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Adolescent school refusal in Japan : implications for school counselors

Abstract

Since its emergence in the late 1950s, school refusal has been identified as a severe problem related to schooling in Japan. Its etiology is complex; changes in social environment in Japan after World War II which affect everyone, familial factors such as parenting style, and school environmental factors are considered as critical factors which cause school refusal.

School counselors need to not only understand the background information of school refusal, but also identify early symptoms and intervene before students develop it. Coordination and consultation roles are especially important in dealing with this problem. Consultation with parents of school refusers is often observed in helping students who have developed school refusal. As a coordinator, school counselors can offer those parents and their children information of various psychological services, such as alternative classroom and counseling services by regional educational institutes.

ADOLESCENT SCHOOL REFUSAL IN JAPAN:
IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

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One of the biggest challenges related to schooling in Japan is school refusal (Nakane, 1990). Since the Japanese educational system mandates that all children go to school to receive an education, long-term nonattendance has been considered as one of the maladjustment behaviors in school (Sato, 1996). The annual survey (1999) by the Japanese Ministry of Education indicates a constant increase since 1975 in the number of students who miss school more than 50 days a year. According to this survey, the number of junior high school students who did not attend school more than 30 days per year due to their refusal to attend school in 1998 was 101,680 (Japanese ministry of education, 1999).

With the increasing severity of the school attendance problem, various descriptive terms have evolved as more research has been conducted (Honma, 1986; Koizumi, 1990; Sato, 1996). The terms used for describing school refusal behaviors include truancy, school phobia, neurotic school refusal syndrome, school refusal syndrome, non-attendance, separation anxiety disorder, school avoidance, and drop-out (Sato, 1996; Sikorski, 1996). The confusion of terminology for this phenomenon indicates the complexity of this problem. Because of this complexity, many studies have focused on the classification of the types of school refusal (Honma, 1986; Sato, 1992). Consequently, interest in this problem has moved to the examination of case studies (Honma, 1987; Tsuruta, 1996; Shimizu, 1994; Kitamura, 1994), case studies of the treatment for families of refusers (Honma, 1999; Noda & Uechi, 1999), specific strategies (Suzuki,

Kobayashi, & Sasaki, 1985), and the effect of the alternative classrooms, the place where school refusers go instead of going to their school (Shimoyama & Susuki, 1999).

Despite the demand for professional psychological services in the school setting, teachers traditionally have taken all the responsibility for both teaching and guidance in Japan (Hara, 1998). Enthusiastic teachers have voluntarily learned about providing psychological assistance for students and have received training in counseling skills. Therefore, counseling services in schools have been considered as an extension of teaching (Hara, 1998). In addition, many school nurses deal with the school refusal problems from the perspective of emotional health. However, because of the complicated problems of school refusal which overwhelm teachers, and the limitations of the existing educational system, the Japanese Ministry of Education recently initiated school counseling in the junior high schools as an experimental effort to explore the possibility of more effective assistance for students, including problems related to school refusal (Murayama & Yamamoto, 1995).

Since the concept of school counseling is relatively new in Japan, it is important to clarify the role of the school counselors with regard to school refusal. Since counseling was first introduced in Japanese junior high schools, the focus of this paper will be an school refusal in the adolescent population. Types of school refusal, factors which contribute to school refusal, and historical background of

the problem will be discussed. Implications for school counselors including identification, coordination, consultation, and prevention will be discussed as potential roles school counselors may assume in dealing with this serious problem.

Prevalence of Adolescent School Refusal in Japan

The long-term attendance problem, or school refusal, in Japanese schools was initially equated with truancy until the “new type of school refusal” emerged in the late 1950s (Nakane, 1990; Sato, 1996, p.158). This new type of school refusal was described as follows: when it was time to go to school in the morning, students complained of physical illness such as a headache or a stomachache for which there was no organic cause. These symptoms disappeared in the afternoon and students showed willingness to go to school next day. It also included throwing temper tantrums, being excessively anxious, or even hurting themselves when teachers and parents forcefully demanded that them to go school (Sato, 1996). However, this new type of school refusal was initially termed as “school phobia” to distinguish it from Johnson’s definition of truancy (cited in Sato, 1996) until the introduction of the term “school refusal” in mid 1960s. As a major reason for this terminological change, Sato (1996) pointed out the increase in the number of adolescent school refusers who cannot be diagnosed as separation anxiety disorder.

