

Original Paper

Prevention of School Attendance Problems in Japan: A Macro-Level Perspective on Avoidance Behaviour

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Abstract

In this study, we examined government policies and the relevant law on prevention measures for school attendance problems in Japanese compulsory education schools from the perspective of school avoidance behaviour. In summary: (a) the number of students with school attendance problems has been increasing rapidly since 2017; (b) despite an increase in school counsellors as a government-initiated prevention measure, the number of students with school attendance problems has risen; (c) government policies and the relevant law seek to foster social independence even for students unable to return to school and to provide spaces where students with school attendance problems feel comfortable, which may inadvertently reinforce or perpetuate school avoidance behaviour; and (d) in the Japanese compulsory education system, stakeholders have limited opportunities to block school avoidance behaviour. We propose two measures to prevent school attendance problems drawing on a macro-level behavioural perspective: (a) employing data on class absences in mainstream schools, regardless of the reason for the absence, as an evaluation criterion for prolonged school absenteeism, and (b) implementing appropriate grade repetition for students who miss classes in their mainstream school over a certain threshold, including withholding the school diploma.

Keywords

macro-level perspective, school avoidance behaviour, Japanese compulsory education schools, blocking

1. Introduction

School attendance problems have become a significant social challenge in Japan. Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) annually releases national-level data in the report 'Investigation Results Regarding Behavioural Issues, School Attendance Problems and Other Student Guidance Challengers for Children and Students'. The 2023 report indicates that 299,048 (3.1%) students had school attendance problems, including 105,112 (1.7%) in elementary schools and 193,936 (5.9%) in lower secondary schools (compulsory education schools) in 2022 (MEXT, 2023). This is the highest figure since the government introduced the current data collection format in 1995 (see Figure 1). The 2022 total of students with school attendance problems in compulsory education schools was 2.6-fold greater than that for 2012 (112,689) (e.g., MEXT, 2013; 2023), a significant change over the past 10 years, although the total number of students taking part in compulsory education was decreased by approximately 900,000 (from 10,333,629 to 9,442,083) (e.g., MEXT, 2023).

School plays a crucial role in youth development (Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin, & Gentle-Genitty, 2019), enabling young people to acquire academic, social, communication and problem-solving skills, as well as stress tolerance and other important abilities (Maeda & Inoue, 2021). Where students are isolated from their school environment because of school attendance problems, they experience difficulties in acquiring these important skills and abilities. In addition, school attendance problems can lead to significant consequences, including academic underachievement, family difficulties, social alienation, delinquency (Kearney, 2002), deteriorating peer relationships, employment challenges, an increased risk of psychiatric illness (Fremont, 2003; Sewell, 2008) and the risk of social withdrawal, also known as *hikikomori* (Hamasaki et al., 2021; Sonoda et al., 2004).

The increasing rate of school attendance problems in compulsory education schools has led schools, MEXT and local governments and education boards to implement a variety of measures over an extended period. However, the situation is not improving but rather rapidly deteriorating in recent years. Prevention measures for school attendance problems in Japan may now be at a stage that requires a fundamental review.

While there has been significant discussion of school attendance problems from various perspectives, an evidenced-based behavioural perspective is crucial for understanding and addressing the issue. According to the behavioural perspective, which has shown significant effectiveness in terms of returning students with school attendance problems to school (e.g., Maeda et al., 2010; Ono, 2016), school attendance problems can be interpreted as a form of school avoidance behaviour, through the mechanism outlined in learning theory (Sonoda, 1971; Yoneyama, 2007). In relation to this, Kearney and Silverman (1990) proposed four functions that contribute to school attendance problems: (1) avoiding stimuli that cause negative affectivity, (2) escaping aversive social or evaluative situations, (3) seeking attention from caregivers or (4) gaining positive tangible reinforcement.

Sonoda et al. (2008) examined school avoidance behaviour in Japan from the perspective of avoidance and reinforcement mechanisms. They proposed that, when children meet with unpleasant experiences in a school setting, they may seek to keep from attending school or being in the classroom, due to negative reinforcement. By the same token, remaining at home or in their room can produce positive reinforcement. When children find staying at home significantly more comfortable than attending school, taking their parents' attitudes into account, school avoidance behaviour could develop, even if the discomfort or challenges that are faced at school are relatively minor.

