

Chapter 4

Japanese Adolescent School Refusal: Disengagement or Self–Protection

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ABSTRACT

In Japanese education, one of the most serious problems is school refusal. Many young children and older students refuse to attend schools due to reasons other than economical or physical problems. They are not school truancy cases either as they are often high achievers. Instead, they seem to have problems with stress at schools (study stress) or human relationships problems such as peer pressure, bullying, and a sense of identity. They need a wide range and long lasting support for their recovery from school refusal, including counseling and alternative schools.

INTRODUCTION

School refusal (SR) refers to pupils and students who do not attend school without a clear reason like sickness or poverty. SR is common in the nation (about 120,000 SR students in recent years) and in general, every junior high school class of forty has at least one or two. It is not due to truancy that students have low motivation in learning. School refusal children are often good students. They wish to go to school, but they cannot go. Once they stop going to school, they resist going back to school and isolate themselves from family. Some SR students can become adult's social withdrawal.

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Their problems seem to be related to adolescents' study stress and identity formation. Thus, it seems that Japanese schools, which have rigorous school curriculums, need some more ways in helping young students with study stress and identity formation.

BACKGROUND

Japanese Schools

In the past, Japanese children have seemed to perform well in comparison with children from other countries (OECD, 2010; New York Times, 2014). High standards in science and mathematics provided success in many high technological industries such as automobile, electronic appliances, and railways.

However, critics of Japanese education say that Japanese education tends to include much memorization of knowledge and thus Japanese children lack in creativity and critical thinking. Also, the teaching method used at high schools is mainly lecture style, without students' questioning and with little free discussion; so in the classroom, active participation by the students rarely takes place and students are passive in their learning. It seems that the goal of many students is to prepare themselves to get in a good college or university for securing good employment rather than nurturing knowledge and the learning process, and that for many students, success in life is achieved by being accepted by a good college and work for a big company.

However, some large business organizations have recently started to point out that college graduates lack necessary communication ability (in their own language) for business activities. They need graduates who can actively engage in discussion and interact with a variety of people.

Communication ability is also indispensable in international business and other activities. Since many Japanese students study English for at least four hours a week until high school graduation, they can read difficult English sentences for college examinations. However, many Japanese seem to have limited ability in communication in English and interaction with foreigners.

Another common school norm is high attendance at cram schools, called 'juku', in Japanese. Juku is a private cram school to prepare students for entrance exams. In every town in Japan, there are many jukus where students learn mainly test-taking skills after regular school. Some children stay at juku until late at night. Parents pay high tuition for the lessons at juku, so some students study harder at juku than at their regular school.

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