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The school attendance problem in Japanese compulsory education: the case of a public junior high school

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The purpose of this study was to collect accurate data on the School Attendance Problem (SAP) in Japan at a local level while using an explicit definition of legitimate attendance. Attendance data on 35 students at a junior high school ($M=13.9$ years, $SD=0.9$) were extracted and 11 fundamental factors related to SAP were examined. The analysis showed that the number of absences in the previous year was a strong predictor of SAP in the current year; that more than 90% of the subjects did not take advantage of special institutions; that parents's attitude was a significant predictor of the prolongation of SAP; and that school withdrawal type (SW) was the most common form of SAP. Regardless of their attendance record or academic performance, all SAP students were advanced to the next grade at the end of the school year. Close cooperation between parents and school is identified as a key factor in addressing SAP. To give effective support to SAP students in Japan, it is necessary to review aspects of the educational system that may be encouraging students not to attend school.

Keywords: School attendance problems, Japan, compulsory education, case study.

El problema de la asistencia escolar en la educación obligatoria japonesa: el caso de una escuela secundaria pública. El propósito de este estudio fue recopilar datos precisos sobre el Problema de Asistencia Escolar (PAE) en Japón a nivel local mientras se usa una definición explícita de asistencia legítima. Se extrajeron los datos de asistencia de 35 estudiantes en una escuela secundaria ($M=13.9$ años, $SD=0.9$) y se examinaron 11 factores fundamentales relacionados con PAE. Los análisis mostraron que el número de ausencias en el año anterior fue un fuerte predictor de los PAE en el año en curso; que más del 90% de los sujetos no aprovecharon instituciones especiales; que la actitud de los padres fue un predictor significativo de la prolongación de PAE; y que el tipo de retiro de escuela (RE) fue la forma más común de PAE. Independientemente de su registro de asistencia o rendimiento académico, todos los estudiantes con PAE pasaron al siguiente grado al final del año escolar. La estrecha cooperación entre los padres y la escuela se identifica como un factor clave para abordar los PAE. Con el fin de brindar un apoyo efectivo a los estudiantes con PAE en Japón, es necesario revisar aspectos del sistema educativo que pueden alentar a los estudiantes a no asistir a la escuela.

Palabras clave: Problemas de asistencia escolar, Japón, educación obligatoria, estudio de caso.

The school attendance problem (SAP) in compulsory education is a psychosocial issue of long standing in the field of education and psychology. SAP has significant consequences, such as academic underachievement, family difficulties, worsening peer relationships, employment difficulties, and an increased risk of psychiatric illness (Fremont, 2003; Sewell, 2008). Without appropriate interventions or supports, students' SAP can be prolonged (Glaser, 1959; Hersov, 1972; King et al., 1998; Okuyama, Okada, Kuribayashi, & Kaneko, 1999; Sonoda, Hashimoto, Ishibashi, & Kamohara, 2008), making it even more difficult to address the problem (Okuyama et al., 1999; Sonoda, Takayama, Maeda, Tanaka, & Kuriyama, 2004; Terada, 2010).

Although considerable research on SAP in compulsory education systems has been published, most of these studies have occurred in Western settings. Elliott and Place (2017) showed that the number of studies conducted in non-English-speaking educational environments has increased over the past two decades. Nevertheless, we still know little about SAP outside Western countries. The present study, which focuses on a specific non-Western country, will help to promote better understanding of this universal issue. Japan has a long history of SAP studies dating back to the 1960s, but little of this literature is available in English, and most English-language articles on the subject omit basic information about features of the Japanese education system that could have an impact on the development of SAP.

Compulsory Education in Japan

Compulsory education in Japan requires six years of elementary school (generally age 7 to 12) and three years of junior high school (age 13 to 15). In compulsory school, each homeroom (with about 35 students to a class) has a homeroom teacher, and most classes take place in this location. The homeroom, teacher, and classmates do not change over the course of the school year. In elementary school, the homeroom teacher covers most subjects personally; in junior high school, classes are taught by specialized teachers in each subject. Both elementary and junior high schools require five or six classes (lasting 45 to 50 minutes) each day. All schools have homeroom sessions of 10 to 15 minutes before the first class and after the last class, during which the homeroom teacher checks school attendance and makes announcements associated with school life. At most compulsory schools, students change into indoor shoes at the entrance to the school building before going to their homerooms. Each student has a shoe box tagged with his or her number, making it easy for staff to check school attendance at any moment.