If school avoidance behaviour persists, the children's aversion response to school does not have a chance to be extinguished (Yoneyama, 2007). An effective technique of reducing avoidance behaviour is exposure and response prevention (Krypotos et al., 2015). If problems in school attendance are to be addressed as avoidance behaviours, they should be blocked in some way, and children who have school attendance problems should be reintroduced to the school setting as soon as possible to alleviate their anxiety in response to the school environment (Sonoda et al., 2004).

This study examines the measures implemented by MEXT to prevent school attendance problems in compulsory education schools from a macro-level behavioural perspective. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: First, we provide an overview of the distinctive nature of the Japanese compulsory education system. We then present detailed data from MEXT's 2023 report on prolonged absenteeism and school attendance problems. Following that, we provide an analysis of the situation and the challenges associated with the utilisation of school counsellors and MEXT policies with respect to school attendance problems from the perspective of school avoidance behaviour. Finally, we propose more effective measures of preventing school attendance problems from a macro-level behavioural approach perspective.

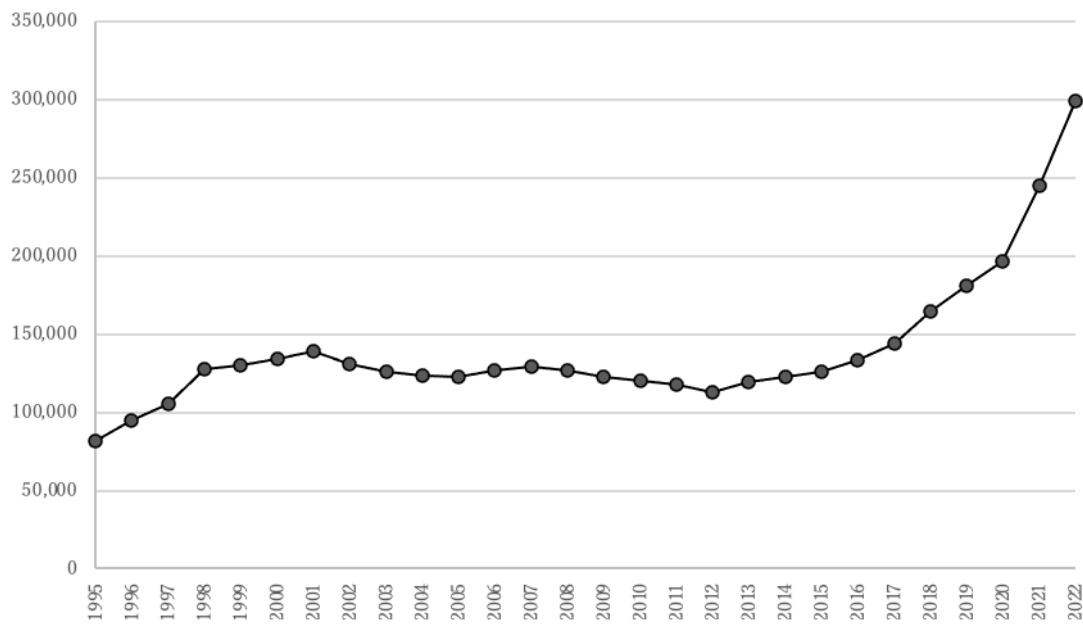


Figure 1. The Number of Students with School Attendance Problems in Japanese Compulsory Education Schools

2. Japan's Compulsory Education System

Compulsory education in Japan requires six years of elementary school (generally ages 7-12) and three years of lower secondary school (ages 13-15). In compulsory school environments, each homeroom (including about 35 students to a class) has a homeroom teacher, and most classes take place in this single location. The homeroom, teacher and students do not change over the course of the school year. In elementary school, homeroom teachers cover most subjects on their own; in lower secondary school, classes are taught by teachers who are specialised in the given subject. Elementary and lower secondary schools have five or six required classes (lasting 45-50 minutes) per day. All schools have homeroom sessions of 10-15 minutes before the first class and after the last class. During these sessions, the homeroom teacher checks attendance and makes announcements concerned with administration or other aspects of school.