In the 1980s, another term, “futouko (i.e., school nonattendance),” emerged due to the criticism that school refusal implies students’ intentional refusal to go to school rather than their inability to go to school due to their psychological problems (Sato, 1996). However, both terms are interchangeably used for describing the long-term absenteeism at school in Japan at this point. In fact, when the term “futouko” is translated into English, school refusal is usually used instead of school nonattendance (Itabashi, 2000; Shimoyama & Susuki, 1999). Thus, the terminology of long-term absenteeism has gradually changed with the progress of the studies and the recognition of the severity of the problem.

Types of School Refusal

As the terminological changes show, unfortunately there is no clear agreement on the definition of school refusal (Sato, 1996). Elliott (1999) noted that “the major difficulty in gaining any understanding of school refusal is that the use of terms employed in describing various forms of school absence frequently varies” (p. 1001). As criteria for school refusal, both Elliott (1999) and King, Ollendick, and Tonge (1995) applied those originally developed by Berg, Nichols, and Prichard (cited in Elliott, 1999; King et al., 1995):

1. Severe difficulty in attending school, often resulting in prolonged absence

2. Severe emotional upset, including excessive fearfulness, temper tantrums, or complaints of feeling ill without obvious organic cause when faced with the prospect of going to school
3. Staying at home with the parent's knowledge when the youngster should be at school
4. Absence of significant antisocial characteristics such as stealing, lying, and destructiveness (Elliott, p.1001; King et al, p.2-3)

These criteria obviously distinguish school refusal and truant behaviors. In Japan, similar criteria are popularly applied for the identification of school refusal (Sato, 1996). In addition, Sato (1996) specifically stated that the long-term absence from school, which is not caused by mental illness or other handicaps, is the main problem in school refusal.

Although the term school refusal has been used to describe long-term non-attendance that stems from psychological reasons, there are several categories under this term. Koizumi (1990) proposed the following six types: neurotic, truant tendency, mental illness, intentional, temporary, and mental retardation and other handicaps. These terms are almost identical to the types proposed by Honma and Nakagawa (1997) and Sato (1996), and are frequently applied in other studies (Kitamura, 1994; Tsuruta, 1996). Koizumi (1990) noted that the six types of school refusal are "school refusal in the broad meaning" and the neurotic type is "school refusal in the narrow meaning" (p.92). Thus, the six types belong to

school nonattendance due to psychological reasons; however, the neurotic type is considered as school refusal, which is the focus of many researchers. In fact, this type is dominant and frequently observed among all types of nonattendance due to psychological reasons (Koizumi, 1990).

Neurotic School Refusal

The characteristics of neurotic type can be described by its three subtypes (Koizumi, 1990): separation anxiety, spoiled child, and burnout of a good child. Sato (1992) also described three similar subtypes as separation anxiety, loss-of-self, and immature.

Both Sato and Koizumi described the separation anxiety subtype as usually seen in elementary school age, and there are few such cases in adolescence. Separation anxiety disorder, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed., DSM-IV, American Psychiatric Association, 1994), is described as “developmentally inappropriate and excessive anxiety concerning separation from home or from those to whom the child is attached” (p. 110). Koizumi (1990) noted that it usually stems from the mother/child relationship, which is overprotective or rejecting. In some cases, it involves grandparents who live with their grandchildren. In Japan, it is not unusual that three generations live together in one house. Grandparents sometimes pamper their grandchildren, encouraging their dependence, which causes school refusal behavior (Koizumi, 1990).

