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A Research Design for Examining What Induces Community Residents' Aid for Free Schools in Japan

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Abstract

This paper attempts to present a research design that can identify what motivates community residents to aid to free schools in Japan. Free schools, also known as alternative schools in Japan, differ from conventional schools in that they do not receive financial assistance from national, prefectural, and municipal governments. The financial conditions at many free schools are restricted and thus they must strive to devise methods to effectively manage the insufficient funding they receive and find supplemental resources for education, such as enlisting support from residents in the communities in which these schools are located. How can free schools obtain aid from community residents? What conditions foster community residents' intentions to aid free schools? This paper designs a research project that seeks answers to these questions.

I. Introduction

Free schools (*furi sukūru*), also known as alternative schools in Japan, are facilities used by non-attendant (*futōkō*) students, who are defined as those absent from their elementary schools (*shōgakkō*) or lower secondary schools (*chūgakkō*) for thirty or more days in one academic year for reasons unrelated to their health or their families' financial conditions. Reasons for non-attendance are diverse and include bad relationships with friends, poor academic performance, and family circumstances (MEXT 2018, 62 and 75).

The Act on Assurance of Educational Opportunities (*Kyōiku kikai kakuho hō*) was established in 2016 and stipulates that non-attendant students should be provided necessary aid as delivered through a combination of national, prefectural, and municipal governments, along with private organizations. Free schools are included in the private organizations that provide

non-attendant students with opportunities to study. Establishment of the Act may anticipate that free schools will undertake more important roles to aid non-attendant students.

This paper seeks to devise a research design to contribute to evolving studies on free schools. The following sections address what a study on free schools should identify, where research should be performed and how it should be conducted, and how to ascertain that research results can be generalized.

II. What Is Identified

Free schools possess several features, one of which that their curricula do not comply with educational criteria established by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). The MEXT does not regard free schools as among conventional schools stipulated by School Education Act (*Gakkō kyōiku hō*). Therefore, national, prefectural, and municipal governments are not required to award free schools with grants-in-aid provided for conventional school management. This absence of public financial aid has a strong bearing on free schools' problems with insufficient finances.

One method to offer students at free schools effective services using scant funds is to enlist support from various organizations and people. Funabashi (2012) conducted a survey of free schools in Hokkaidō, one of the findings from which was that these schools tend to seek aid from other facilities and institutions. Free schools' desires toward universities are enumerated in several categories (Funabashi 2012, 69 and 76–78). It is understandable that free schools would seek aid as many suffer from insufficient financial resources, which inhibit employment of salaried experts in medicine, welfare services, job placement guidance, and counseling for future education. Help from facilities and institutions that employ these specialists is beneficial for free schools.

As the survey results show, universities are among the institutions that are sought to help with free schools. University students can volunteer at these schools in a mentoring-type role to assist non-attendant students with studies. Interaction with university students may cultivate non-attendant students'

social skills and intellectual interests, thus universities' assistance can be of benefit to free school students.

However, university students are in classes during the weekday. Free schools cannot uniformly obtain sufficient university student volunteers on weekdays and weekends. Moreover, all the free schools are not necessarily located near universities, thus face difficulties in obtaining university student volunteers. In addition to universities, help from other facilities and institutions might be infrequent if they are not in close proximity to the schools.

While assistance from facilities and institutions employing specialists is favorable for free schools, there are advantages to cooperating with community residents. Many students attending these schools had harsh experiences at their conventional schools. Experts in medicine or welfare can use their specialized knowledge to help these students heal. Children who have experienced hardship benefit from contact with benevolent people whose affection can stimulate children's mental development. Studies on Australian alternative schools, which are almost synonymous with Japanese free schools, note the affection that staff members show their students. These staff members perceive that their affection positively influences their students and the students appreciate the staff members' tenderness and devotion (Mills, McGregor et al. 2016, 105; Te Riele et al. 2017, 57, 63, and 68). Benevolence along with knowledge and skills is required to nurture children at free schools. Facilities and institutions that employ experts are not located everywhere. There are free schools whose communities do not have organizations with specialists. However, the communities have residents who could possibly provide aid.

Communities have a diverse mix of people: owners of privately-run shops, restaurants, factories, and barbershops, housewives or househusbands, retirees, and more. Community residents can serve as teachers and friends to students at free schools. Owners of shops, restaurants, and factories can provide these students with opportunities to observe their workplaces and gain experience.

Residents live in communities in which free schools are located and thus can be viable resources.

III. Where Research Is Performed

In general, the environment in rural areas is more conducive to mutual aid among residents than urban areas. Therefore, it stands to reason that free schools in rural areas can enjoy more aid from community residents than equivalent schools in urban areas. Several reports illustrate that residents in rural communities intend to assist free schools (*Asahi shimbun* 2002; *Shizuoka shimbun* 2017; *Yomiuri shimbun* 2014).