All Japanese students are automatically enrolled in elementary school at the age of six and are typically de-enrolled by the local government at the age of 15. Students in compulsory education schools can automatically advance to the next grade level (MEXT, 2003; Saito, 2003; Sugiyama, 2022) and receive a diploma upon completing lower secondary school (nine grades) regardless of their attendance record or individual achievement (Maeda & Hatada, 2019; Sugiyama, 2022). That is, the system of grade repetition and withdrawal from school is not essential in public compulsory education schools in Japan. For individual academic achievement, a credit-based system for each subject is not employed in public compulsory education schools, and no national standardised evaluation test for academic achievement

is required to be passed at the end either elementary school or lower secondary school (Suzuki, 2017). Instead, several school-specific achievement tests are implemented during each term. In extreme cases, students with school attendance problems who are enrolled but who never attend school or take any achievement test during the period of compulsory education can still receive a diploma from both elementary school and lower secondary school (e.g., Maeda & Hatada, 2019).

3. The National Annual Report on School Absenteeism

All Japanese compulsory education schools collect data on students' attendance and absences. These data are subsequently compiled by MEXT through 47 local education boards and are ultimately included in the national annual report. The data on school absenteeism in MEXT's official annual report is reported in the national media and also has had a significant impact on education and community service responses to students who have prolonged absenteeism and school attendance problems. This impact has led to the development of public support systems for students with school attendance problems, such as the official deployment of school counsellors in 1995 and school social workers in 2008, as well as the enactment of relevant law in 2016 (Maeda, 2022). The annual data that are provided by MEXT are published online and are freely accessible to anyone (these data are only available in Japanese).

MEXT (2023) defines prolonged absenteeism as being absent for over 30 days over the course of one school year, categorised into the following four groups of causes: sickness (referring to physical or mental disorders or injuries that require hospitalisation, doctor visits or home recuperation), economic reasons (pertaining to financially struggling families in which the children must work for living), school attendance problems (referring to prolonged absence due to physical, psychological, social and/or emotional factors, not including medical and economic reasons) and others. In addition, in 2020, the reason category of avoiding COVID-19 infection was added (MEXT, 2021). This is intended to be a temporary category and to persist only until COVID-19 is under control. School staff, including classroom teachers, school nurses and student guidance counsellors, among others, are responsible for categorising absent students after their absence notices are assessed.

In 2022, there were 460,648 students prolonged absenteeism, accounting for 4.9% of the total student population in compulsory education schools. In particular, there were 196,676 cases in elementary schools (3.1% of the total) and 263,972 in lower secondary schools (8.1% of the total). Of these, 64.9% were categorised as school attendance problems, 16.4% as sickness, 5.1% as avoiding COVID-19 infection, 0% as economic reasons and 13.5% as others (MEXT, 2023).

In the annual report for MEXT, the causes of school attendance problems are grouped into 13 factors: (a) bullying issues, (b) trouble with friends not including bullying issues, (c) relationship issues with teachers, (d) academic underachievement, (e) anxiety about further study, (f) maladaptation in extracurricular activities at school, (g) issues with school rules (h) maladaptation at the time of school

entry, promotion and school transfer, (i) rapid change in the family environment, (j) interaction issues with parent(s), (k) domestic discord, (l) delinquency or truancy, (m) apathy or anxiety and (n) others (MEXT, 2023). Of the 13 factors, (m) apathy or anxiety (51.8%) accounted for most school attendance problems, followed by (l) delinquency or truancy (11.4%) and (b) troubles with friends, not including bullying issues (9.2%), with (a) bullying issues (0.2%) being the least prevalent factor in compulsory education schools in 2022 (MEXT, 2023) (see Table 1). Recent national surveys have indicated that more than 60% of school attendance problems among Japanese students in compulsory education schools are closely associated with factors of apathy, anxiety or truancy.

Table 1. Factors Contributing to School Attendance Problems in Compulsory Education Schools

	The factors contributing to school attendance problems	Rate (%)
1	Apathy or anxiety	51.8
2	Delinquency or truancy	11.4
3	Trouble with friends, except for bullying issues	9.2
4	Interaction issues with parent(s)	7.4
5	Academic underachievement	4.9
6	Maladaptation at the time of school entry, promotion and school transfer	3.1
7	Rapid change in the family environment	2.6
8	Domestic discord	1.6
9	Relationship issues with teachers	1.2
10	Anxiety about further studies	0.7
11	Issues with school rules	0.7
12	Maladaptation in extracurricular activities at school	0.3
13	Bullying issues	0.2
	Others	5.0

