

# What Does School Attendance Mean in Japanese Compulsory Education Schools? Analysing the National Annual Report

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**Abstract:** School absenteeism in Japan has become a serious psychosocial issue over the past few decades. According to the national survey conducted annually by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan (MEXT), the number of students with school attendance problems (futoko) in compulsory education schools has been the highest since the government introduced the current data collection format in 1991. All Japanese compulsory education schools collect data on attendance and absence each day. The obtained data in each school are collected by MEXT via local education boards, which are eventually reported as annual national data. However, in recent years, data classification and interpretation of school attendance and absenteeism have become more complicated, which may constitute a limiting factor for appropriate measures for school absenteeism in Japan. The current study showed the situation of school absenteeism in Japanese compulsory education schools using the annual data reported by MEXT, and it examined matters of data classification and interpretation. The author proposed that two main categories of attendance/absence be used, namely: (a) class attendance in mainstream schools, and (b) class nonattendance in mainstream schools.

**Keywords:** school absenteeism, Japanese compulsory education schools, school attendance, school attendance data

School absenteeism in Japan has become a serious psychosocial issue over the past few decades. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan (MEXT) defines school attendance problems (futoko) as being absent from or unable to attend school for more than 30 days a year due to physical, psychological, social, and/or emotional factors, with exceptions permitted for medical and economic reasons (MEXT, 2021). According to the national survey conducted annually by MEXT (2021), the number of students with school attendance problems in 2020 reached 63,350 in elementary schools (1.0% of all students in elementary schools) and 132,777 in lower secondary schools (4.0% of all students in lower secondary schools). This is the highest level since the government introduced the current data collection format in 1991.

The Japanese education system is composed of four phases: 1. elementary school, 2. lower secondary school, 3. upper secondary school, and 4. junior college or university. Compulsory education refers to six years of elementary school (7–12 years old) and three years of lower secondary school (13–15 years old) (MEXT, 2013). Thereafter, 97% of students voluntarily attend three years of upper secondary school (16–18 years old) (MEXT, 2021).

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All Japanese students are automatically enrolled in elementary school at the age of six and de-enrolled at the age of 15, by the local government. In Japanese compulsory education schools, each class (approximately 30–35 students in one class) has a homeroom teacher and a fixed classroom where the students take most of their lessons, except for special subjects such as physical education or science experiments. The homeroom teacher, classmates, and classroom are consistent for one school year. In elementary school, a homeroom teacher covers most subjects in his/her class, and in lower secondary school, classes are taught by specialised teachers in each subject. Moreover, teachers in compulsory education schools conduct five or six classes (45–50 minutes each) every day. In public lower secondary school, 1,015 classes (approximately 200 days) are set in one school year (MEXT, 2017). All schools have homeroom times (10–15 minutes) before the first lesson and after the last session each day.

The OECD (2014) reports that Japan is one of two countries where no students repeated a grade during compulsory education schooling compared with an average of 12% across OECD countries. The Japanese government has employed an automatic promotion system (MEXT, 2014) since the Revised Elementary School Order was officially announced in 1900 (Saito, 2003), during the Meiji Era. Students in compulsory education schools can receive automatic promotion to the next year level (Saito, 2003) and receive diplomas at the end of elementary and lower secondary school (grade 9) regardless of their school attendance record (Karuta, 2020; Sasaki, 2008) or individual academic achievement (Ichikawa, 1992; Karuta, 2020). Regarding individual academic achievement, a credit-based system for each subject is not employed in public compulsory education schools, and there is no national standardised evaluation test for academic achievement at the end of elementary or lower secondary school (Suzuki, 2017).