Japan has no national standardized test of academic achievement at the end of both elementary school and junior high. Instead, several school-specific achievement tests are administered each term. There is virtually no repetition of a grade or withdrawal from school during the compulsory education years (Ministry of Education, Culture,

Sports, Science and Technology Japan [MEXT], 2005). Rather, all Japanese students are automatically registered at an elementary school at age 7 and automatically deregistered upon graduation from junior high school (age 15), receiving a school diploma regardless of their academic achievement. After junior high school, Japanese students who wish to move on to senior high school must take a separate entrance examination for each school.

School Attendance Problems in Japan

Japan defines SAP as being absent from or unable to attend school for more than 30 full days a year due to physical, psychological, social, and/or emotional factors, with exceptions permitted for medical and economic reasons (MEXT, 2009). Each compulsory school is required to check students' attendance every day and to report attendance data regularly to the local board of education. According to the Japanese government, the number of SAP students has reached approximately 31,000 (0.5%) among elementary school students, which represents the highest total number and percentage at any time in the last 14 years, and approximately 103,000 (3.0%) junior high school students (MEXT, 2017), which is the highest rate since the government began to collect data.

The official definition of school attendance is somewhat more flexible than the definition of SAP, thereby granting the school principal or local educational authority some room for interpretation. As a result, many schools officially count as school attendance such activities as attending adaptation classes within or outside the school, going to the nurse's office or the school counseling room, attending free private schools (Maeda, 2016), and coming to school to meet with school teachers for a few minutes in the evening (Nakahara & Ito, 2008). For this reason, some SAP students are categorized as legitimately attending school by official documents even when they are not in the homeroom and have not attended any classes for many months. Maeda (2017) pointed out that the actual number of SAP students not regularly appearing in their homerooms is likely far greater than the official figure reported by the government.

Because SAP has worsened dramatically in recent years, effective evidence-based approaches such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) should be introduced nationally as early as possible. Before such an approach can be properly implemented, however, accurate SAP data based on uniform criteria are needed. It is widely recognized that the official SAP data reported by MEXT are relatively unreliable (Yamamoto, 2008) due to the flexibility of the official definition, which allows various interpretations of legitimate attendance, allowing each school and local board of education to make its own determinations. Yamamoto (2008) also noted that official SAP data lacked validity as an index indicating the actual state of SAP in Japan. In fact,

we could find no Japanese studies of SAP that included both quantitative and qualitative methods while also providing a precise definition of legitimate school attendance.

The purpose of the present study was to collect accurate data on the actual state of SAP in a Japanese school while using an explicit definition of legitimate attendance.

METHOD

Participants

The subjects were 35 SAP students enrolled in grades 7 to 9 (23 males and 12 females; $M=13.9$ years, $SD=0.9$; $\chi^2(1)=3.46$, $p=0.06$) enrolled at a public junior high school on the Japanese island of Kyushu in 2016 and 2017. The total enrollment at the school was 423 students. The age and sex distribution of the 35 students was as follows: age 13, 9 males and 6 females; age 14, 6 males and 3 females; age 15, 8 males and 3 females; $\chi^2(2)=1.60$, $p=0.45$. Using school criteria regarding legitimate school attendance (described below), 35 subjects who failed to attend school without a legitimate excuse for more than 10 full days during the 209-day school year of 2016–2017 were identified. We then obtained and analyzed data for the 35 students on 11 fundamental factors related to SAP.

Measures

Along with basic demographic information on the subjects (age, sex, school year, and number of brothers and sisters), the support faculty member, SA, and SC examined 11 fundamental data points regarding these students: (1) the number of absences in the current and previous year; (2) the number of parents at home; (3) the parents' response to contacts from school (rated as good, average, or poor); (4) the level of acceptance of home visits by school staff (good, average, or poor); (5) academic skills (good, average, or poor); (6) use of special institutions (yes or no); (7) whether the parents had ever visited the school counseling room for consultation (yes or no); (8) whether the students had ever visited the school counseling room for consultation (yes or no); (9) the parents' attitudes toward the school (positive, average, or negative); (10) the type of SAP; and (11) any change in the students' attitudes after six months.

For data point 10, the type of SAP, the *School-Nonattendance Checklist* or SNACK (Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin, & Gentle-Genitty, 2018) was employed. The SNACK lists 14 possible reasons for absenteeism, each of which is classified as one of four types of SAP: school refusal (SR), truancy (TR), school withdrawal (SW), and school exclusion (SE), or alternatively as non-problematic absenteeism. Based on the SNACK, the homeroom teachers and participating staff mutually determined the type of SAP applicable to each subject.