Koizumi's spoiled child subtype and Sato's immature subtype are almost identical. Koizumi (1990) pointed out that the onset of this type is observed at kindergarten age, but it gets steadily worse. Therefore, it is also observed among adolescent school refusers. The refusers of this type are emotionally immature, lack a self-reliant spirit and social skills, and have low frustration tolerance (Koizumi, 1990; Honma & Nakagawa, 1997; Sato, 1992). As a result, when they encounter a threatening situation outside the home, they refuse to go to school.

Burn-out of a good child subtype (Koizumi, 1990) and loss of self subtype (Sato, 1992) also share several characteristics. This type of school refusal is observed mainly in adolescence (Kitamura, 1994; Koizumi, 1990). These school refusers have been good children and good students, they have been hard workers and earned relatively good grades, and they have never indicated dislike for school before the onset of school refusal (Kitamura, 1994; Koizumi, 1990, Sato, 1996). Since they have been good students, parents, teachers, and other people have high expectations for them. Therefore, these children "internalize other people's expectations, repress their needs, and grow up to be good children" (Koizumi, 1990, p.94). However, as they reach adolescence they sometimes encounter difficult situations in which they cannot live up to others' expectations, they might fail in academic achievement or peer acceptance, for example. Once they lose their self-confidence, even if triggered by relatively developmentally

typical troubles, they reject everything. Then they refuse to go to school and seclude themselves at home.

Students with these neurotic types of school refusal are generally treated as school refusals. However, the remaining five types also should be noted here for the clear understanding of the distinction between the neurotic type and others. In addition, an increase in “mixed type” (p. 96, Koizumi, 1990) of school refusal is currently more prevalent.

Truant Tendency Type

The second type, truant tendency, has two subtypes: apathetic and delinquent (Koizumi, 1990). The apathetic subtype is observed often in adolescence (Honma & Nakagawa, 1997). As the name implies, this is characterized as apathy toward anything related to school (Tsuruta, 1996). These school refusers “withdraw themselves only from the situation where they are supposed to be; therefore, they become apathetic and unmotivated only for that” (Tsuruta, 1996, p. 98). Since the school is the place where they are supposed to be, they withdraw from school by refusing to go. However, since their withdrawal is “selective and situational” (Tsuruta, 1996, p.98), they engage in what they are interested in such as their hobbies. Sato (1992) reported the recent drastic increase in this type of school refusal.

The delinquent subtype stems from the old-fashioned type of truancy. These refusers are characterized as selfish, anti-social, and unable to follow the

rules of school and society (Honma & Nakagawa, 1997). In addition, they seldom show any anxiety and conflict for nonattendance. Since these two subtypes indicate truant tendencies, they are both under this type. Both subtypes initiate their school refusal behavior because of their lack of interest in going to school. Therefore, their behavior is voluntary. This type may be treated as a behavioral problem rather than a psychological problem. However, the current increase in the number of apathetic type draws the attention of school refusal researchers (i.e., Tsuruta, 1996; Sato, 1996). Morita (1991) described the apathetic type of school refusal as a “modern type of school refusal” and warned that school refusal could happen to any child, any student.

Mental Illness Type

The third type, mental illness, is due to psychotic disorders or mood disorders, such as schizophrenia and depression (Koizumi, 1990; Sato, 1992). This type of school refusers express general symptoms of depression or schizophrenia. This type needs to be distinguished from the neurotic type. The neurotic type often expresses symptoms similar to mental illness such as depression and schizophrenia in its process for recovery. The neurotic type refusers show extreme anxiety and emotional conflict especially toward the issue related to schooling; on the other hand, the mental illness type has persistent emotional dysfunctions without any relations with schooling. Their absence is a

result of their illness. As Honma and Nakagawa (1997) noted, it is important to work with psychiatrists in diagnosis and treatment of this type.

