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A Research Design on Student Volunteers at Free Schools in Japan

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Abstract

This paper aims to design research on aid for children at free schools in Japan. The enforcement of the Act to Ensure Opportunities for Education in 2016 has provided free schools with possibilities to play significant roles in assisting elementary-school or lower-secondary-school students who do not desire to attend their schools. Despite growing expectations for them, many free schools do not have sufficient money for procuring management and manpower for conducting education. University and junior college students' volunteer activities at free schools may be able to compensate for work of an insufficient number of salaried staff members. However, previous studies do not reveal what student volunteers can do for children at free schools or how student volunteers can contribute to aiding children at free schools. After discussing previous studies on measures for aiding nonattendant children in Japan and on alternative schools in Australia, this paper proposes a research design that may contribute to free schools employing student volunteers.

I. Introduction

In December 2016, the National Diet of Japan enacted the Act to Ensure Opportunities to Receive Education Substituted for Compulsory Education (the Act to Ensure Opportunities for Education, or *Kyōiku kikai kakuho hō*). The act aims at establishing educational environments for elementary-school students (first to sixth graders) and lower-secondary-school (*chūgakkō*) students (seventh to ninth graders) who do not desire to attend their schools. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) defines a nonattendant (*futōkō*) child or nonattendant student as an elementary-school or lower-secondary-school student who is absent from school for thirty days or more in a school year for reasons excepting his/her disease and family finances. The MEXT presumes that nonattendant

children's absence may be influenced by various factors, such as their mentalities, emotions, and society. Acute bullying inside and outside classrooms may represent a reason for nonattendance. The new act was established to assist nonattendant children in their studies.

Roles of free schools (*furī sukūru*) attracted attention during the process of the legislation to ensure opportunities for education. Free schools in Japan do not signify schools at which students receive education free of fees. Rather, the schools employ free curriculums unlike authorized schools that the Act of Education at Schools (*Gakkō kyōiku hō*) regulates. Free schools in Japan denote private facilities in which nonattendant children spend the daytime instead of going to their elementary or lower secondary schools. The functions of free schools are similar to ones of alternative schools in other countries. The MEXT has not regarded free schools as authorized schools, which are clarified under Article Two of the Act on Education at Schools. In principle, the MEXT has not provided free schools with capital aid, which formal schools can obtain from the MEXT.

Article Three of the Act to Ensure Opportunities for Education prescribes that measures to ensure opportunities for education should be conducted through close cooperation among the central government, local governments, private organizations attempting to ensure opportunities for education, and individuals involved in activities to ensure opportunities for education. Free schools are managed by private organizations or individuals. Hence, the act presumes that free schools cooperate with the central government and local governments. While the MEXT has not regarded a free school as a formal school, the new act requires free schools' contribution to aiding nonattendant students to study.

Nihon keizai shimbun (http://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLASDG05H81_V00C15A8CR8000/) reported on the number of private facilities attended by nonattendant students. Japan held 474 private facilities for nonattendant students as of March 2015. The MEXT sent all the facilities questionnaires. Among these, 318 facilities responded to a question that inquired to what types of organization the respondents belonged. The responses showed that 234 facilities (73.6 percent) were free schools. Another question was asked of each organization about the number of nonattendant children who

went to the facility. Replies from 317 facilities revealed that there were, altogether, 4,196 elementary-school and lower-secondary-school students who went to the facilities (MEXT 2015, 6 and 8). This result signifies that more than 4,196 nonattendant children went to 474 private facilities in March 2015.

It can be forecast that free schools will play more roles in assisting nonattendant children in the near future than before the enforcement of the Act to Ensure Opportunities for Education. However, many free schools are managed with insufficient finances and a limited number of salaried staff members. Therefore, free schools will require more volunteers in aiding nonattendant children in the immediate future. Students at universities and junior colleges may be prospects for volunteers at free schools. Over the decades, universities and junior colleges in Japan have evolved programs that dispatch their students as volunteers to communities. Under some of the programs, students at universities and junior colleges assist elementary-school or lower-secondary-school students in studying, and also play with them. Students studying psychology or pedagogy at universities or junior colleges especially tend to participate in volunteer activities with elementary-school and lower-secondary-school students.