However, residents in an urban community cooperate with a free school by providing students with opportunities to interact with adults and children residing in the community and learn about society (Hiromoto 2018, 8–10). While a degree of urbanism in a community might, to some extent, influence community residents' aid to a free school, other factors can determine community residents' cooperation.

A degree of urbanism cannot be regarded as a principal determinant of non-attendance. A simple linear regression analysis was conducted using the incidence rate of non-attendant students at elementary schools and lower secondary schools in Academic Year 2016 as the dependent variable and the population density in the same academic year as the independent variable. The unit of analysis was prefecture. As Table 1 displays, the regression equation was not significant at the 5% level. This result indicates that non-attendance tends to occur in both of urban and rural areas. Thus, both areas require community residents' aid for free schools that non-attendant students utilize.

While assistance from community residents for free schools is desired in both urban and rural areas, these districts hold disparate features in terms of mutual aid among residents. Research on aid from community residents conducted in only one area cannot obtain generalized results, instead reflecting circumstances specific to only urban districts or only rural districts. Therefore, research should be conducted in both areas. How can free schools obtain aid from community residents regardless of location? A study that seeks to uncover an answer to this question may be useful for various free schools.

Table 1. Simple Linear Regression Analysis

Data		
Dependent Variable	percentage of non-attendant students in Academic Year 2016	
	Mean	1.30
	Standard Deviation	0.19
	Source	Mombu kagaku shō (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology). 2018. "Heisei 28 nendo 'Jidō seito no mondai kōdō, futōkō tō seito shidō jō no sho kadai ni kansuru chōsa' (kakutei chi) ni tsuite." [文部科学省「平成28年度『児童生徒の問題行動・不登校等生徒指導上の諸課題に関する調査』(確定値)について]]
Independent Variable	population density (per square kilometer)	
	Mean	658.9
	Standard Deviation	1184.0
	population as of January 1, 2017	
	Source	Kokudo chiri kyōkai (Japan Geographic Data Center). 2017. <i>Jūmin kihon daichō jinkō yōran I</i> . [国土地理協会『住民基本台帳人口要覧 I』]
	area (square kilometer) as of October 1, 2016	
Source	Kokudo kōtsū shō (The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism). 2017. <i>Zenkoku todōfuken shikuchōson betsu menseki shirabe</i> . [国土交通省『全国都道府県市区町村別面積調』]	
Results		
Simple Linear Regression Model		
Adjusted R-Square		.035
Significance Probability for ANOVA		.108
Coefficient of Simple Linear Regression Equation		
(Constant)		
Unstandardized Coefficient	B	1.277
	Std. Error	.031
t-value		41.415
Significance Probability		.000
Population Density		
Unstandardized Coefficient	B	.000
	Std. Error	.000
Standardized Coefficient	Beta	.238
t-value		1.641
Significance Probability		.108

IV. How Research Is Conducted

There are several previous studies that examine free schools and their methodologies can be sorted into two groups. One method is to minutely investigate one free school using observations and interviews, which are ideal for gathering detailed information on a particular school. Through participatory observations, Sagawa (2010) ascertained how staff members incorporated the ethos of receptivity and empathy for non-attendant students into actual aid for children at a free school. The study identified that translating this ethos into actual assistance was a demanding task, as staff members devised methods to flexibly interpret the ethical principles and to attempt to overcome actual individual difficulties that occur in aiding children (Sagawa 2010, 48–49, 52, and 62).

Takenaka (2016) conducted participatory observations at a free school, and semi-structured interviews with the students' parents. Publications, websites, and printed materials were also used to obtain information on this school. Acquired information revealed that the free school functioned as a site for students' parents to manage their emotions and promoted parents' receptivity and empathy for their children (Takenaka 2016, 92 and 97).

Hokudai futōkō chōsa chīmu (*Non-attendance Research Team at Hokkaidō University*) (2012) examined one free school using information obtained through interviews with staff members, websites, and printed materials from the school. Due to restricted finances, the school had only employed two full-time salaried staff members since its foundation and volunteers were required to assist them. This free school attempted to stabilize its financial condition by expanding its functions to provision of services for disabled children and receive grants-in-aid for the new services from the local government (Hokudai futōkō chōsa chīmu 2012, 80, 82–83, and 89–90).

Another type of study on free schools employs results from surveys of several schools. Katō (2018) used results from a 2015 survey conducted by the MEXT for which questionnaires were sent to private groups and facilities that serve non-attendant students. Among 318 groups and facilities that responded to the questionnaire, 73.6% were free schools (MEXT 2015, 1 and 6). Katō noted that approximately 70% of these groups and facilities were

428 (126)

established in and after 2000, over 80% were attended by 20 or fewer children, with approximately 40% attended by one to five children. Nearly 70% of the staff members worked fewer than five days per week. These survey results indicate that many free schools are managed on a small scale (Katō 2018, 177–78 and 182).