Procedure

The school participating in the case study counted students who visited any places on the school grounds (e.g., individual adaptation class, school nurse's office, counseling room, school staff room, or school entrance) during school hours (8:00–17:00) as legitimately in attendance, even if they did not attend any classes. Although each homeroom teacher records students' arrival and departure times, the official registration of school attendance shows simply either attendance or absence, meaning that full-day and part-day attendance were treated identically in the attendance records. According to these criteria for legitimate school attendance, the 35 students selected for our study were assessed as SAP.

Along with the homeroom teachers, three other staff at the school provided support to SAP students. The first was a male teacher appointed by the principal and given a reduced instructional burden so that he could devote more time to SAP students. Second, a male part-time school assistant (SA) was responsible for supporting all students, including SAP students, with any school related issues. Finally, a male part-time school counselor (SC, the primary author of this paper) worked at the school from 8:00 to noon every Friday morning. The support faculty member and SA checked school attendance records on all students three times a day, while each homeroom teacher recorded school attendance data for his or her class at both the morning and evening assembly times. Therefore, school attendance was checked a total of five times a day. Subsequently, the support faculty member developed a list of SAP students who had missed more than 10 full days over the course of the school year. Each homeroom teacher and the three other staff members named above collected and analyzed data on the 35 identified SAP students.

Data Analysis

The percentage of students at each level (e.g., good, average, or poor) or in each category on each of the 11 data points was calculated. Subsequently, one-way analysis of variance was utilized to compare the average number of absences between levels for data points 2, 3, 4, and 9, and the *t*-test was used to compare the average number of absences between categories for data points 6, 7, and 8. Correlation analysis was carried out for data point 1, and a chi-square test was used for data point 5. The statistical significance level was 0.05 in all cases.

RESULTS

Number of Absences in the Current and Previous years. The average number of absences in the current year (2017) was 69.7 days ($SD=71.1$). Three students were absent for all 209 days of school in 2017. The average number of absences in the

previous year (2016) was 62.7 ($SD=65.6$). The number of absences between 2016 and 2017 had a strong positive correlation ($r=0.69$, $p<0.01$). In 2017, 17 subjects (4% of the whole school) had more than 30 absences.

Number of Parents at Home. The subjects' family structure was categorized as follows: 48.6% of subjects ($n=17$) had two-parent families, 45.7% ($n=16$) had a single-mother, and 5.7% ($n=2$) had a single-father ($\chi^2(2)=12.06$, $p<0.01$). There was no significant difference in the number of absences among the three groups by parental status ($F(2, 32)=0.80$, $p=0.46$, $\eta^2=0.05$).

Parents' Response to Contacts from School. The parents' responses to contacts from school were evaluated as good in 12 cases (34.2%), average for 6 families (17.1%), and poor in 17 instances (48.7%) ($\chi^2(2)=5.20$, $p=0.07$). The number of absences varied significantly among the three levels ($F(2, 32)=4.16$, $p=0.03$, $\eta^2=0.20$); the "good" group ($M=34.0$) averaged only one-third of the number of absences of the "poor" group ($M=102.0$).

Level of Acceptance of Home Visits by School Staff. Twenty families (57.1%) were rated as giving a good response to home visits, with 6 (17.1%) assessed as average and 9 as poor ($\chi^2(2)=9.31$, $p<0.01$). The number of absences differed significantly among the three levels ($F(2, 32)=10.24$, $p<0.01$, $\eta^2=0.39$); the means were 34.6 for the "good" acceptance group and 137.2 for the "poor" group.

Academic Skills. With regard to academic skills, 4 students (11.4%) were rated as good, 8 (22.9%) as average, and 22 (62.9%) as poor. There was a significant interaction among the three categories ($\chi^2(2)=15.77$, $p<0.01$).

Use of Special Institutions. Only three students (8.6%) made use of special institutions ($\chi^2(1)=24.03$, $p<0.01$). No significant difference in the number of absences was found between those who took advantage of special institutions and those who did not ($t(33)=1.94$, $p=0.06$, $r=0.32$).

Parent Visits to the School Counseling Room. The school counseling room was visited for consultation by 48.6% ($n=17$) of parents, while 51.4% ($n=18$) did not ($\chi^2(1)=0.03$, $p=0.87$). The difference in number of absences between those who had visited and those who had not visited was not significant ($t(33)=1.89$, $p=0.07$, $r=0.31$).

Student Visits to the School Counseling Room. Among the students, 11.4% ($n=4$) had visited the school counseling room, and 88.6% ($n=31$) had not ($\chi^2(1)=20.82$, $p<0.01$). The difference in the number of absences between the two groups was not significant ($t(33)=-0.56$, $p=0.58$, $r=0.10$).