If free schools require many student volunteers, it is desirable that students majoring in not only psychology or pedagogy but also other academic disciplines can volunteer at free schools. Students whose majors are psychology or pedagogy may look after nonattendant children using knowledge and skills in the field of psychology or pedagogy. How can students majoring in academic disciplines excluding psychology and pedagogy volunteer at free schools? This article attempts to design research that reveals how students not majoring in psychology or pedagogy at universities or junior colleges can effectively contribute to assisting nonattendant children at free schools as volunteers. There does not seem to be sufficient literature on this topic. Therefore, this article refers to the literature on student volunteers working in public facilities and a public program for nonattendant children. Because free schools appear to be able to implement more flexible measures than the public facilities or the public program, they may flexibly employ varied types of student volunteers and effectively assist

nonattendant children with student volunteers' contributions. After the examination of the literature on the public facilities and the public program in Japan, previous studies on alternative schools in Australia are analyzed. Previous studies on alternative schools in Australia tend to be focused on the affective domain rather than knowledge or skills that can be obtained through psychology or pedagogy. Therefore, the literature on alternative schools in Australia provides us with clues to effective volunteer activities conducted by university or junior college students who are not majoring in psychology or pedagogy.

II. Student Volunteers in Public Facilities and under a Public Program

Educational assistance centers (*kyōiku shien sentā*), which were termed classrooms coaching adaptation (*tekiō shidō kyōshitsu*) in the past, are public facilities to assist nonattendant children. The centers are established and managed by boards of education in prefectural and municipal governments. The MEXT recommends prefectural and municipal governments establish and improve educational assistance centers. Teachers in active service and former teachers at elementary or lower secondary schools work as staff members at the centers. The centers aid nonattendant children in studying and aim to return nonattendant children to elementary or lower secondary schools. Students at universities and junior colleges volunteer at educational assistance centers as tutors and playmates. There are several studies on students' volunteer work at educational assistance centers. Two of them are referred to in this section. The two previous studies identified desirable roles of student volunteers at educational assistance centers.

Nakano and Takagi (2009) interviewed staff members at educational assistance centers to reveal what kinds of relationships staff members desire student volunteers to hold with nonattendant children at the centers. Semi-constructed interviews were conducted with nine staff members. The responses from the interviewees were that they desired student volunteers to conduct themselves as individuals with personalities, instructors, older siblings, and playmates (Nakano and Takagi 2009, 74–76). Students majoring in psychology or pedagogy may obtain knowledge and skills to effectively

interact with nonattendant children through studying at universities or junior colleges. Hence, these students can be regarded as instructors at educational assistance centers. While students who are not majoring in psychology or pedagogy may confront difficulties in behaving as instructors, they can conduct themselves as individuals with personalities, older siblings, and playmates.

Hashizaki and Kosaka (2007) discussed the roles of student volunteers at educational assistance centers. Staff members at the centers were surveyed using questionnaires. The questionnaires included a question about roles that staff members desired student volunteers to play at educational assistance centers. The results of the surveys revealed that staff members desired student volunteers to play five roles: to cooperate with institutes and individuals outside educational assistance centers, to conduct themselves like older siblings of nonattendant children, to behave like friends of nonattendant children, to aid nonattendant children to study by taking on the role of tutors, and to cooperate with staff members and specialists (Hashizaki and Kosaka 2007, 20 and 22). As indicated above, students whose majors are not psychology or pedagogy can play roles as older siblings and friends of nonattendant children.

The research results of Nakano and Takagi (2009) and Hashizaki and Kosaka (2007) signify that students who do not study psychology or pedagogy can contribute to aiding nonattendant children. Students at universities or junior colleges can conduct themselves as older siblings or friends of nonattendant children. Most of students at universities and junior colleges are youths. They can comprehend the feelings of children more easily than can middle- or old-aged people. Students at universities and junior colleges suit volunteers who behave as older siblings or friends of nonattendant children.

The mental friend (*mentaru furendo*) program is a public program that provides nonattendant children with opportunities to interact with young individuals. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare promotes the program. Under the program, prefectural and city governments dispatch young individuals, including students at universities and junior colleges, to nonattendant children's homes or child consultation centers (*jidō sōdanjo*) of

prefectural and city governments; these youngsters take on the role of mental friends to the children. Mental friends spend time at homes of children or at child consultation centers in having chats with children, playing with children, and aiding children to study. A previous study discussed the roles of metal friends.