According to Honma and Nakagawa (1997), this type is relatively rare among elementary school children, but it gradually increases among adolescents. Honma and Nakagawa (1997) studied the school refusers who went to the alternative classroom in a regional education center, and they reported this type of school refusers were only 3% of all refusers. However, as Koizumi (1990) noted, this ratio might be higher in mental health center or hospital settings.

Intentional Type

The fourth type, intentional type, is a student's intentional refusal to go to school (Koizumi, 1990; Sato, 1992). Koizumi (1990) explained that this type of student rejects school because they do not see the value of school. For example, this type includes students who are absent from school because they think that the school does not fit them. Therefore, students of this type usually seldom have anxiety or conflict for nonattendance (Honma & Nakagawa, 1997).

This type seems to share some characteristics with the truant tendency type. However, students of this type show neither apathy nor anti-social behaviors which are characteristics of the truant tendency type. Instead, they tend to be mature and have a strong identity (Honma & Nakagawa, 1997). School refusal is a choice positively made by them. Koizumi (1990) noted that in several cases students seemed to be this type but they ended up with the truant tendency

type because of the fact that they “secluded themselves and idled away their time” (p. 91). Thus, it is important to distinguish these two types by looking at students’ behaviors.

Temporary Type

As the name indicates, the temporary type is characterized by relatively short term adjustment problems due to events such as moving, transition to junior high school or high school, or parental divorce (Koizumi, 1990; Sato, 1992). Students with this type usually return to school once the situation is settled down. However, these situational changes often result in long-term school refusal by developing neurotic type. Therefore, it is important to distinguish this temporary type and other types. For example, as Koizumi noted (1990) bullying could be considered as one of situational change which triggers temporary school refusal, but in often cases school refusal may continue even though bullying ends. Since there is no guideline for determining what is “temporary,” this type may be distinguished only by its duration of symptoms.

Mental Retardation and Learning Disability Type

The last type, mental retardation and other handicaps, is characterized by absenteeism due to adjustment problems because of the severe academic failures due to mental retardation or a learning disability (Koizumi, 1990; Sato, 1992). Because of their handicaps, students of this type have difficulty completing

schoolwork and understanding classes. As a result, they lose interest in going to school or they feel difficulty in staying in school (Sato, 1996).

This type of school refusal may be related to the current Japanese school system. As Hodgkinson criticized (cited in Bracey, 1997), the current Japanese education system focuses on the average student; as a result, students who require special needs are usually left without proper assistance. A learning disability, which is relatively new in Japan, is rarely diagnosed. Thus, students who have or might have academic handicaps are underserved and result in school refusal. As Sato pointed out (1996), academic failure or difficulty is often combined with other factors such as personal characteristics and environmental issues in the development of school refusal. Therefore, this type of school refusal may be exhibited with a combination of the other types.

All types stem from psychological reasons for not going to school. However, characteristics of each type are widely diverse. The neurotic type, the narrow meaning of school refusal, has basically dominated the research (Sato, 1996), but other types also contributed to the continuous increase of school refusal and are beginning to draw more attention (Sato, 1992).

Factors That Cause School Refusal Behaviors

As the existence of various types of school refusal implies, the factors that cause it are heterogeneous and multi-causal (Elliott, 1999). However, there are

several factors commonly identified among researchers (Itabashi, 2000; Koizumi, 1990; Nakane, 1990; Sato, 1996; Sikorski, 1996).

First, as a factor which affects every child and adolescent, Koizumi (1990) highlighted the drastic change in the social environment in Japan. Since 1960, Japan has drastically changed in economic growth and the modernization of its society, which has changed people's lifestyles and values. The educational system which started after World War II was also established by 1960. It facilitated the value of high academic achievement, which means getting into prestigious schools. As a result, students have to experience stressful competition such as standardized tests throughout their education (Koizumi, 1990; Sato, 1996). A declining birthrate, the changes in family structure, and the psychological absence of fathers in families who devote their time for work commitment are also considered critical background factors (Sato, 1996).