Parents' Attitudes toward the School. Parents in 15 families (42.9%) were assessed as having a positive attitude toward the school, 11 (31.4%) had an average attitude, and 9 (25.7%) were viewed as having a negative attitude ($\chi^2(2)=1.60$, $p=0.45$). The difference in the number of absences across the three categories was significant

($F(2, 32)=6.3, p<0.01, \eta^2=0.28$); the positive group had far fewer absences ($M=26.5$) than the average ($M=103.5$) and negative ($M=100.3$) groups.

Type of SAP. The type of SAP was identified using SNACK: 5.7% ($n=2$) were SR, 74.3% ($n=26$) were SW, 20.0% ($n=7$) were TR, and there were no SE students ($\chi^2(2)=27.49, p<0.01$).

Subjects after Six Months. Of the 35 subjects, 11 were ninth-graders in their final year of compulsory education. Four of these went on to senior high schools, four continued on to correspondence-based senior high school, two of them did not continue in school and did not find work, and one attended evening high school. All nine eighth-graders moved on to ninth grade, where six of them were absent for more than 30 full days during the first six months of school. The other three each had fewer than five full-day absences. The 15 students in seventh grade moved on to eighth grade, where five were absent for more than 30 days in six months.

DISCUSSION

A strong positive correlation was found between the number of absences in the current and previous years. As Ingles, Gonzalvez-Macia, Garcia-Fernandez, Vicent, and Martinez-Monteagudo (2015) pointed out, present SAP may be the result of prior SAP during elementary school, and the number of absences in the previous year is a sufficient predictor of SAP in the current year. Indeed, the three students who never attended school at all during the year of this study were experiencing a serious *hikikomori* (Japanese for social withdrawal) state; the school staff did not see two of them for approximately two years.

The number of absences did not differ significantly across the three categories of family status. A recent national survey reported that 8.9% of Japanese families have only one parent (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2017); however, the proportion of single-parent families among the subjects of this study was significantly higher. Hence, family status may be an important predictor of SAP in Japan.

Approximately half the parents of the subjects were unreceptive to contact from the school. Children of those parents whose responses to the school were rated as “good” had significantly fewer absences than those in the “poor” contact group. SAP researchers have advocated for stronger collaboration between school and family (Kearney & Bates, 2005; Richardson, 2016), as this factor has been shown to be correlated with a reduction in attendance problems.

In many Japanese compulsory schools, each homeroom teacher is responsible for contacting parents when students in their class do not attend school. However, if the parents of SAP students refuse to be in contact with the homeroom teachers, providing appropriate school support becomes difficult, frequently leading to the prolongation of

SAP. Homeroom teachers are encouraged to make home visits, especially when they cannot contact the parents of SAP students by other means. In fact, MEXT (2016) encourages each local board of education and school to make regular visits to the homes of SAP students to offer support. Our analysis suggested that the level of acceptance of home visits was important, as children in families with good acceptance of home visits had fewer absences than those with poor acceptance. All families with poor acceptance of home visits were also rated as poor with regard to contact with the school, indicating that parents who reject the school's attempts to reach them are likely not to welcome home visits by teachers either. These results indicate that regular contact between parents and school teachers is important to prevent SAP but very difficult to maintain with unreceptive families.

Individual academic skills are a predictor of SAP. In fact, more than half the students in this study were considered to have poor academic skills. It is not surprising that if SAP students are out of school for a long period, their academic skills will decline, further discouraging them from returning. This mechanism is similar to the prolongation of SR, which increases students' anxiety levels when they return to school (Terada, 2015; Warnecke, 1964). To prevent both academic and mental problems related to prolonged SAP status, early intervention is required.

Only three subjects (fewer than 10%) used special institutions, although no significant difference was found in the number of absences between this small group and the other 32 subjects. Two of these three were experiencing serious *hikikomori* conditions, and one was attending school while also attending regular counseling sessions at a psychiatric institution. Of the two *hikikomori* students, one had not attended school for three years and the other for 18 months. Because both students were in their final year of junior high school, they effectively "graduated" from the school without attending it for a long time. Some Japanese researchers have pointed out that many special institutions in Japan exhibit a wait-and-see approach until SAP students spontaneously demonstrate a desire to return to school, a tactic that has increased the number of SAP students (Ishikawa, 2007; Kawai & Sakurai, 2003; Maeda, 2011). These two students in our study may have encountered a similar approach.

Although some Japanese researchers have insisted on the importance of individual support for SAP students at school (Hirata, 2018; Sakata, 2007), this intervention is effective only where SAP students actively use the resources available to them. In our study, nearly 90% of SAP students never even visited the counseling room, suggesting that providing meaningful, individualized school-based support to such students will be very challenging. Thus, in most cases of a school-based approach to supporting SAP students, providing consultation for the parents of SAP students is an indispensable first step (Maeda, Hatada, Sonoda, & Takayama, 2012).