4. The Deployment of School Counsellors

In the 1990s, as the number of students with school attendance problems and issues related to bullying grew, MEXT initiated its school counsellor project (MEXT, 2007). In 1995, as a part of this initiative, school counsellors were appointed to 154 public schools across the country, including both elementary and lower secondary schools (MEXT, 2007). In the ensuing years, the number of schools with designated school counsellor significantly increased. As of 2021, school counsellors have been assigned to approximately 27,000 out of 29,000 public compulsory education schools (MEXT, 2022). The majority of these counsellors are part-time workers employed by local boards of education, and 80% of them hold licences as clinical psychologists that are certified by the Foundation of the Japanese Certification Board for Clinical Psychologists (MEXT, 2007). In addition to their work as school

counsellors, many are also employed as clinical psychologists at other specialised institutions, including hospitals, welfare organisations and universities. Here we should note that the first author is a full-time lecturer for a clinical psychology course at a university and works part-time as a school counsellor at public lower secondary schools.

Addressing students' school attendance problems has been a primary task for school counsellors, in alignment with the main goal of the School Counsellor Project that was initiated by MEXT in 1995 (MEXT, 2007). As noted, the number of students having school attendance problems has significantly increased, and the number of designated school counsellors has seen a dramatic increase since the beginning of the implementation of the project (see Figure 2). MEXT is seeking to further increase the number of school counsellors or the working hours of those currently employed. However, even where full-time school counsellors are deployed at all lower secondary schools, such as in Nagoya City, the number of students with school attendance problems continues to dramatically increase (Sankei Shimbun, 2021).

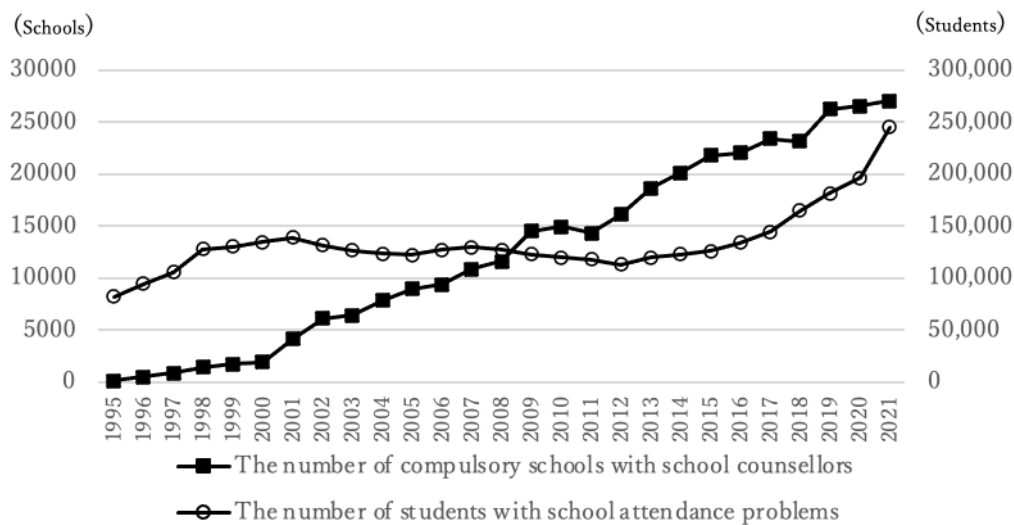


Figure 2. The Number of Schools with School Counsellors and Students with School Attendance Problems

5. MEXT Policies for Addressing School Attendance Problems

In this section, MEXT's policies intended to address school attendance problems are explored. Three notable notifications by MEXT in 2016, 2019 and 2023 are highlighted. These are entitled 'How to Deal with School Attendance Problems' (published in 2016 and 2019) and 'Measures to Address School Attendance Problems to Ensure that No One is Left Behind in Learning: CoCoLo Plan' (published in 2023). The authors have translated these from MEXT from Japanese to English and summarised them as follows.

5.1 How to Deal with School Attendance Problems (MEXT, 2016, 2019)

MEXT (2016, 2019) noted the following five points as basic policy with respect to school attendance problems.

5.1.1 Perspective on Support

In seeking to support students with school attendance problems, stakeholders should not simply focus on getting them back to school but should also help these students become socially independent, in alignment with their own perspectives on their career paths. For some students with school attendance problems, periods of absence from school could provide psychological rest or enable them to reflect on themselves. Nevertheless, stakeholders should understand that students with school attendance problems may encounter considerable challenges in pursuing their further education and becoming socially independent due to delays in their academic preparation.