## **1 Recording and Reporting of School Attendance and Absenteeism**

### **1.1 Japan's Annual National Report of School Attendance and Absenteeism**

All Japanese compulsory education schools collect data on attendance and absence each day (details about the recording and reporting of attendance data are presented in Section 1.7). The obtained data in each school are collected by MEXT via local education boards, which are eventually reported as annual national data. However, in recent years, data classification and interpretation of school attendance and absenteeism have become more complicated, which may constitute a limiting factor for appropriate measures for school absenteeism in Japan. The current study shows the situation of school absenteeism in Japanese compulsory education schools using the annual data reported by MEXT and examines matters of data classification and interpretation.

## 1.2 Various Forms of Official School Attendance (shusseki atsukai)

In Japanese compulsory education schools, various forms of school attendance are officially authorised by MEXT (e.g., MEXT, 2021). Apart from regular classroom attendance, school attendance is categorised into the following three types: (a) separate room attendance within enrolled schools (e.g., school nurse office, special education room or school counselling office); (b) attendance in support services outside of enrolled schools (e.g., public childcare centre, adaptation class provided by local education board, medical institutions, and private free schools); and (c) home-schooling using Internet technology (MEXT, 2021). Attendance at private free schools, which was not authorised until 2016, has officially been authorised since 2017. MEXT (2021) reported that 92,626 students in compulsory education schools (1.0% of students) are in category (a), 24,260 (0.3% of students) are in category (b), and 2,626 (0.03% of students) are in category (c).

## 1.3 Definition of Official Absence (koketsu/shuttei/kibiki)

In Japan, the category ‘Official absence’ officially allows exemption from school attendance (not counted as absence but virtually counted as authorised school attendance on paper). ‘Official absence’ includes ‘Suspension of attendance due to infectious diseases’, ‘Bereavement leave’, ‘Natural disasters’, and ‘Outside school events as representing school’ (sports, art, and music, among others). MEXT (2021) has notified each compulsory education school that absence from school due to the side effects of COVID-19 vaccination can be regarded as official school absence and recorded in the ‘Suspension of attendance due to infectious diseases’ category.

## 1.4 Definition of Prolonged School Absenteeism (choki kesseki)

Prolonged school absenteeism in Japan is defined as being absent for over 30 days in one school year, which is then categorised into ‘Sickness’ (physical or mental disorder or injury that needs either hospitalisation, doctor visits, or recuperation at home), ‘Economic reasons’ (financially struggling family where students need to work for a living), ‘School attendance problems (futoko)’ (being absent from or being unable to attend school for over 30 days a year due to physical, psychological, social, and/or emotional factors, with exceptions made for medical and economic reasons), and ‘Others’ (MEXT, 2020). Additionally, the ‘Avoiding from COVID-19 infection’ category was added in 2020 (MEXT, 2021), which was supposed to be a temporary category until the control of COVID-19 was achieved. In each school, school staff in charge (classroom teacher, school nurse, and student guidance teacher, among others) categorise absent students into the above categories after assessing the notice of absence from the parents as their routine work.

In 2020, the number of students with prolonged absenteeism reached 287,747 students in compulsory education schools (3.0% of students in compulsory education schools; more specifically, 113,746 or 1.8% of students in elementary school, and 174,001 or 5.3% of students in lower secondary school), in which 68.2% were classified as ‘School attendance problems’, 15.4% as ‘Sickness’, 7.3% as ‘Avoiding from COVID-19 infection’, 0% as ‘Economic reasons’, and 9.1% as ‘Others’ (MEXT, 2021). Figure 1 shows the prevalence of prolonged school absenteeism in 2020.

