UrbanScope
e-Journal of the Urban-Culture Research Center, OCU

Aspects of self-exclusion in the Japanese education system

Sabine MEISE*

Keywords: Absenteeism, Japanese Education, Comparative Education, Exclusion

Abstract

This article introduces aspects of self-exclusion of Japanese students during compulsory education despite the efforts of Japanese public education to build Inclusive schools. The description of different learning places for pupils inside and outside regular schools, but also activities of teachers to prevent self-exclusion, such as extra lessons in regular schools (research 2007, 2017), gives an insight into Japanese school education, which shows an ambivalence in creating Inclusive schools within a neoliberal educational policy. Selected research results of questionnaires for teachers throughout Japan in 2007, 2017 and ethnographic studies in 2014, 2017 and 2018 are used for illustration.

The article concludes that flexibility in using various places of learning to find an 居場所 (î basho- good place) for every student and the attitudes and activities of teachers (comparing 2007 and 2017) are two important forces in preventing school non-attendance. Attitudes and activities of educators, but also structural questions such as looking at suitable learning places could be considered in searching for the tertium comparationis for upcoming comparative research between Japan and Germany.

*"We have less children who will make
the new society in the future than before.
We had better cost [invest] for them more than before."
Quote from a teacher's questionnaire 2017*

I.　Introduction

For more than 50 years, Japanese students have been self-excluding from school, culminating in a powerful social不登校 (futôkô - school not-attendance) movement (Lozano 2013, Wong 2007, Yoneyama 2000). Recent developments show the dialectic between efforts to create Inclusive schools and attempts to create an 居場所 (î basho - good place) for every student. The introduction of 特別支援教育 (tokubetsu shien kyôiku - special support education) in 2007 (Ueno et al 2006)[1] was an important step towards establishing Inclusive schools. This formed various activities to realize the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) which was signed in 2007 and ratified in 2014. This creation of Inclusive schools has exposed the limits of a neoliberal educational policy (Goodman/Phillips 2003), especially with the increasing number of 不登校生徒 (futôkô seito – students who do not attend school).

---

1. This term is mainly used by teachers in Free schools. It is adopted from Higuchi Ichiyo: "A place where you can feel safe"(https://kotobank. jp/word/%E5%B1%85%E5%A0%B4%E6%89%80-435522).

---

*　Lecturer,School of Education & Social Scienes, Oldenburg University
　 Ammerländer Heerstraße 114-118 26129 Oldenburg
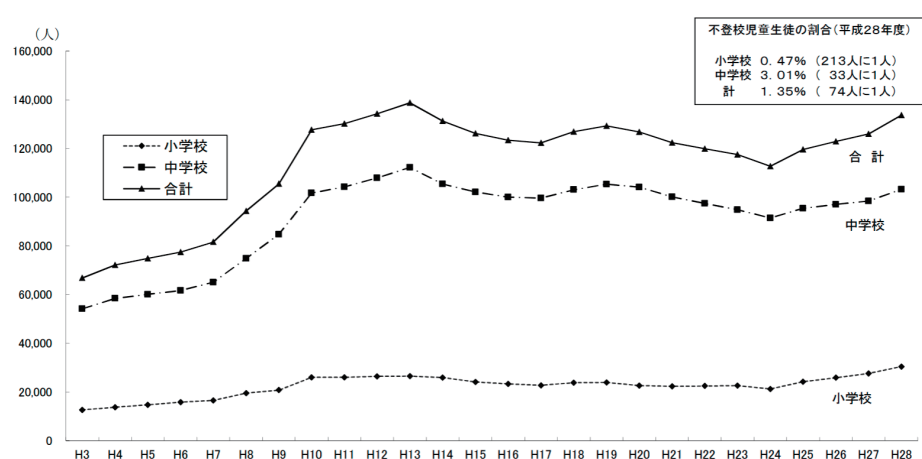　 E-mail: sabine.meise@uni-oldenburg.de

(MEXT 2018, 65)

Chart explanation:

Elementary school students: 0.47%

Lower secondary school (JHS) students: 3.01%

Average during compulsory education: 1.35%

Japanese year H28 = 2016. The lowest line shows the number of students in elementary school, the middle line JHS and the upper line represents both elementary school and JHS.

figure 1

These statistics represent students who "do not or cannot attend school for 30 days or more in a school year for whatever reasons including psychological, emotional, physical, or social reasons, but excluding illness and financial reasons" (MoE 1999, In: Ishikida 2005, 122).