5.1.2 Significance and Role of Schools

The purpose of compulsory education schools is to develop students' ability, their basic skills for social independence, and the essential qualities that are required to become a contributing member of society. Given the paramount role that schools play, initiatives intended to enhance school education are crucial. To support students with school attendance problems, it is essential to accurately identify the underlying causes of their poor attendance, share this information with the school, family and relevant authorities as necessary, develop detailed and systematic support plans tailored to students' individual needs and provide assistance to broaden their career options for social independence. In addition, schools should explore how to accommodate students who feel unable to adopt to the current education system and make efforts to address this issue.

To support students in developing their potential based on their talents and abilities in a way that respects their wishes, schools should consider utilising various relevant institutions. These may include education support centres, special schools for school attendance problems, learning support provided with the use of information and communication technology, free schools and evening secondary schools to assist students achieve social independence. In cases of this type, it is important to actively collaborate with private free schools and non-political organisations.

5.1.3 Importance of Cause-based Support for School Attendance Problems

It will be necessary to modify the school environment or provide appropriate support for students with school attendance problems to return to school spontaneously or to achieve social independence, depending on the cause of their school attendance problems.

5.1.4 Support for Family of Students with School Attendance Problems

Education at home is the foundation of all learning, and it is crucial to support the families of students with school attendance problems in their homes. In relation to the factors and backgrounds of school attendance problems, it may be necessary to collaborate with welfare and medical institutions to provide appropriate support and encouragement drawing on an accurate understanding of the family's

situation. It is therefore essential for the family, school and other relevant institutions to collaborate with each other. They should develop a positive relationship between families and relevant institutions to collaborate while sharing awareness of the situation. It is also necessary to develop a support system in which parents can feel free to discuss their problems, including outreach support.

5.2 Measures to Address School Attendance Problems to Ensure that No One is Left Behind in Learning: CoCoLo Plan (MEXT, 2023)

In this notification, MEXT (2023) announced a package of emergency measures to address the rapidly growing school attendance problems (the CoCoLo Plan). This announcement involved three main support policies, as follows:

5.2.1 Ensuring Learning Opportunities for all Students with School Attendance Problems and Arranging Learning Environments for Them Whenever They Are Willing to Learn

Specific measures here include (a) promoting specialised schools for students with school attendance problems, (b) promoting dedicated support rooms within school, (c) strengthening the functionality of educational support centre, (d) ensuring a high standard of learning opportunities at upper secondary schools and (e) ensuring that spaces for diversity learning and students would be provided.

5.2.2 Providing Support for Students with School Attendance Problems at “Team School” while Remaining Attentive to Subtle Mental Health Signals, Ensuring that no SOS Signs Go Unnoticed

To this end, specific measures include (a) promoting the early identification of changes in physical and mental conditions with the use of one PC terminal for each student, (b) promoting early support at Team School and (c) providing support for parents so that they do not have to worry alone.

5.2.3 Ensuring School Environments where all Students Can Learn Safely

Specific measures include (a) visualising the school climate, (b) improving school lessons because this takes up the largest share of time for students at school, (c) implementing comprehensive measures to address problematic behaviours including bullying, (d) promoting the revision of school rules with student engagement, (e) creating warm and comfortable school environments and (f) making school a place where students can learn about community and embracing diverse individuality and opinions regardless of race, language or disability.

6. Enactment of Law for School Attendance Problems

The law “Act To Guarantee Access To Supplementary Learning To Insufficient Compulsory Education To Absenteeism And What Not” was enacted in 2016. In this law, the basic principle that individual students with school attendance problems should be supported based on their needs and academic performance was explicitly stated (Fujine, 2022). In addition, financial arrangements for various learning activities outside of compulsory education schools, such as free schools, were specified as matters that stakeholders should give special consideration. The law assumes that students with school attendance problems should be provided with appropriate places of learning outside of public

compulsory education schools. Under the terms of this law, attendance at private free schools is an authorised school attendance, regardless of the educational curriculum of the free school (Maeda, 2022). However, contrary to the government's expectations, the number of students with school attendance problems has increased dramatically since this law was enacted (see Figure 1).

