

Virtues of a Free School Administered by a Social Welfare Corporation

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Abstract

This study aims to clarify the features of a free school managed by a social welfare corporation that also operates a day nursery. The required data were obtained through semi-structured interviews of a staff member of a free school and parents whose children attended the free school, observations at the free school and a day nursery, documents regarding the free school, and websites of the social welfare corporation. Students at the free school were permitted to enter the premises of the day nursery. This study found that the students appease their unpleasant feelings by walking alone in the day nursery's premises, by witnessing childcare workers benevolently attending to preschool children at the day nursery, and by learning how to behave and manage other individuals. Thus, in the future, the students can also consider becoming childcare workers.

I. Introduction

In 2016, the Act on Assurance of Educational Opportunities (*Kyōiku kikai kakuho hō*) was enacted in Japan to provide non-attendant (*futōkō*) children with opportunities to receive education. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) defines a non-attendant child as a student absent from their elementary school (*shōgakkō*) or lower secondary school (*chūgakkō*) for 30 days or more in a particular academic year for reasons unrelated to issues regarding their health or family's finances.

The Act on Assurance of Educational Opportunities stipulates a close cooperation among the national government, local governments, and private organizations in providing non-attendant children with opportunities to receive education. Free schools (*furī sukūru*) are not conventional schools that have been prescribed by the Act on School Education (*Gakkō kyōiku hō*), but they are private organizations providing education that is not prescribed

by the Act. Free schools, as alternative schools, play a major role in rendering care to non-attendant children; their roles have been significantly expanding since the enactment of the 2016 Act.

The Act on Assurance of Educational Opportunities does not clarify requisites for a free school. Therefore, various private organizations regard themselves as free schools. MEXT (2015) revealed the percentage of each type of organization that non-attendant children attended in March 2015. Their results showed that the surveyed organizations encompassed corporations engaging in specific nonprofit activities (*tokutei hieiri katsudō hōjin* or *NPO hōjin*), educational corporations (*gakkō hōjin*), incorporated associations or incorporated foundations (*kōeki/ippān shadan hōjin* or *kōeki/ippān zaidan hōjin*), for-profit corporations (*eiri hōjin*), other corporations including social welfare corporations (*shakai fukushi hōjin*), voluntary organizations without corporate status, and organizations managed by a single private individual. Among these categories, the other corporations including social welfare corporations accounted for 3.1% (MEXT 2015, 1 and 4).

A limited number of free schools is administered by social welfare corporations. If the strong aspects of social welfare corporations can contribute toward evolving the operations of free schools, many other social welfare corporations should consider establishing free schools. This study reveals the merits of a social welfare corporation managing a free school.

II. Methodology

Studies on free schools have been conscious of free school categories. Kajiwara and Kumai (2018) noted two types of free schools, namely, free schools where non-attendant children spend their daytime (Type 1 schools) and free schools where students are educated through methods that are not employed by conventional schools (Type 2 schools). Thus, Type 1 schools are free schools for non-attendant children, and Type 2 schools are free schools practicing Waldorf (or Steiner) education. Kajiwara and Kumai were mindful of this distinction and observed a Type 2 school (Kajiwara and Kumai 2018, 21–22).

Itō and Nishizawa (2016) investigated Type 2 rather than Type 1 schools. While Type 1 schools tended to be unwillingly attended by non-attendant

children, Type 2 schools were intentionally chosen over conventional schools by willing children (Itō and Nishizawa 2016, 426). Children's reasons for attending the two types of schools differ.

Some studies have indicated a merger of these two types of free schools. For instance, Fujita (2002) asserted three categories of free schools: Type 1, Type 2, and extracurricular schools (Type 3 schools), such as cram schools (*juku*) and preparatory schools (*yobikō*), which provide supplementary education to boost students' academic performance at conventional schools or to prepare them for entrance examinations. Although these three types of free schools exist, Fujita indicated that many Type 1 schools could be regarded as Type 2 schools, as they practice unique education techniques (Fujita 2002, 103–104).