Support for students with difficulties inside and outside regular schools has increased and become more varied to fit the needs of each student. The new 中学校学習指導要領 (*Chûgakkô gakushû shidô yôryô* - Government course guidelines for lower secondary school) in 2017 shows that 不登校生徒 (*futôkô seito* - students who do not attend school) play an important role among students who may require support:

1. 障害のある生徒 (*shôgai no aru seito* - disabled students)
2. 海外から帰国した生徒 (*kaigai kara kikoku shita seito* - students who have returned to Japan) and 日本語の習得に困難のある生徒 (*nihongo no shûtoku ni kon'nan no aru seito* - students who have difficulty learning the Japanese language)
3. 不登校生徒 (*futôkô seito* - students who do not attend school)
4. 学齢を経過した者への配慮 (*gakurei o keika shita mono e no hairyo* - students who have exceeded school age) (MEXT 2017, 25-26).

Observations and interviews (in 2014) with teachers showed that part of their work is to focus on 気になる生徒 (*ki ni naru seito* - students who are of concern to teachers) to prevent further problems like school absenteeism or other types of self-exclusion.

Keeping this variety of students who need support in mind, this article will introduce places where Japanese students can study in various ways. It will show the efforts in educational institutions to find an 居場所 (*î basho* - good place) for each individual student suitable to her/his learning needs. The second part of the article will give an insight into attitudes and activities of teachers in regular schools who are trying to prevent school non-attendance. The article is based on research from 2007, 2014 and 2017[2] and shows the development of Japanese school reform during the last decade.

II.   Learning places for students within and outside regular schools

After nine years of compulsory education in elementary and lower secondary school (Junior High School, JHS) most young people continue three more years at higher secondary school (Senior High School, SHS). Schools are divided into public and an increasing number of private schools. Looking at inter-school differentiation, pupils in

---

2. The author lived 10 years in Japan, taught and researched at various educational institutes; continued research for the last two decades.

Japan can study at a variety of places other than regular schools:

Inter-school Differentiation

- フリースクール (*furiisukûru* - Free school*)*
- 適応指導教室 (*tekiô shidô kyôshitsu* - Adaptive instruction classroom)
- 特別支援学校 (*tokubetsu shien gakkô* - School for special education support*)*
- 通信教育 (*tsûshin kyôiku* - Part time schools/ Distance learning schools/ Online schools*)*
- 学習塾 (*gakushûjuku*) + 予備校 (*yobikô)* etc. (Cram schools)
- Schools under observation of the ministries of welfare and justice.

Within regular schools, there are further opportunities to find a suitable place for students.

Intra-school Differentiation:

- 特殊学級 (*tokushu gakkyû* - Classes for special education)
- 通級学級 (*tsûkyû gakkyû* - Resource room)
- 保健室 (*hokenshitsu* - School nurse's room).

In addition, intra-classroom differentiation in regular classes through team teaching and other methods allows more opportunities for students to find a suitable place to learn.

As Oka (2010) points out, the Japanese education system not only has many places where students can learn, but is highly flexible in finding an 居場所 (*î basho* - good place) for each student. Since the receiving educational institution decides the next level of education, part of compulsory education in Japan may occur outside regular institutions. The 2016 adopted law 義務教育の段階における普通教育に相当する教育の機会の確保等に関する法律 (*gimukyōiku no dankai ni okeru futsū kyōiku ni sōtō suru kyōiku no kikai no kakuho-tō ni kansuru hōritsu* - Act on securing opportunities for education equivalent to ordinary education at the stage of compulsory education) to allow フリースクール (*furiisukûru* - Free schools*)* to fulfill compulsory education is another step to prevent further school non-attendance.

Questionnaire research in 1997 (Meise 2000), 2007 and 2017 for teachers of elementary, lower and upper secondary schools throughout Japan shows that attitudes towards educational institutions outside regular schools has changed slightly during the last two decades and shows a high acceptance of these places for learning.