7. Discussion

7.1 Number of Students with School Attendance Problems in a Macro-level Single-case Study

The number of students with school attendance problems in compulsory education schools in Japan has been on the rise since 2013 and experienced a notable surge in 2017, with figures reaching 144,031 in 2017 and escalating to 299,048 in 2022 (MEXT, 2018, 2023). Thus, measures implemented by MEXT to tackle school attendance problems as interventions during this period have proven ineffective in terms of the perspective of a macro-level single-case experimental design. In fact, the situation for students with school attendance problems has rapidly deteriorated over the course of the last five years. School attendance is a crucial metric for the evaluation of post-intervention outcomes regarding school attendance (King et al., 1998). It is often referred to as the gold standard (Tonge & Silverman, 2019), and it is commonly utilised as a measurement construct (Heyne et al., 2020). From a behavioural perspective, the target behaviour in school attendance problems is school avoidance behaviour, and the goal of treatment is to reduce it while increasing attendance. Thus, as a fundamental concern, regardless of whether MEXT implements measures to address school attendance problems at the national level, stakeholders should consistently monitor the number of students who exhibit school attendance problems in compulsory educational schools at the micro to macro level.

If government policies for school attendance problems as interventions do not positively influence target behaviour, these policies should be reviewed using an evidence-based perspective. Here, while the definition of school attendance in compulsory education in Japan has been discussed (e.g., Maeda, 2022; Ono, 2012), the simplest and the most crucial metric for evaluating the outcome of interventions, including governmental policies, is to count the number of students who do not attend school due to school attendance problems.

7.2 Effectiveness of Deploying School Counsellors for Addressing School Attendance Problems

Yagi (2008) found that most school counsellors adopt an individual therapy model and lack school-level training before they begin working. Moreover, many school counsellors implement a wait-and-see approach with students who have school attendance problems or with their parents until the child demonstrates a spontaneous return to school (Sankei Shimbun, 2021; Sonoda et al., 2008). In this context, Kanahara (2010) emphasises that a person-centred approach is ingrained in Japanese compulsory education schools, leading to the adoption of the wait-and-see approach for children with school attendance problems.

Maeda (2011), working as a school counsellor in lower secondary schools in Japan, interviewed the parents of 21 students with school attendance problems. These parents sought assistance from psychiatrists and child psychologists at clinic-based institutions. All parents were counselled to adopt a wait-and-see approach until their children could spontaneously return to school. Neither Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) nor any other behavioural approach was recommended to them, although both of these have demonstrated effectiveness in addressing school attendance problems over an extended period (e.g., Blagg, 1977; Heyne et al., 2002; King et al., 1998; Last et al., 1998; Ollendick & King, 1999).

As noted, since many school counsellors work for clinic-based institutions as certified clinical psychologists, situations where they utilise only individual therapy model, such as the wait-and-see approach, should occur. The wait-and-see approach is the principal technique used for Japanese students with school attendance problems (Kanahara, 2010; Kawai & Sakurai, 2003), regardless of its effectiveness. In addition, in the Japanese compulsory school system, due to its automatic promotion and the automatic issuance of school diploma, stakeholders, including parents, are not obligated to take responsibility even if the students have school attendance problems and cannot return to school. In this context, it is not surprising that school counsellors could avoid CBT or the behavioural approach, which sometimes require putting strain on students with school attendance problems or their parents, such as through an exposure process. Instead, they may opt for the wait-and-see approach, which does not impose an additional burden on them.

From the behavioural perspective, the wait-and-see approach, which expects that students with school attendance problems will return to school spontaneously at certain point in time, reinforces and maintains their school avoidance behaviour unless someone actively blocks it (Maeda et al., 2012; Sonoda, 1977). If school counsellors maintain a wait-and-see approach without considering means of blocking school avoidance behaviour in students with school attendance problems, or if the stakeholders that are involved in the process adopt this stance, the increased deployment of school counsellors to compulsory education schools by MEXT may prevent students with school attendance problems from returning to school.

7.3 MEXT Policies and the Relevant Law from the Perspective of School Avoidance Behaviour

In MEXT policy documents regarding school attendance problems in compulsory education schools, two main key phrases are consistently used: “fostering social independence even for students unable to return to school due to school attendance problems” and “providing spaces (inside or outside schools or through information and communication technology) where students with school attendance problems feel comfortable”. From these policies, support service institutions outside of compulsory education schools that seek to provide educational or psychological support for students with school attendance problems have recently been granted officially recognised as places that provide diverse educational opportunities (The Nishinippon Shimbun, 2023). However, fewer than 40% of students with school

attendance problems use such institutions (Japan Educational Press, 2021), and attendance problems have also been identified in support service institutions that operate outside of compulsory education schools (Sasaki, 2017).