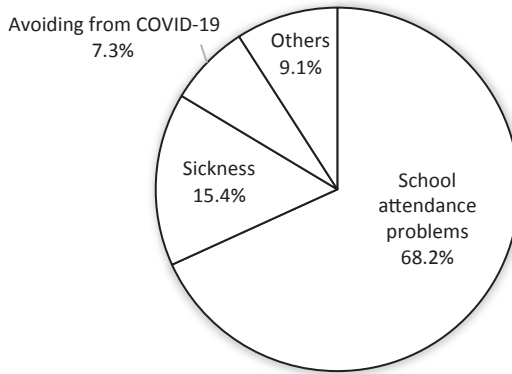


Figure 1. Prevalence of prolonged school absenteeism in 2020

### 1.5 School Attendance Problems (futoko) in Japan

In prolonged school absenteeism (i.e., over 30 days in one school year), the category ‘School attendance problems (futoko)’ has the highest prevalence and is a serious psychosocial issue in compulsory education schools. As mentioned earlier, school attendance problems are defined as being absent from or unable to attend school for more than 30 days a year due to physical, psychological, social, and/or emotional factors, with exceptions permitted for medical and economic reasons (MEXT, 2021).

MEXT (2021) categorises the cause of ‘School attendance problems’ into the following three main factors: ‘School-based factors’, ‘Family-based factors’, and ‘Individual-based factors’, which are then divided into 13 subcategories. School-based subcategories include the following: (a) Bullying issues, (b) Trouble with friends, except for bullying issues, (c) Relationship issues with teachers, (d) Academic underachievement, (e) Anxiety about further studies, (f) Maladaptation in extracurricular activities at school, (g) Maladaptation at the time of school entry, and (h) Maladaptation at the time of promotion and school transfer. Family-based subcategories involve the following: (i) Rapid change in family environment, (j) Interaction issues between parent(s) and child, and (k) Domestic discord. Individual-based subcategories include the following: (l) Delinquency or truancy and (m) Apathy or anxiety (MEXT, 2021).

Of the 13 subcategories, (m) Apathy or anxiety (46.9%) accounted for most ‘School attendance problems’, followed by (l) Delinquency or truancy (12.0%), and (b) Troubles with friends, except for bullying issues (10.6%), with (a) Bullying issues (0.2%) being the least prevalent in compulsory education schools in 2020 (MEXT, 2021). Recent national surveys have indicated that school attendance problems among Japanese students is closely associated with the individual-based factors of apathy or anxiety (Yamasaki, 2022).

### **1.6 Making Judgements About Absences Reportedly Stemming from Sickness**

In terms of sickness, MEXT (2021) states that although doctors are primarily responsible to determine whether a student who is ill should recuperate at home, family and others who care for the child are also allowed to provide their own independent judgement. Hence, when parents are willing to let their child stay at home due to sickness regardless of whether they have a physical or mental disorder, they are not required by school authorities to produce a medical certificate. Instead, parents must simply report to school authorities that their child will not be attending school due to sickness. In this case, if a student misses school for many days owing to a family holiday but the parents erroneously inform the school that their child is unable to attend due to being sick or having a fever, then in many schools the absence will be automatically classified as due to ‘Sickness’ rather than ‘School attendance problems’.

### **1.7 The Process of Recording and Reporting Attendance and Absence**

In Japanese compulsory education schools, each homeroom teacher routinely checks student attendance or absence in homeroom hours in the morning. During school hours, some teachers record the arrival time of late (‘tardy’) students and departure time of students who leave early from school. These data are shared with the school administrative staff via the school nurse.

The school absence data collected in each school is transferred to MEXT (national government) via 47 local education boards, once a year. The data of tardiness and early leaving are generally regarded as authorised attendance and not reported as partial absence. Based on these data, MEXT officially issues the number and rate of students with prolonged absenteeism, including school attendance problems, as the result of an annual survey. In addition, the School Education Act stipulates that the principals of compulsory education schools must report to the local education boards about students who do not attend school for seven days without any authorised reason. Local education boards are then expected to require that the parents of those students send their children to school. Nevertheless, this law has become ‘a dead letter’ because it is not adhered to by the school principals and local education boards (e.g., Ono, 2015).