This long-term research also gives an insight into the attitude of Japanese teachers towards the concept of an 居場所 (*î basho* - good place). Rating the Nature-Nurture-Effort Concept on a scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (very important), in 2007 and 2017 teachers gave the highest value to the Nurture/Environment of the student (average of 4.13 points in 2007 and 4.24 points in 2017). Japanese teachers therefore value a suitable learning
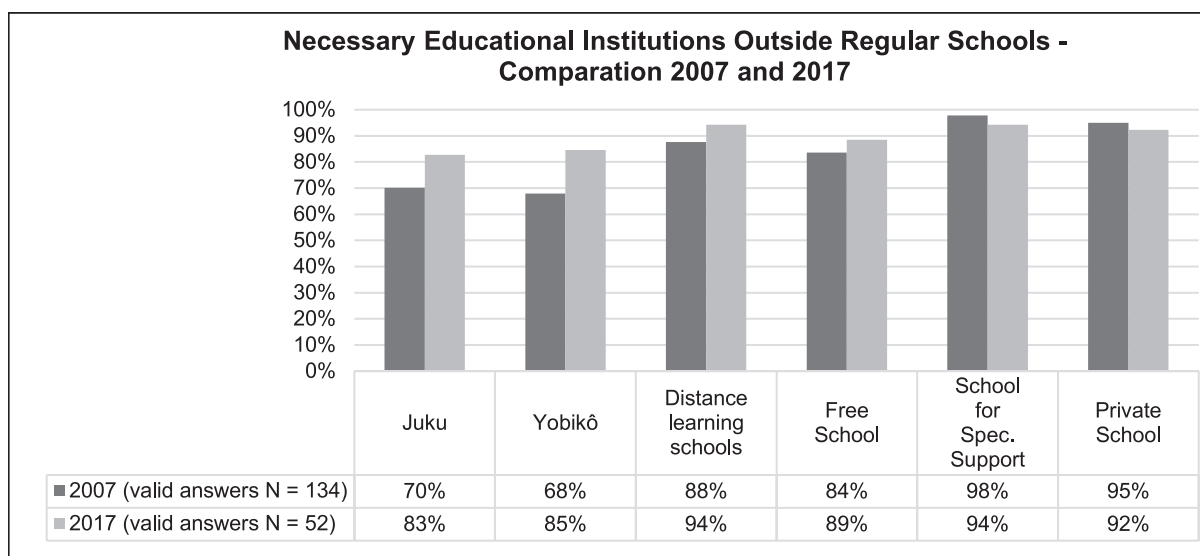
Necessary Educational Institutions Outside Regular Schools - Comparation 2007 and 2017

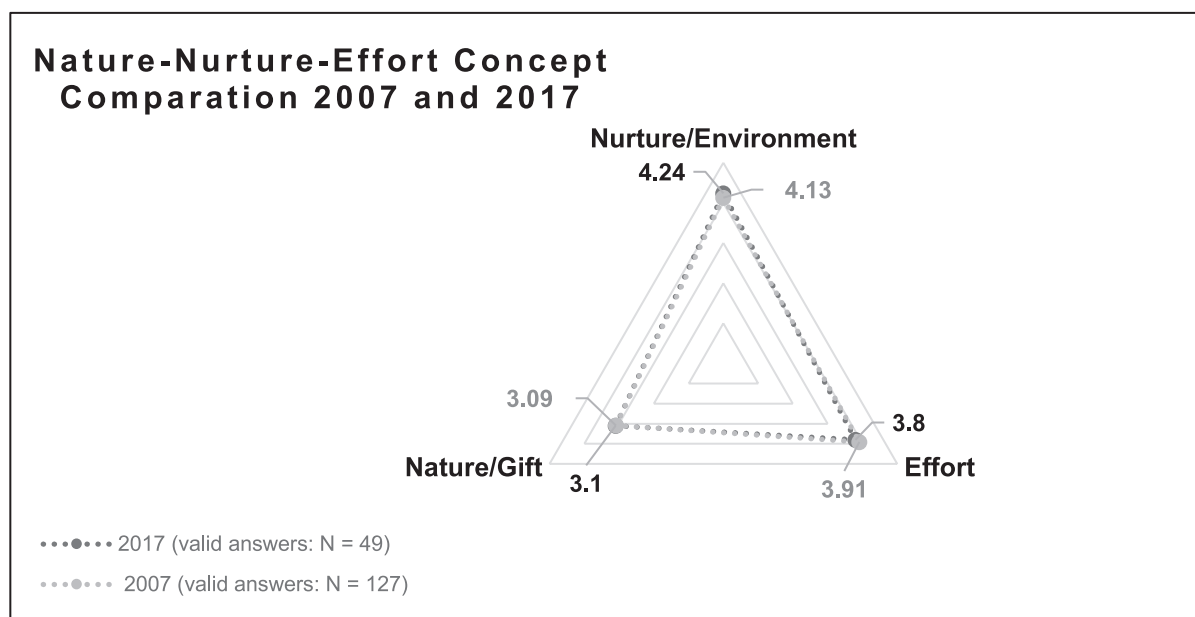|	Juku	Yobikô	Distance learning schools	Free School	School for Spec. Support	Private School
2007 (valid answers N = 134)	70%	68%	88%	84%	98%	95%
2017 (valid answers N = 52)	83%	85%	94%	89%	94%	92%