MEXT does not provide a clear definition of the social independence of students with school attendance problems. However, being employed and paying taxes would naturally be considered part of this. In this context, supporting students who have school attendance problems at institutions outside schools will not contribute to their further social independence. Several studies have indicated that students with school attendance problems face a significant risk in future employment if they do not return to school (e.g., Brandibas et al., 2004; Kearney et al., 2020; Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006; Maeda & Heyne, 2019). Hatada et al. (2018) examined outpatients at a psychiatric clinic who experienced school attendance problems during compulsory education and indicated that these issues were significantly associated with dropping out of school during higher education and unemployment. That is, to ensure that students with school attendance problems in compulsory education schools achieve social independence, it is far more crucial to prioritise their reintegration into mainstream schools than merely to offer them a comfortable space outside of school. Thus, MEXT should establish policies aimed at facilitating their return to mainstream educational settings.

The law Act To Guarantee Access To Supplementary Learning To Insufficient Compulsory Education To Absenteeism And What Not was enacted in 2016 to address school attendance problems. The law stipulates two basic concepts, namely, (a) the importance of providing diverse learning activities in appropriate spaces for students with school attendance problems outside of school and (b) the necessity of providing rest for students with school attendance problems (Sugiyama, 2022). These concepts are in line with the government's policy, which essentially states that students with school attendance problems do not need to be returned to their mainstream schools but should be provided a place outside of school where they can study in comfort. However, the number of students exhibiting school attendance problems has increased dramatically since the law was enacted.

Several studies have noted out that the longer that a period of school nonattendance persists, the more difficult it becomes for the student to return to school (e.g., Kawai, 2003; Maeda & Heyne, 2019; Okuyama et al., 1999; Ono, 2016; Sonoda, 1982). Here, if the goal of problem-solving is for students to reintegrate into mainstream schools, a law that encourages them to remain away from a mainstream school environment may exacerbate the conditions for students with school attendance problems. From a behavioural perspective, the law, along with government policies, such as those described earlier, may also be a significant factor in the maintenance and reinforcement of school avoidance behaviour.

7.4 Difficulty in Blocking School Avoidance Behaviour within the Japanese Compulsory Education System

Ono (2016) noted that the Japanese compulsory education system, in which students who do not attend school can receive automatic promotion and a school diploma without any legal sanction on their

parents, can encourage school avoidance behaviour. By contrast, many OECD countries have implemented institutional, administrative or legal interventions for students with attendance behaviour (e.g., Akbasli et al., 2017; Burr et al., 2023; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Ricking & Schulze, 2019) to address these problems, which appear to effectively block school avoidance behaviour.

For example, in Germany, students of an age to attend compulsory education are not allowed to be educated outside of a public or state-approved school (Ricking & Schulze, 2019). The relevant provisions of school laws impose a step-by step approach to addressing school attendance problems, including warnings, fines, compulsory attendance enforced by the police and even arrests (Ricking & Schulze, 2019). Kearney and Graczyk (2014) described legal strategies to address severe school attendance problems, including truancy and juvenile court, as along with police intervention to bring students with school attendance problems back to school. In Australia, school principals send a letter to the parents of students with school attendance problems, explaining their responsibility to ensure that their children attend school; if the problems persist, principals call a meeting with the parents and can escalate to filing a complaint against the parents, with the Chief Education Officer initiating prosecution (Mazerolle et al., 2017). In Netherlands, school attendance officers, as public servants, are placed at every city council in the nation to enforce the School Attendance Law to prevent school absenteeism and early school leaving (Brouwer-Borghuis et al., 2019; Karel et al., 2022).

In the Japanese compulsory education system, none of these approaches is available, even the drafting of a letter to the parents. This is because school attendance problems are broadly interpreted as being an authorised reason for not attending school (Sasaki, 2017; Shinohara & Shojima, 2008), and thus, students with these problems and their parents are essentially exempted from legal liability (Shinohara & Shojima, 2008). However, as noted, recent national surveys have found that more than 60% of school attendance problems among Japanese students in compulsory education schools are closely associated with the factors of apathy, anxiety or truancy (MEXT, 2023).

Maeda (2012) identified typical Japanese students with school attendance problems in Japanese compulsory education schools as those who (a) refuse to attend school for trivial reasons, (b) are not diagnosed with any specific physical or mental disorder, (c) have no difficulty socialising with family and friends outside of school hours, (d) spend most of their time alone and during the school hours doing favourite activities such as watching television, playing video games, browsing the Internet or reading comic books and (e) are likely to be reluctant to visit the school counselling office even if their parents ask them to attend.

