between the free school and the community suggests that free schools holding links with residents in their communities are inclined to enjoy cooperation from the residents.

Lastly, remarks by the staff members indicated that they welcome assistance from various individuals without excluding outside influence on the school. Free School A appears to find the interaction between its students and various individuals desirable in order to cultivate its students' social and emotional skills. Free School A does not rebuff community residents' offers to aid its students, and does not require the residents to exactly follow the free school's rules. This flexibility appears to facilitate cooperation from the community. This suggests that a correlation between a free school's policy and obtained cooperation from its neighborhood may be plausible. There are large-scale free schools that have original and unique educational

methods (Wang 2007, 194–196 and 198–200). Residents who do not possess expertise in pedagogy or psychology, or experience in education may face difficulties in aiding students at these free schools.

As suggested above, the interviews with the staff members at Free School A give some clues as to the reasons that make the community provide the school with assistance. Although the community of Free School A is located in an urban area, it sustains a neighborhood association. The association aids not only residents within the community but also students at Free School A. Central members of the neighborhood association are elderly, and may be interested in the development of children for reasons having to do with their experience in raising children. The members may display an emotional anticipation about the students' development. Further, the representative of the free school is a disaster prevention officer serving the community. He contributes to his community and establishes links with residents in the community through disaster prevention activities. His network in the community promotes neighborhood's aid for his free school. Moreover, Free School A does not pose obstacles that decrease residents' motivation to help the school. Free School A welcomes aid from the neighborhood. These conditions enable Free School A to enjoy community-based assistance.

VI. Conclusion

The present study investigated what method Free School A employs in order to be able to cope with a small budget. Although the free school is located in a central area of a big city, the community has assisted the free school.

Community residents offer students at Free School A opportunities to participate in activities in the community. Residents' advice is convincing for students because they recognize the residents' helpful intent. In this regard, community residents can partly act as teachers and counselors at traditional schools. The free school does not pay residents salaries, and this is crucial for managing a free school with a small budget.

The reasons for receiving aid from the community have to do with the community itself and the free school. One reason is the presence of a neighborhood association even in an urban area. The neighborhood association

aids not only residents in the community but also students attending the free school. As central members of the neighborhood association are elderly who have raised children, they have an emotional interest in the students' development. Moreover, the representative of Free School A is a disaster prevention officer acting in the community. His established links with the community function as channels of assistance through the residents for the free school. Free School A welcomes aid from the community, while its policy of flexibility alleviates the difficulties with which residents may be confronted in aiding students at the free school.

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