Figure 2

Figure 3

place as an important factor for learning success - higher than Nature/Gift and Effort.

This long-term research also gives an insight into the attitude of Japanese teachers towards the concept of an 居場所 (î basho - good place). Rating the Nature-Nurture-Effort Concept on a scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (very important), in 2007 and 2017 teachers gave the highest value to the Nurture/Environment of the student (average of 4.13 points in 2007 and 4.24 points in 2017). Japanese teachers therefore value a suitable learning place as an important factor for learning success - higher than Nature/Gift and Effort.

III. Attitudes and Activities of teachers in regular schools to prevent student self-exclusion

Most of the children in elementary school enter their school life with a trained "olympic" spirit – "being there is everything" - a goal of education in preschools (保育園 *hoikuen* and 幼稚園 *yôchien*). Linked to this spirit, the morning routines in elementary school make sure every child is seen and heard every day to make them feel welcome in their school and their classroom. The educational set-up in schools ensures that students are in vertical and horizontal relation to each other and makes them develop responsibility for their interactions. Students' activities are not only focused on the own class, but also on grade and mixed-age activities (Meise/Schubert 2013). Repeating grades is very rare in Japan, so students develop strong social bonds. The ambitious educational goal to form "仲良し" (*nakayoshi* - good friends) relationships among the students can lead, if it fails, to children feeling like outsid-
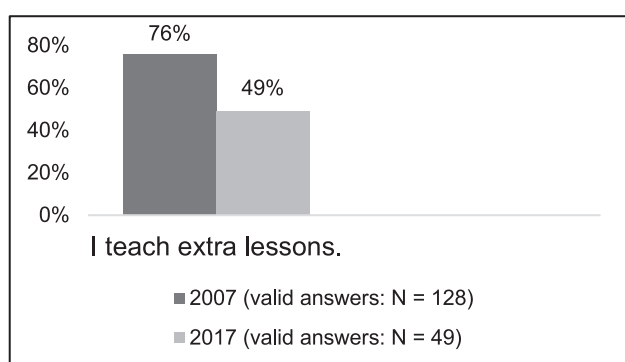

Figure 4

ers due to いじめ (*ijime* - mobbing/bullying). Despite the many activities of different actors at schools towardsいじめ (*ijime*-mobbing/bullying) in many schools, these bullying situations are one of the main reasons for school refusal, especially in JHS. Another important factor, however, lies in the amount of focus Japanese students receive from their teachers. Many students develop self-exclusion behaviours because they don't understand the content of lessons. Sleeping in the classroom is a simple way to exclude oneself, but school phobia could also be a result of learning difficulties or gaps in knowledge. Therefore many Japanese teachers offer extra learning