In other OECD countries, as noted, school attendance problems exhibited by Japanese students of this type are typically addressed through institutional, administrative or legal interventions. In Japanese compulsory education schools, stakeholders can only ask students with school attendance problems or their parents what they or their children want to do. Then, if they are willing to attend school only when they can, stakeholders must respect their decision and wait for a spontaneous recovery, with no

limitation. In fact, many students with school attendance problems who claim that they will attend school when their time comes never return to school until graduation (e.g., Maeda & Hatada, 2019). Stakeholders within the Japanese compulsory education system do not have the opportunity to block students' school avoidance behaviour, which may have led to rapid increase in the number of students with school attendance problems and *hikikomori*.

As noted in this study, a fundamental problem in the Japanese compulsory education system, where stakeholders are unable to block school avoidance behaviour, may be the automatic promotion and graduation in compulsory education schools, regardless of students' attendance record. In fact, Sasaki (2008), a researcher in the Japanese educational system, noted that he was approached by individuals from France, Germany and the United States who expressed surprise concerning why Japanese students in compulsory education schools can still be promoted in spite of not attending school. This fundamental problem in the Japanese compulsory education system, which could be associated with students' school avoidance behaviour, remains overlooked in the study of school attendance problems in Japanese schools.

According to PISA (2023), Japan was one of only two countries where no students underwent grade repetition in compulsory education, where 8.9% of students repeated grades across OECD member nations. Of the number of students with prolonged school absenteeism in Japan, 9,614 students in compulsory education schools did not attend school for a single day in 2022 (MEXT, 2023). In automatic promotion system, these students also receive promotion and a school diploma without proving their academic achievement at their grade. From a macro-level behavioural perspective, this system may reinforce or maintain students' school avoidance behaviour rather than blocking it.

For Japanese compulsory education schools, we propose two measures to prevent school absenteeism and school attendance problems drawing on a macro-level behavioural perspective: (a) employing data on class absences in mainstream schools, regardless of the reason for the absence, as an evaluation criterion for prolonged school absenteeism, and (b) implementing appropriate grade repetition for students who miss classes over a certain threshold (e.g., absences exceeding 15% of classes in a school year) in their mainstream school and withholding diplomas that would have been granted through automatic promotion. In European countries that have retention rules, while academic performance throughout the school year is typically the primary criterion for promotion to the next grade at the end of an academic year, factors such as behaviour, attendance record and family and health problems can also be considered in the promotion criteria (Eurydice, 2011).

8. Conclusion

In this study, we reviewed annual data from MEXT in the context of government policies and the relevant law with respect to prevention measures for school attendance problems in Japanese compulsory education schools from the perspective of school avoidance behaviour and identified

certain shortcomings within them. In summary: (a) the number of students with school attendance problems has been increasing rapidly since 2017; (b) despite increased numbers of school counsellors as a government-initiated prevention measure for school attendance problems, the number of students exhibiting school attendance problems has risen instead of declining; (c) MEXT policies and the relevant law seek to foster social independence even for students unable to return to school due to school attendance problems and to provide spaces where students with school attendance problems feel comfortable, which may inadvertently reinforce or perpetuate school avoidance behaviour; (d) in the Japanese compulsory education system, automatic promotion and the issuance of a school diploma regardless of attendance record limit stakeholders' ability to block school avoidance behaviour, aside the employment of a passive wait-and-see approach; and (e) necessary grade repetition as appropriate for students who miss classes over a certain threshold, along with withholding of automatic diplomas, should be implemented.

The rapid increase in prolonged absenteeism and school attendance problems in Japanese compulsory education schools could be influenced by multiple factors that go beyond government policies and the relevant law regarding prevention measures. In this study, various psychosocial factors that are associated with prolonged school absenteeism and school attendance problems, aside from the perspective of school avoidance behaviour, were not addressed, and this is a limitation of this study. Multiple factors related to the rapid increase of prolonged school absenteeism and school attendance problems should be explored in various research fields, and effective prevention measures should be developed across various macro-level domains, not only in Japan but also in other countries. Further, the macro-level perspective of school avoidance behaviour and approaches to it should be developed, and accurate behavioural data should be collected, as the simplest evidence should be more considered and applied in the field of prevention measures concerning school absenteeism and school attendance problems.

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