Takayama (2012) regarded Type 2 schools as a place that non-attendant children spend their daytime. All the free schools fall in the Type 1 schools category. Each type of free school can function as a place that befits non-attendant children in a certain mental state (Takayama 2012, 90–91).

While one significant investigation on free schools is examination of differences and similarities between Type 1 and Type 2 schools, an investigation of distinctions among Type 1 schools can be also a notable discussion. Several subcategories can be ascertained among Type 1 schools. Type 1 schools perform significant functions, for example, as alleviators of the emotions of children who cannot attend conventional schools. Thus, children experiencing harsh situation can be relieved by attending Type 1 schools. However, the literature on free schools has seldom investigated the subcategories of Type 1 schools.

This study reveals the features of a Type 1 school. Although free schools administered by social welfare corporations are scarce, they may hold strengths that other types of free schools do not. This study seeks prospects of progress that can be achieved by free schools.

The free school investigated in this study is located in a city whose population was approximately 230,000 by the end of February 2019. The city is the capital of a prefecture. The distance between the free school and the central railway station of the city is approximately 6.8 km. The district containing the free school is a suburban area; the free school is situated in a

residential area and amidst an abundantly natural environment and is adjacent to a day nursery. The social welfare corporation started operating the day nursery in 2005 and the free school, selected for this study, in 2016.

To obtain data for examining the free school administered by the social welfare corporation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the manager of the free school and parents of students at the free school and observations at the free school and the day nursery. The manager, the only regular and full-time staff member, and volunteers take care of students at the free school. The manager has been working at the free school since it was established and thus can understand the students better. The students' presents were also interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from 10 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. (noon) on February 21, 2019. The observations at the free school and day nursery were conducted from 12:00 to 1 p.m. on the same day. The manager was informed that the interviews and observations would be conducted adhering to the human rights of the students and their parents. Documents regarding the free school and websites of the social welfare corporation were reviewed. The names of the free school, manager, students, and students' parents are not disclosed in this study.

III. Results

In the interviews, the students' parents reported positive changes in children's behavioral patterns and mentality after the children started attending the free school. The manager expounded on the methods used by the students to appease their anger or displeasure. When the students felt unpleasant and could not placate themselves, they would inform the manager that they were leaving the free school and taking a walk within the premises of the day nursery adjoining the free school. The free school staff members, students, and their parents were permitted to enter the day nursery premises.

The size of the day nursery is 18,486.0 m² (a website of the social welfare corporation). In August 2008, a survey was conducted among day nurseries whose establishment the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare or Tokyo Metropolitan Government authorized. The average size of the surveyed

day nurseries was 2,388.7 m² (Zenkoku shakai fukushi kyōgikai 2009, 33–34 and 39). The size of the day nursery adjacent to the investigated free school is 7.7 times the average size of a day nursery site and comprises wooden playground equipment, footpaths, various types of trees, ponds, cultivated fields, paddies, ponies, rabbits, goats, a pig, turkeys, peafowls, and a tortoise (observation and the social welfare corporation's website). Notably, when the students walked on the footpaths and fields by the trees and ponds, or saw and touched the animals, they experienced a sense of calm.

The manager of the free school also illustrated other effects of the day nursery on the students. When the students walked in the premises of the day nursery, they witnessed childcare workers (*hoikushi*) rendering care to young children. Thus, the students could observe how childcare workers managed younger children. The manager of the day nursery provided the students with opportunities to render care to young children at the day nursery. By attending to the young children, the students were able to learn how they should conduct themselves. Thus, the students as caregivers deliberated on what and how they should do while rendering care to younger children. This consideration results in opportunities for the students to reflect on their behavior.