time after regular classes. However, research shows that compared to 2007 fewer teachers are now supporting their students. Almost half (2017) of Japanese teachers spend extra time with their students to make sure all of their questions are answered. This trend is also seen in the amount of extra time teachers spend per week. While in 2017 (20 teachers responded in the questionnaire) teachers taught an average of 2.1 hours (ranging from 0.5 to 5 hours), in 2007 they taught 2.3 hours (0.25 to 9 hour range; 72 teachers). The questionnaire responses in 2007 and 2017 also show continued effort by teachers to use different methods than in regular lessons to ensure that students are catching up with their studies as well as learning beyond regular subject contents. Teachers are aware of the variety of students and that their extra activities have a strong impact in preventing school non-attendance.
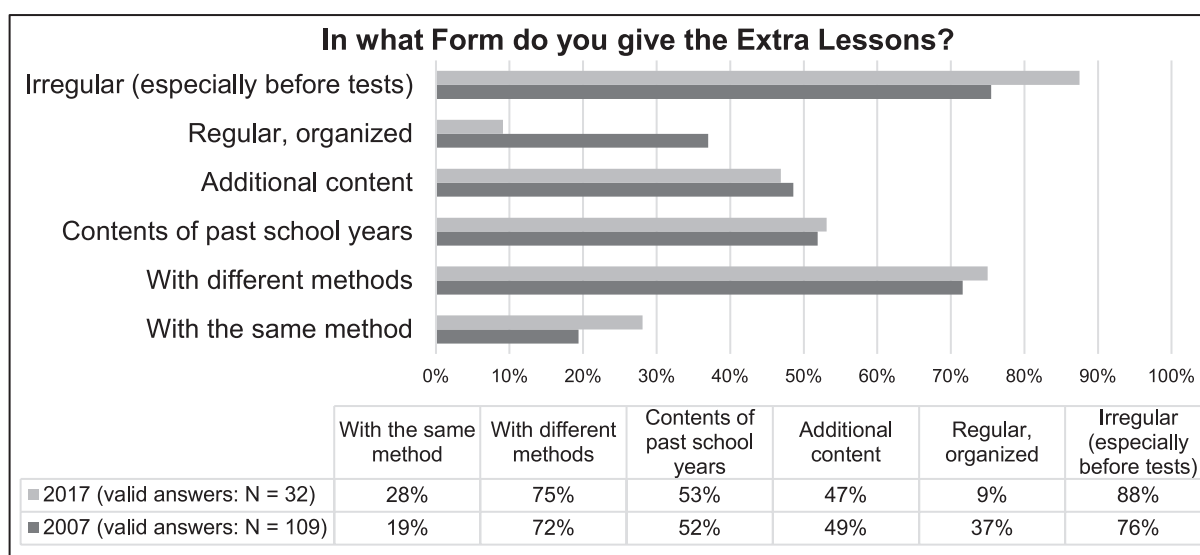

In what Form do you give the Extra Lessons?

	With the same method	With different methods	Contents of past school years	Additional content	Regular, organized	Irregular (especially before tests)
2017 (valid answers: N = 32)	28%	75%	53%	47%	9%	88%
2007 (valid answers: N = 109)	19%	72%	52%	49%	37%	76%

figure 5

Besides these activities, teachers are busy communicating with parents and other educational supporters in the community, like Free Schools. Some subject teachers even teach at nearby Free schools. The many activities inside regular schools to prevent school non-attendance are embedded in several supporting institutions outside. The Act on "Promotion of Development and Support for Children and Young People" led to "Comprehensive Counselling Centers for Children and Young People" and "Regional Councils for Youth Support", which are institutions outside regular school to support students with difficulties in various ways (Headquarters for Promotion of Development and Support for Children and Young People 2010, Sakurai 2007, Yamada 2015).

IV.   Summary and considerations for upcoming comparative research

Two important forces that can prevent the self-exclusion of Japanese students are discussed in this article. The first, the concept of 居場所 (*î basho* - good place) represents a flexibility in places of learning and acceptance of students' reasons not to attend regular school or regular classes. The second, the attitudes of teachers and their activities seen today in Japanese educational institutions to reduce school non-attendance. Therefore, structural questions, as well as the mind sets, and actions are considerations for future comparative research between Japan and Germany. The search for a theoretical framework not just in one country but in both gives an opportunity to search for a complex understanding of concepts in both countries. The best way to overcome the long term "Western" dominance in research on the "East" (Dolles/Ducke 2003) would be the consequent search for the *tertium comparationis* (Waterkamp 2006). One example of such research from Japan is the East-Asian model of inclusion from Oka (2010), though even this model is based on a view on cultures as "containers". One goal for comparative research should be to overcome this "container" thinking (Beauchamp 2003) and look for the common global forces in education and the different educational concepts in each country (Adick 2008, Schubert 2005).

Bibliography

Adick, C. (2008): Vergleichende Erziehungswissenschaft – Eine Einführung. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

Beauchamp, E. (ed.) (2003): Comparative Education Reader. NY/ London: Routledge.

Dolles, H./ Ducke, I. (2003): Mißverständnisse in der Begegnung mit Japan – Eine Hinführung. In: Ducke,I./ Dolles, H. (eds.): Mißverständnisse in der Begegnung mit Japan. Japanstudien 15, München: iudicium, 17-35.

Goodman, R./ Phillips, D. (eds.) (2003): Can The Japanese Change Their Education System? Oxford: Symposium Books.