Despite these social background factors, not all the adolescents develop school refusal. Sato (1996) discussed personalities of children and parents, parenting styles, and family dynamics as familial factors which contribute to the onset of school refusal. Especially enmeshed relationships between mothers and children with school refusal have been studied (Itabashi, 2000, Koizumi, 1990; Sato, 1996).

In addition, the changes in school environment should be noted as critical factors. As one of those changes, Nakane (1990), Sato (1996), and K. Ohara, T.

Sakuta, K. Ohara, and A. Sakuta (1999) discussed the close relationship between bullying and school refusal. In fact, both bullying and school refusal have become widespread at almost same time. It is likely that victimization of bullying triggered school refusal (Nakane, 1990). Academic underachievement, especially in junior and senior high school, is also discussed in relationship with school refusal (Koizumi, 1990). Burn-out of good child type is typically triggered by this factor.

School refusal in Japan is complicated. It is a result of the intertwining of the social background factor, the familial factor, and the school environment factor.

Implication for School Counselors

Identification of School Refusal

Students usually exhibit various warning signs before they develop school refusal. It is crucial for school counselors to recognize those signs and intervene in the early stage. Both Kodama (1994) and Ishigooka (1995) discussed the importance of early recognition of school refusal behaviors and summarized the following characteristics of early stage of school refusal.

First, students exhibit changes in their school attendance patterns. They become absent from school more often, and late arrival and early departure occur more frequently. Ishigooka (1995) pointed out that frequent absence after holidays should be noted. Second, students frequently complain about physical

pain, such as headache, stomachache, and nausea, and visit school nurse often. In addition, they begin to skip physical education and club activities. Changes in friendships and sudden decline of grades are also critical points to consider.

These symptoms are easily identified at school if school counselors have closely worked with other teachers and school nurses. Once these symptoms are identified, it is crucial for counselors to make contact with parents to gather more information about students at home. Ishigooka (1995) described several behavioral changes according to school refusal that could be observed at home: exhibiting reluctance to go to school, somatic complaints, lack of appetite, avoidance of school issues, and decrease of conversation with family.

As part of the identification process, Kodama (1994) emphasized that it is important to distinguish the early symptom of school refusal from developmental behavioral patterns. For example, adolescents' decreased interest in the conversation with family might reflect their desire for autonomy. As Vernon (1993) discussed, assessing frequency, intensity, and duration is useful for the identification of the problem, which helps distinguish the school refusal symptom from typical developmental characteristics.

Coordinator Role Between and Among School and Outside Agencies

Because there has not been a special professional who serves as a coordinator in most schools in Japan, it has been difficult to build a team to work with problems such as school refusal. Since school counseling is a new

educational service in Japan, the role statement of school counselors itself does not exist. Based on the school counseling system in the United States, Ishigooka (1995) pointed out that school counselors in Japan would also have to work as a pivotal person who can maximize the function of each system, school, home, and outside agencies.

Since there has been no identified coordinator, school counselors need to perform this role within the school setting. In the identification of school refusal, it is critical to collect information about students who display school refusal tendency. Contacting teachers of students who display school refusal behaviors, conferring with the school principal and vice principal as well as the school nurse are all possible coordination roles school counselors can perform (Ukai, 1995). Second, coordination between school and home is also important. Ishigooka (1995) noted that often times the relationship between parents and school gets worse because they tend to blame each other for the school refusal behaviors. School counselors need to intervene in these cases and facilitate ways to construct positive relationships to help these families (Ishigooka, 1995). Third, the most important coordination for school counselor is the one between school and other regional educational institutes (Takayama, 1995). In Japan, most of prefectures, cities, and towns have their own educational institutes under a prefectural board of education. Those regional educational institutes usually offer consultation and sometimes counseling for parents and teachers in the area where the institutes are.