The manager of the free school and a parent of a student at the school remarked on the student's desires to become a childcare worker in the future. When the student started attending the free school, he was a second grader at a conventional elementary school. Anxiety distressed him at the conventional school (according to a disclosed document from the free school). An aspiration to work at a day nursery occurred to him while he was on the site of the day nursery. The manager of the free school and the student's parent noticed that his anxiety had decreased and his desire to become a childcare worker increased. Other students' parents also recognized that his mental state was improving.

IV. Discussion

A free school administered by a social welfare corporation holds virtues. It can employ the social welfare corporation's facilities, such as a day nursery, as places where free school students can relax, observe the benign conduct

of caregivers, learn appropriate behaviors, and obtain a desire for the future.

The investigated free school was administered by a social welfare corporation that also ran a day nursery and enjoyed advantages such as contiguity to the day nursery and the extraordinarily large site of the day nursery. These advantages are unique features that most free schools administered by social welfare corporations do not have. However, many free schools run by social welfare corporations may use welfare facilities as places where free school students refresh themselves, note the benign conduct of caregivers, and learn self-control through observing and experiencing care at welfare facilities. Social welfare corporations administer welfare facilities for pre-school children and elderly or disabled individuals. By observing caregivers, students can envisage themselves aiding those individuals and may wish to become caregivers working at welfare facilities in the future.

Welfare facilities provide children with opportunities to objectively observe caregivers and individuals who require care. Children witness caregivers benevolently managing young children and elderly or disabled individuals at these facilities. Many free school students are presumed to have had unsettling experiences at their conventional schools before quitting them. Children feel a sense of calm after witnessing benign care when they envisage someone caring for individuals requiring aid like them. Children who have been treated in an unkind manner at their conventional schools perceived the kindness displayed at welfare facilities as a significant and heartening attribute. The observation at the facilities functions as an alleviator of students' unpleasant memories and as a provider of opportunities to learn how to deal with people. If free school students are offered opportunities to be employed as caregivers at welfare facilities, they will effectively reflect on their behaviors while dealing with other individuals.

MEXT (2015) revealed activities designed by organizations for non-attendant children. Exposure to societal experiences, including experiences in workplaces, is among the activities conducted by many organizations; 74.2% of the surveyed organizations provide non-attendant children with opportunities for societal experiences (MEXT 2015, 12). This survey result signifies that societal experiences are significant for non-attendant children. Free schools administered by social welfare corporations can effortlessly provide

students with such opportunities, thereby encouraging free school students' desire to work as caregivers at welfare facilities.

V. Conclusion

This study aimed to reveal the virtues of a free school operated by a social welfare corporation. Overall, four merits were identified after examining the data obtained through interviews, observations, documents, and web-sites.

The investigated free school is operated by a social welfare corporation that also administers a day nursery. The day nursery adjoined the free school and permitted free school students to enter the premises. The students could walk on the exceptionally large site of the day nursery, which is a unique feature of this day nursery. Moreover, the site contains multiple ponds and various trees and animals. While the uniqueness of the site should not be discounted, free school students could calm themselves by spending time alone outside their school premises. Facilities operated by social welfare corporations can be places where free schools students transform their feelings and gain calm.

Welfare facilities provide free school students with opportunities to witness caregivers benevolently caring for young children and elderly or disabled individuals at welfare facilities. Free school students can observe the benign conduct that they would desire from other individuals and learn that there benign individuals do exist.

Moreover, observing the caregivers benevolently dealing with other individuals provides an opportunity to the students to learn how to treat others with respect and behave well. The observation provides the students with the motivation to reflect on their conduct.

Free school students may have dreams for the future by observing workplaces and experiencing jobs at welfare facilities. The dreams allay their anxiety and become energy sources in overcoming difficulties they face.

Free schools administered by social welfare corporations enjoy advantages such as favorably influencing their students. Such free schools, however, are limited in number. Some obstacles may inhibit social welfare corporations from establishing free schools. A significant task would be to identify

factors that obstruct the establishment of free schools by social welfare corporations. This task could boost free schools administered by social welfare corporations and enhance functions of free schools.

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