Ōhara and Nagai (2007) reported on how, as mental friends, students at a university and a junior college aided a nonattendant child. Ōhara and Nagai explained that the mental friends played the roles as older siblings and friends. However, these mental friends confronted difficulties in aiding the nonattendant child to study. Her mental friends had not accumulated considerable experiences in teaching a child (Ōhara and Nagai 2007, 2–3 and 5–6). Many students at universities and junior colleges appear not to have sufficient experiences and skills in teaching if they are majoring in academic disciplines excluding pedagogy.

Similarly to the previous studies on educational assistance centers, the study on the mental friend program also indicated that student volunteers could play roles in conducting themselves as older siblings and friends of nonattendant children.

III. Alternative Schools in Australia

Alternative schools play notable roles in several countries. Alternative schools in these countries and free schools in Japan share the intent to look after children who do not attend traditional schools. While there may be diversities of varying degrees between free schools in Japan and alternative schools in other countries, comparison between free schools and alternative schools is of use in examining free schools' operations and students' volunteer activities at free schools.

Among alternative school systems in several countries, Australia's system may hold clues beneficial to analyzing free schools in Japan. Australia has permitted non-conventional education systems because the country includes areas in which people sparsely reside. There is a milieu that situationally provides education for each child. Free schools in Japan pursue this setting for education. Moreover, previous studies on alternative schools in Australia displayed several significant points to be discussed. One of them

is the affective domain, which encompasses kindness, trust, sympathy, and solidarity.

Te Riele et al. (2017) highlighted the affective dimension's significance for alternative schools in Australia. They observed that alternative schools hold environments that produced mutually respectful relationships between students and the staff including youth workers. Interviewed teachers and youth workers sought to connect with and understand their students. The staff members regarded their students as fellow individuals and listened to the students. The affective relationships between students and the staff form the foundation of significant components of schooling. In view of workers at alternative schools, the affective relationships between students and the staff advance not only students' learning but also students' well-being such as alleviation of poverty and enhancement of safety at the schools (Te Riele et al. 2017, 57, 62–64, and 68).

Mills et al. (2016) directed their attention to emotions of young individuals attending alternative schools in Australia. Interviewed students realized that teachers and youth workers at their alternative schools devotedly cared for them. The affective factors, which include care, love, and solidarity, influence students at the alternative schools. Mills et al. revealed that the affective factors fostered students' learning at the alternative schools. Interviewed students at the alternative schools believed that teachers and youth workers at the schools looked after students in benign associations. Mills el al. contended that the affective domain was essential at alternative schools (Mills et al. 2016, 101 and 105–107).

These previous studies on alternative schools in Australia focused on the affective sphere. The studies revealed that staff members at the alternative schools endeavored to connect with and comprehend their students. Students appreciated the staff's caring for them. Both students and staff recognized that the staff's care for students promoted students' learning. It can be surmised that not only the investigated alternative schools but also other alternative schools in Australia emphasize the emotional relationships between students and the staff.

One reason for alternative schools' emphasis on the affective sphere of students exists in their recognition of successes. Plows, Bottrell, and Te

Riele (2017) revealed what the staff at alternative schools in Australia regarded as success. While the education policy of the state government presumes that alternative schools' successes lie in students' acquisition of certificates or educational credentials and students' return to mainstream schools, the staff considered them as a part of their successes. Interviews with the staff members at alternative schools disclosed that the sphere of successes for the staff was extensive. Staff members regarded as successes varied conducts of students such as attendance at the alternative schools, participation in learning activities, recognition of their abilities, skills, strengths, and talents, possession of aspirations and hopes for their future, and management of their anger. The staff appreciated incremental progress of students (Plows, Bottrell, and Te Riele 2017, 29–31, 33–34, and 36).

The emphasis on the affective domain and gradual progress of students corresponds with ethics of many free schools in Japan. Exploration of alternative schools in Australia may lead to findings practical for free schools in Japan. Moreover, examination into volunteers at alternative schools in Australia may provide us with clues for analysis of what student volunteers can conduct at free schools in Japan. While previous studies on alternative schools in Australia do not minutely clarify the roles of volunteers, detailed enumeration of volunteers' functions may contribute to examination of student volunteers' roles at free schools.