Kogirima (2016) conducted a survey of facilities whose information is listed in a guidebook on free schools located in Japan, of which 129 responded to the questionnaire. More than 90% of responding facilities considered discussions between children and staff members to be a significant activity, while more than 80% replied that individual tuition, small-class education, and children's self-determination in their projects were significant activities. These results imply that the facilities employ various educational methods and activities to instill social skills and self-respect in children (Kogirima 2016, 47, 49–50, and 55).

Funabashi (2012) analyzed results of a survey of thirteen free schools recognized by the education board of Hokkaidō Government, one of the prefectural governments in Japan. The responses to the questionnaire indicated a tendency in free schools to desire assistance from other facilities and institutions such as welfare facilities, medical institutions, companies, and universities (Funabashi 2012, 69 and 76–78).

As noted above, there are advantages to these two respective methodologies. Research on an individual free school using observations and interviews can obtain minute information such as how staff members address each situation, how parents of children attending the school feel at a certain moment, and how the school intends to stabilize its financial condition. A questionnaire method is not expected to obtain detailed responses. However, questionnaire-based survey results from many free schools can be regarded as reliable because of their broad representation versus a single case. Data acquired from a number of free schools can clarify their tendencies to have small numbers of students and full-time staff members, to provide their students with opportunities to gain social skills and self-respect, and to desire assistance from other facilities and institutions. Information on only one free school cannot be generally interpreted as applicable to other schools.

The virtues of these two methodologies can be integrated into one methodology. Observations and interviews at approximately ten free schools can obtain detailed information and examination results generalized to a certain extent. In Australia, studies on alternative schools employed observations and interviews with students and staff members at two to four alternative schools (Lewthwaite et al. 2017, 391; Mills and McGregor 2016, 202; Mills, McGregor et al. 2016, 103; Plows, Bottrell, and Te Riele 2017, 31; Te Riele et al. 2017, 60–61). These studies' methodologies are effective for attaining minute clarification and generalization of research results to some extent. However, the results from a study that examines approximately ten alternative schools could have a higher level of generalization.

A methodology that may advance a study on free schools is described below. Research would be conducted on approximately ten free schools in urban and rural areas in order to seek factors that determine community residents' aid to free schools regardless of urbanism and ruralism. Interviews would be conducted with both staff members and community residents. Questions to be asked of staff members are: (1) What aid does this school receive from community residents? and (2) why do staff members at this school think the community residents attempt to or do not attempt to cooperate with their free school? Community residents would be asked why they do or do not aid their area's free schools. A researcher would conduct observations at free schools to learn what types of assistance community residents provide, as aid provided at one school might not be performed at another. During interviews, a researcher would ask staff members why they think their free school receives assistance from community residents that other schools do not obtain.

V. How to Ascertain that Research Results Can Be Generalized

Observations and interviews at approximately ten free schools in urban and rural areas may identify these schools' strategies to obtain aid from community residents. Strategies that one free school might employ might not be available at other schools. After establishing what method each free school employs, an assessment should be administered to determine if these methods can be applied to other schools.

Presentations would be conducted to report the research results to all free schools studied. Staff members would be interviewed and asked for their opinions on whether they can use other free schools' methods to obtain aid from community residents and whether these methods would be effective for their schools. These interviews will identify which methods can be generally regarded as effectual in urban and rural areas and what conditions are required to induce community residents' aid to free schools.

VI. Conclusion

This study attempted to present a research design that further examines free schools, with a focus on how these schools obtain aid from community residents. Previous studies on free schools can be sorted into two groups: studies on one free school using observation and interviews, and studies on many free schools using questionnaires. Advantages of these two types of studies are integrated into a methodology that aims to examine approximately ten free schools using observations and interviews to obtain detailed information on multiple schools so that the findings can be generalized to a certain extent. After the methods each free school uses are determined, a presentation on all of the methods found will be delivered to staff members at each free school. In interviews, the staff members would be asked for their opinions on whether they can use other free schools' strategies and whether they would be effective at their schools. This process advances the degree of generalization of results from research based on observations and interviews at the free schools.

Accumulating information on free schools should be fostered to understand free schools, which are undertaking more essential roles in providing non-attendant students with opportunities to study and to interact with diverse groups of people. Observations and interviews at many free schools are instrumental in collecting data for academic studies and improving school operations. The Act on Assurance of Educational Opportunities of 2016 required enhancement of free schools' functions. Practical results of research on free schools are desired to improve their services and operations.

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