## 2 Using School Absence Data

### 2.1 Individual Level

Individual student absence data are kept by each compulsory education school for five years and transferred to the next grade when students move on to the next grade. The staff of each compulsory education school are thus kept informed of students' absences whenever necessary over a certain period of time. The data are provided to the senior secondary school of the student's choice as a part of the student's record when they apply for it at grade nine, the final year in compulsory education schools.

### 2.2 National and Academic Level

The data on school absenteeism in the annual report has had a significant impact on education and community service responses to students with prolonged absenteeism and school attendance problems, contributing to the development of public support systems for them, such as official deployment of school counsellors in 1995 and school social workers in 2008, as well as the enactment of relevant laws (e.g., Act To Guarantee Access To Supplementary Learning To Insufficient Compulsory Education Due To Absenteeism And What Not in 2016). That is, the national annual data provided by MEXT is imperative in understanding the situation of school absenteeism in Japan. However, the data have not currently been used to evaluate school policy or determine school funding.

Many researchers who study school absenteeism in Japan have utilised the annual data in their studies (e.g., Aruga, 2020; Hong et al., 2019; Matsuura et al., 2020; Ochi et al., 2020). The data can be analysed from various perspectives because the MEXT annual report provides much data on school absenteeism. However, as mentioned previously, the data classification of absenteeism is based on the judgement of each school, and without defined universal criteria, there can be various interpretations of the data that has been analysed.

## 3 Discussion

### 3.1 Ambiguous Criteria for School Attendance Problems

The data related to school attendance problems in Japan are generally emphasised and utilised in the government, media, education board, and schools. School attendance problems are a category of prolonged absenteeism, which excludes medical and economic reasons. In this regard, one can have little confidence in the data about absence due to medical reasons because they include the poor physical condition

reported by parents. If the parents of students with prolonged absenteeism report that the student feels unwell, then each school must make the decision to categorise this incident as either 'Sickness' or 'Other' based simply on the parent's report. In fact, several public schools in which the author worked as a school counsellor determined that parent reports of 'feeling unwell', 'headache' or 'stomach-ache' in the morning would be classified as 'Sickness' (authorised absence). Additionally, if the students do not attend school for more than 30 days due to these symptoms, then they will not be categorised as 'School attendance problems'. As long as parents are not officially required to obtain a medical certificate for health or mental health symptoms, then students with school attendance problems, especially school refusal, are likely to be included in the 'Sickness' category and therefore might miss receiving school-based effective support to enable return to school.

### 3.2 Extending the Interpretation of Authorised School Attendance

In Japan, with the increase of prolonged absenteeism and school attendance problems, MEXT has extended the interpretation of authorised school attendance. The law 'Act To Guarantee Access To Supplementary Learning To Insufficient Compulsory Education Due To Absenteeism And What Not' was enacted in 2016, and it officially acknowledges the significance of learning at free private schools (Kurosaki, 2022). The law assumes that students with school attendance problems should be provided with appropriate places of learning outside public compulsory education schools. Under this law, attendance at private free schools is regarded as an authorised school attendance, regardless of the educational curriculum of the free school. Nevertheless, in reality, the number of students with school attendance problems is the highest on record since the Act was enacted in 2016 (e.g., MEXT, 2021). This implies that most students with prolonged school absenteeism, including school attendance problems, are not attending either mainstream or alternative education schools.

Home-schooling is another option of alternative education. MEXT has officially recognised this as authorised school attendance under certain conditions, since the 2005 notification titled 'Dealing With Students With Refusal To Go To School Who Perform Learning Activities Through Information Technology At Home'. Authorised home-schooling attendance for students with school attendance problems, using information and communication technology, was uncommon in Japan. However, the numbers have rapidly increased since the spread of COVID-19 in 2020, growing four-fold compared with that in 2019 (from 608 to 2,626; MEXT, 2020, 2021). This increase is likely to continue, given the current categorisation of school attendance problems and MEXT policy towards prolonged school absenteeism, which is to provide students with absenteeism appropriate places of learning outside public compulsory education schools. Nevertheless, as Havik and Ingul (2021) assert, it is difficult to implement home-schooling for students with school attendance problems who

**68** lack motivation, making it unlikely to be an effective strategy for many Japanese students with school attendance problems, about half of whom are categorised as having ‘Apathy or anxiety’ problems (MEXT, 2021).