IV. Methodology of Ascertaining What Student Volunteers Can Conduct

As displayed above, the previous study revealed that staff members at educational assistance centers desired student volunteers to conduct themselves as individuals with personalities. It is desirable for nonattendant children to be acquainted with varied people with diverse personalities because nonattendant children hold a limited number of opportunities for making the acquaintance of people. Moreover, two previous studies disclosed that the staff members at educational assistance centers desired student volunteers to conduct themselves like older siblings and friends of nonattendant children. The previous study on the mental friend program reported that mental friends played the roles of older siblings and friends of a nonattendant

child. These findings signify that student volunteers are required to form and retain pleasant relationships with nonattendant children and amiably conduct themselves. Even students who are not majoring in psychology or pedagogy can accomplish the role of individuals with personalities and behave like older siblings or friends of nonattendant children. Many students can contribute to aiding nonattendant children.

However, previous studies did not refer to what kinds of concrete behaviors correspond to conducts like siblings or friends of nonattendant children. Therefore, it is useful to concretely propose conducts that student volunteers can employ at free schools. A desirable research design is one that aims at revealing which concrete functions student volunteers can perform at free schools in Japan.

The research design embraces a preliminary task: to comprehend volunteers' functions at alternative schools in Australia. As indicated in the prior section, alternative schools in Australia regard as significant the affective sphere rather than techniques for efficiently teaching their students and for expeditiously returning their students to mainstream schools. Many free schools in Japan share this philosophy. Volunteers at alternative schools in Australia may be an exemplar for student volunteers at free schools in Japan. Student volunteers not majoring in psychology or pedagogy can conduct themselves at free schools like volunteers at alternative schools in Australia. An examination of the literature on, surveys and observations of, and interviews with volunteers at alternative schools is preliminary to determine what they conduct for their students and what student volunteers may be able to do at free schools in Japan.

After ascertaining what volunteers conduct for their students at alternative schools in Australia, volunteers' functions are classified into two categories: functions that university or junior college students not majoring in psychology or pedagogy can play; and functions that the students cannot implement. Observations can be made if free schools in Japan permit a researcher to dispatch university or junior college students whose majors are not psychology or pedagogy as volunteers and observe their conduct. The point to be observed is what functions student volunteers can carry out to improve affective relationships between children and staff at free schools. The

researcher requests student volunteers to seek to perform functions that volunteers undertake at alternative schools in Australia.

Staff members are interviewed to ascertain how they evaluate student volunteers' functions. Student volunteers are asked whether they found it difficult to carry out the functions that volunteers perform at alternative schools in Australia. If possible, interviews are conducted with children attending free schools. They are asked how they consider student volunteers' functions. Data obtained through observation and interviews are employed to analyze what functions student volunteers can perform even though they are not majoring in psychology or pedagogy, and what functions are effective in forming affective relationships between the children and the staff.

V. Conclusion

This paper examined previous studies on the public facilities and the public program that aid nonattendant children in Japan and on alternative schools in Australia. Staff members at the educational assistance centers want student volunteers to conduct themselves like nonattendant children's older siblings or friends. University and junior-college students as mental friends play the roles of older siblings and friends of nonattendant children. Alternative schools in Australia endeavor to nurture positive emotions of students and form affective connections between students and the staff.

The staff at educational assistance centers desire student volunteers to play roles of nonattendant children's siblings or friends. Playing the roles of nonattendant children's siblings or friends can be interpreted as selecting benign and compassionate behaviors. In that background, what functions of volunteers give rise to benign and compassionate behaviors? The answer to this question may be obtained by examination of alternative schools in Australia. The alternative schools prioritize formation and maintenance of affective relationships between students and the staff. Practices at alternative schools may be an exemplar of student volunteers' functions. Observation should be conducted on whether or not student volunteers at free schools can carry out the functions like volunteers at alternative schools in Australia. Interviews with staff members, student volunteers, and

children at free schools provide us with data that are employed to evaluate how effective student volunteers' functions are in nurturing positive emotions of nonattendant children and in forming and maintaining affective relationships between children and the staff at free schools.

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