Headquarters for Promotion of Development and Support for Children and Young People (2010): Vision for Children and Young People - Supporting the development of children and young people, aiming for a society inclusive of every single person. http://www8.cao.go.jp/youth/suisin/pdf/vision_english.pdf.

Ishikida, M. (2005): Japanese education in the 21st century. New York: iUniverse.

Lozano, B. (2013): Understanding *Futôkô* as a social problem in Japan – The Social Context and Motivation for Change. https://baylor-ir.tdl.org/.../Brittany_Lozano_HonorsThesis.pdf.

Meise, S. (2000) Normalization is best – Einstellung japanischer Lehrer zur Integration behinderter Schüler in das Regelschulsystem. In: Die neue Sonderschule 45/5, S. 352 - 362. http://fachportal-paedagogik.de/fis_bildung/suche/fis_set.html?FId=558269&mstn=83&ckd=yes&mtz=200&facets=y&maxg=5&ohneSynonyme=y&feldname1=Zeitschrift&feldinhalt1=%22DIE+NEUE+SONDERSCHULE%22&bool1=or&next=558270,558319,561201,561202,561203&prev=558078,558079,558081,558094,558222&nHits=304&marker=1.

Meise, S./Schubert, V. (2013): Japan. In: Adick, C. (Ed.): Regionale Bildungsentwicklungen und nationale Schulsysteme in Afrika, Asien, Lateinamerika und Karibik. Historisch-vergleichende Sozialisations- und Bildungsforschung. Band 10; Waxmann-Verlag, Münster, 233-257.

MEXT (2018): 平成28年度「児童生徒の問題行動・不登校等生徒指導上の諸課題に関する調査 (*Heisei 28-nendo `jidô seito no mondaikôdô futokô-tô seito shidô-jô no sho kadai ni kansuru chôsa* - Umfrage zu Problemen im Zusammenhang mit der Beratung von Schülern bei Problemverhalten und Schulverweigerung im Jahre 2016, 65.

MEXT (2017): 中学校 - 学習指導要領. (Chûgakkô - gakushû shidô yôryô. Mittelschule - Richtlinien für den Unterricht) http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/micro_detail/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2018/05/07/1384661_5_4.pdf.

Oka, N. (2010): Prospects for Building an East Asian Model of Inclusive Education and Its Significance: Re-Examining the Essence of the Western Model and Relations Between the Community and People with Disabilities in Japan. Presentation 1, Part II Possibilities and Significance of the East Asian Model of Inclusive Education, Japanese Association of Special Education 2009 Annual Meeting Joint Workshop With Utsunomiya University, The Japanese journal of special education 47(6), 03-31, 515-532.

Sakurai, K. (2007): Erscheinungsformen und Wahrnehmung von Gewalt bei Schülern und Schulverweigerung im deutsch-japanischen Vergleich. Frankfurt/M. et al: Peter Lang.

Schubert, V. (2005): Vergleichende Pädagogik. In: Pädagogik als vergleichende Kulturwissenschaft – Erziehung und Bildung in Japan, 9-23.

Ueno, K./Ogata, A./Tsuge, M./Matsumura, S. (2006): 特別支援教育基本用語１００－解説とここが知りたい・聞きたいQ＆A(*Tokubetsu shien kyôiku kihon yôgo 100 – kaisetsu to kokoga shiritai – kikitai Q&A* - 100 basic expressions of the Special Support Education - Explanation of what you want to know and hear: questions and answers).Tokyo: Meijitosho.

UN (2006): 15. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities New York, 13 December 2006 https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV15&chapter=4&clang=_en.

Waterkamp, D. (2006): Vergleichende Erziehungswissenschaft – Ein Lehrbuch. Münster et al: Waxmann.

Wong, S. (2007): Reframing Futôkô (school non - attendance) in Japan – a social movement perspective. https://digital. library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/48389/8/02whole.pdf.

Yamada, T. (2015): Investigating the function of social capital: a case study on self-help groups that have non-attendance school children. Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies 46, 1-17, https://hermes-ir.lib.hit-u.ac.jp/rs/bitstream/10086/27217/1/ HJsoc0460100100.pdf.

Yoneyama, S. (2000): Student Discourse on *Tokokyohi* (School Phobia/Refusal) in Japan: Burnout or empowerment? British Journal of Sociology of Education, 21:1, 77-94.