When the school needs to collaborate with the parents of SAP students, the parents' attitude toward such collaboration may be an important factor. In this case study, the parents' attitude toward the school was assessed based on the state of communication between school staff and the parents. It was found that the children of parents in the positive group had fewer absences than the average or the negative group. When parents have negative attitudes toward the school, the students' SAP is aggravated. Moreover, eight of the nine families with negative attitudes were also rated as poor in their openness to contact with the school. Overall, approximately half of all parents who were unreceptive to contact with the school also took a negative attitude toward the school. This negative attitude presumably fostered the prolongation of SAP by impeding school-based approaches to helping the children.

The SNACK was utilized to identify types of SAP. The analysis suggested that most of the subjects were SW, which reflects the distinctive features of Japanese SAP. Parental irresponsibility is a central feature of SW, as the parents do not manage to ensure that their child goes to school (Heyne et al., 2018). Although this factor has been discussed extensively (Aida, 1978; Blagg, 1987; Inamura, 1994; Ishikawa, 2007), few recent Japanese studies have discussed parental responsibility for a student's school attendance. However, in view of the dramatic increase in the number of SAP and *hikikomori* students in Japan, along with the results of the present study, it is clear that parental responsibility for both prevention of and intervention in SAP cases must be discussed.

In addition, the development of effective school-based intervention for SW is imperative for Japan. Offering consultation to the parents of SW students in a school setting can often be a key to addressing the problem. Of the three SAP types observed among our sample, SR was the least common. One SR student returned to regular school attendance after a school-based behavioral consultation with the student and the family. The other received school counseling once but never came back. SR students are more likely than SW students to receive individual sessions, even at school. In such a case, manualized CBT for students with chronic absenteeism (e.g., Heyne & Rollings, 2002; Kearney & Albano, 2007) should be the first-line intervention. Finally, seven SAP students were categorized as TR, and three of these frequently ran away from either school or home; this development requires the school to cooperate closely with the police or other local authorities.

Of the 11 ninth-graders in the study, 4 continued on to correspondence senior high school, where regular, in-person attendance is not necessary. In this setting, the students study at home and go to a satellite campus only for exam. In Japan, correspondence senior high school is a common option for SAP students who are reluctant to attend a standard senior high school (Higashimura, 2004; Inagaki & Wake, 2007; Wakita & Iwata, 2005). However, the dropout rate from public correspondence

senior high schools was 6.7% in 2016, far higher than the 0.8% rate in standard high schools (MEXT, 2016). Students in correspondence school have fewer opportunities than other students to communicate or build relationships with their peers. This factor may be related to the higher dropout rate, but no evidence-based study has been published on the topic.

Two subjects were neither studying nor working at the time of the six-month follow-up survey. One student was a serious case of *hikikomori* who had not attended school at all throughout the three years of junior high school, and the other was a TR student who exhibited delinquent behaviors and attended school only 22% of the time. The school had a greater chance to provide school-based support for the TR student than for the *hikikomori* student, due to the greater ease of communication.

All SAP students in our study advanced to the next grade and automatically received their diploma, regardless of their attendance or academic record. This practice of social promotion encourages troubled Japanese students to treat attending school as unnecessary and discourages counselors, psychologists, and even researchers from addressing the problem. In general, effective interventions for SAP students in Japan have not been popular and have thus not been widely applied. Hence, as part of considering how to deliver meaningful support for SAP students, a thorough review of the educational system is necessary.

Limitations and Further Research

This study has several limitations. First, it was a pilot case study, relying on data (some of which was derived from subjective assessment) on the characteristics of SAP students in a single junior high school. A comparison survey should be conducted in several schools that use the same criteria for legitimate school attendance, so as to more broadly determine the common characteristics of SAP students in Japan. Second, no comparison was made on the 11 SAP-related factors between the 35 students in the study and other students attending data. Hence, we cannot specify where the SAP students differed from their peers or what factors appear most important in ensuring that students continue to attend school. These issues should be examined through studies that compare data on SAP students and other regularly attending students.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the condition of SAP students in the Japanese education system by analyzing data on SAP students at a junior high school. We concluded that the parents' attitude toward the school is a significant factor in the prolongation of SAP. The most common type of SAP students is the SW type. Close cooperation between parents and the school is essential in addressing the SAP. To provide effective support for SAP

students in Japan, it is necessary to consider what features of the educational system are likely to encourage Japanese students not to attend school.

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