The national annual data on school absenteeism in compulsory education schools reported by MEXT is crucial for stakeholders in the field of school attendance. However, understanding the data is difficult, due to the complexity of categories, the definitions for which change every few years. Recently, the definition of authorised school attendance has been extended to include home-schooling under certain conditions. Despite this, the number of students with prolonged absenteeism and school attendance problems has increased rather than declined. The effectiveness of the long-standing MEXT policy that has been providing an alternative learning option for students unwilling to attend school should be questioned because it has not been evaluated. This policy is challenged by the findings of numerous studies confirming that school environments provide the most significant opportunities for youth to develop their abilities and skills, such as academic skills, social and emotional skills, social competence and relationship skills, persistence, problem-solving skills, the ability to work with others, and stress tolerance (e.g., Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Maeda & Inoue, 2021). Once students are isolated from the school environment due to their absenteeism, they experience difficulties in acquiring these skills and abilities. The school environment is a society for all children of school age, where they can participate in psychosocial experiences that promote their future development, well-being, and potential.

### 3.3 Missing Days Versus Missing Classes

Although the number of absent days is regarded as a crucial criterion for prolonged school absenteeism in Japanese compulsory education schools, the time spent in school or attending classes is not regarded as a valued criterion for determining the presence or absence of a school attendance problem. As noted earlier, there is a range of authorised attendance that would not normally be counted as attendance in other international contexts. For example, a student who attends full classes for three days and has two full-day absences (two days of absence out of the last five school days) will receive a higher rate of prolonged absenteeism than another student who attends school to have a chat with school teachers for a few minutes every day without attending any class (five days of authorised school attendance). This situation is possible because of the flexible interpretation of authorised school attendance entrusted to each school principal. Nakahara and Ito (2008) criticise this practice where students who only partially attend school (without participating in any classes) are registered with an authorised school attendance record and thus are not recognised as having school attendance problems. For as long as this situation exists, a focus on increasing the recorded number of days of ‘apparent’ school attendance will not contribute to solving school attendance problems.



### 3.4 Thresholds and Attendance

Because prolonged school absenteeism is defined as over 30 days of absence in one school year (i.e., 15% absence), this means that missing nearly 150 classes in a year is within the acceptable range in lower secondary school. While around 7% of students in lower secondary schools (i.e., approximately 220,000 students) do not attend 150 classes or more due to prolonged absenteeism, the progressive educational attainment of these students is unknown because there are no standardised criteria for measuring progress at each grade. From the perspective of guaranteeing minimum academic achievement in compulsory education schools, it is suggested that MEXT should establish criteria for minimum academic achievement at each grade, and administer learning progress assessments for all students (e.g., *Chicago Public Schools Policy Manual*, 2009), which may stimulate students with absenteeism to attend some classes.

### 3.5 Sanctions

Parents have a duty to educate their children in the Constitution of Japan (Article 26), and parents who violate the law are liable to a fine of up to 100,000 yen (The School Education Law Article 144). The law has been applied in only two cases, in 1959 and 1976 (Hazama et al., 2011) although there has been a large number of serious cases of school attendance problems associated with parental child-rearing attitudes. Principals in each school must report students absent from school for seven days to local education boards, except for those cases where the parents have authorised reasons. If the local education boards receive these reports from schools, then they must urge the parents to get their children to attend school (Enforcement Order of the School Education Act Article 20, 21).