Many institutes have clinical psychologists on staff for psychological services. Some institutes offer alternative classrooms and individual counseling for school refusers (Honma & Nakagawa, 1997; Takayama, 1995). For example, Gifu-city Adolescent Center opened the alternative classroom “Salvia” for the students who cannot go to school because of their symptoms (Gifu-shi board of education, 1999). Thus, regional education institutes can provide many resources for people who need assistance with school refusal problems. By coordinating between the school and institutes, school counselors can maximize the potential intervention strategies (Takayama, 1995).

Consultation with Parents and Teachers

The most difficult problem of school refusal is that school counselor cannot provide direct counseling service once students start school refusal (Honma, 1999). As a result, school counselors often work with parents through consultation.

First, in the consultation with parents, the school counselors need to show a supportive attitude, establish rapport with parents, and become a person who parents can count on (Ishigooka, 1995). Triggered by a child’s school refusal, the relationship between mother and father or between mother and grandmother sometimes deteriorates because they blame each other (Ishigooka, 1995). In the consultation, school counselors need to show empathy and encourage them to cope with their difficult situation. Educating parents about school refusal,

including types of school refusal and stages for recovery, is important (Ishigooka, 1995; Scott, Cully, & Weissberg, 1995). In addition to educating parents about school refusal, school counselors need to give them skills to help their children and themselves, such as effective communication skills and coping skills (Ishigooka, 1995).

Consultation and collaboration with teachers are also necessary (Scott et al., 1995). Once school refusal occurs in their homeroom, teachers often lose their confidence in their profession and start to blame themselves (Mitsuoka, 1995). Therefore, as with consultation with parents, providing a supportive and encouraging relationship as a consultant is also important. Temporary classroom modification, academic support for the students while they are absent from school, communication with parents and students, and fostering a supportive atmosphere in their homeroom are possible issues to address with teachers (Ishigooka, 1995).

Preventive Approach

Besides early recognition of school refusal behaviors, school counselors need to work proactively before school refusal emerges in school. One of the causal factors of school refusal is the school environment. According to a study by Hirata, Kanno, and Koizumi (1999), many school refusers described being isolated and lonely in their classrooms. Also, many cases of school refusal stem from bullying in the classroom (Nakane, 1990). Therefore, developing a program

for facilitating good friendships and a supportive homeroom atmosphere by collaborating with homeroom teachers is a possible approach for preventing school refusal (Hirata et al., 1999). Friendship groups and classroom guidance are also possible preventions for this issue. In Japan, elementary and junior high schools have a period secured for “doutoku (moral/guidance)” every week. Therefore, even in junior high schools, it is not difficult for school counselors to implement guidance lessons. Working closely with homeroom teachers, school counselors can visit classrooms, and do guidance related to friendships, social skills, bullying, and cooperation.

In addition, educating teachers and parents about school refusal is also a powerful prevention (Sato, 1996). First, by knowing about the characteristics of school refusal, teachers and parents become more sensitive about early symptoms of school refusal. Second, teachers and parents can learn more about available services, including school counselors, and they can form a support service network within school, between school and home, and between school and regional education institutes to serve for possible school refusal problems. Teachers may change their instruction style, be more aware of friendship relationships in the class, and offer extra support for the at risk students.

Conclusion

Since its emergence in the late 1950s, school refusal has been identified as a severe problem related to schooling in Japan. Its etiology is complex; changes

in social environment in Japan after World War II which affect everyone, familial factors such as parenting style, and school environmental factors are considered as critical factors which cause school refusal.

School counselors need to not only understand the background information of school refusal, but also identify early symptoms and intervene before students develop it. Coordination and consultation roles are especially important in dealing with this problem. Consultation with parents of school refusers is often observed in helping students who have developed school refusal. As a coordinator, school counselors can offer those parents and their children information of various psychological services, such as alternative classroom and counseling services by regional educational institutes.

Providing psychological support for parents and teachers is also important in performing those roles. In addition, school counselors must work on prevention by helping teachers facilitate supportive classroom atmospheres, educating teachers and parents about the problem, and working directly with students when symptoms begin to emerge. By performing those roles, school counselors can help a number of students who developed and who have potential to develop school refusal.

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