Imposing legal sanctions against parents who do not get their children to school is virtually impossible for school authorities in Japan (Shinohara & Shojima, 2008). 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 school attendance problems and their parents are exempted from legal liability (Shinohara & Shojima, 2008). In this case, if the student expresses his/her intention not to attend school for any reason, the parents will be exempted from the responsibility of sending their child to school. Therefore, there is a need to develop clear criteria for authorised reasons for being absent from school, to correctly interpret the large amount of data relating to absenteeism in compulsory education schools.

## 4 Conclusion

In sum, the annual national survey conducted by MEXT provides the public with data and information about school attendance and absence in Japan. However, the

**70** following improvements are required to make more effective use of the data. First, the definition of authorised school attendance should be made clear. In Japan, the curriculum content of classes in mainstream schools differs substantially from that of alternative education schools or programmes. Hence, the data pertaining to these various forms of school attendance should not be treated in the same manner as data pertaining to authorised school attendance. In particular, a record of the number of students missing classes in mainstream schools should be collected, and students who miss more than 150 classes in one school year could be identified as having a ‘School attendance problem’ regardless of the reasons for absence from class. This suggestion is critical not only for the measure of school attendance problems, but also for the development of a policy that guarantees at least a minimum level of academic achievement and the opportunity for progress in compulsory education.

Second, parent-reported student absences due to poor physical condition for more than three consecutive days without a doctor’s certificate should be categorised as being a ‘School attendance problem’. Kobayashi (2007) indicated that the average number of absent days per student per school year due to sickness was four days, and highlighted that consecutive school absence for more than three days should be addressed as a possible ‘School attendance problem’. Feeling unwell or somatic complaints is seen in many cases of school refusal, some of which are not diagnosed with any physical or mental health disorders (e.g., Maeda & Heyne, 2019). However, if schools treat these symptoms as sickness (i.e., authorised school absence), then students with these symptoms are often excluded from school or family-based interventions, and this probably contributes to the problem of prolonged school absenteeism in Japan. It follows that for the criterion of ‘Sickness’, a doctor’s certificate, which stipulates the required period of recuperation at home, should be required for more than three days of absence.

Recently, evidence-based approaches have been highlighted for school attendance problems (e.g., Eklund et al., 2020; Heyne et al., 2020; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). In this context, it is necessary for researchers to access quality attendance data to help build evidence for the effectiveness of interventions. However, the importance of data classification and interpretation is occasionally overlooked in Japan, which may contribute to the application of ineffective responses and interventions for school absenteeism. Indeed, as mentioned in this paper, some definitions of absence categories in the MEXT annual report are quite ambiguous, such as the difference between the definition of prolonged school absenteeism and school attendance problems. Therefore, from a fundamental perspective, stakeholders should simplify the definition of school absenteeism, reducing the room for variable interpretation as much as possible. To achieve this, the author recommends that the classification of school absenteeism data be simplified into two main categories: (a) class attendance in mainstream schools, and (b) class nonattendance in mainstream schools. When students miss classes in mainstream schools (i.e., more than 15%), this should be categorised as due to ‘School attendance problems’ regardless

of the reason. Subsequently, each student with school attendance problems should be provided appropriate support, depending on their specific difficulties.

At the moment, MEXT does not report the data in these categories, but it can be estimated on the basis of published data. According to the report of MEXT in 2021, the number of students with prolonged absenteeism in compulsory education schools accounts for 287,747 cases, which would increase to approximately 387,000 cases for this new recommended category. This is because the approximately 100,000 students whose school attendance is officially accepted in other forms of education (e.g., alternative education classes, private free school, or home-schooling) in the absence of being in class in a mainstream school, will be categorised as students with ‘School attendance problems’.

It may be a challenge for MEXT and education authorities to accept that some of their existing measures for school attendance problems are ineffective. In conclusion, if MEXT, education authorities, and each school agree to collect attendance and absence data based on the simplified definitions stated above, to avoid misinterpretation, then it will allow for the development of more meaningful measures for school attendance problems and their effective management in Japan.

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