

Comparison of Responses to Truancy in Japan, the United Kingdom, and the USA

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At the authors' university an educational sociology course was offered in the latter half of Heisei 30. In this course, problems such as school truancy, school refusal, and bullying were discussed, and students of this course showed a lot of interest in these topics. When the authors of this paper discussed these issues, they discovered that there is a great difference in how different countries respond to these issues. Using information taken from media sources and government websites, this paper reports on the truancy situation in Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States while also comparing how the schools and governments of these three countries deal with truancy.

Key Words : Initial response, School refusal, Truancy

1. The Truancy Problem in Fukui

In *Fukui Shimbun* on October 26, 2018, it was reported that an investigation on problem behavior and school truancy conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology concluded there had been 414,387 cases of bullying in Japanese elementary, junior high, and senior high schools during FY 2017. This is the largest amount of bullying cases in one year to date. In regards to this, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology has made progress in investigating minor issues in an effort to improve early response to bullying. However, there were still 474 cases of serious physical or mental harm, which is an increase of 78 cases, and a total of 250 students who committed suicides, including 10 students who were bullied⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾.

In addition, in Fukui prefecture's elementary, junior, or senior high schools there were a total of 1115 truant students. This is the first time in six years that the number of truant students exceeded 1000. In Fukui elementary and junior high schools there is an average of 11.7 truant students per 1000 students, this is the fifth consecutive year that this number has increased. For high schools, there is an average of 15.9 truant students per 1000 students, which increased for the second consecutive year⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾. In Japan, the definition of a truant student is one who is absent from school for more than 30 days a year due to some psychological, emotional, physical, or social factor. However, students who are absent due to illness or economic reasons are not included as truant.

Due to the increasing amount of truant cases in Fukui prefecture, the Fukui Prefectural Board of Education investigated the issue and concluded that problems with friendships, poor academic achievement, and household related issues are increasing. This is also consistent with nationwide viewpoints. Furthermore, the number of truant students who are absent from class for unknown reasons is also increasing and correspondence with these students is often difficult⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾.

2. Initial Response Guidelines for Fukui Prefecture and Japanese Law

2.1 Revision of guidelines for decreased school attendance in Fukui Prefecture

Following an increase in truant students, the Fukui Prefectural Board of Education revisited Fukui Prefecture's school

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refusal policy for teachers, the first time they revisited this policy in eight years⁽¹⁾. The following points exemplifies an initial response method according to the number of days a student is absent, used in order to address issues of truancy as early as possible. In addition, prompt information sharing by the student's homeroom teacher is strongly encouraged so that other school officials, such as head teachers and counselors, can help address the problem.

2.1.1 Initial response according to number of days absent.

Even if a student only has one unexcused absence, homeroom teachers are supposed to talk and listen to students. Teachers are also supposed to talk and listen to students who are tardy, leave school early, appear to be in poor physical condition, are in an academic slump, or are having friendship trouble. Then, if necessary, teachers are supposed to consult with the head of the school or the teacher in charge of that academic year.

If an unexcused absence continues for two days, the homeroom teacher is supposed to visit the student's home as well as receive advice from other educational experts. If a student is absent for three days, a support team is set up which may include the homeroom teacher, a school administration official, school nurse, and any other educational experts. In an effort to share information, a "support note" should be created which would include an accumulation of five days' worth of efforts to support the truant student⁽³⁾.

2.1.2 Prevention measures.

In order to prevent and identify potential truancy issues, Fukui Prefecture conducted a consciousness survey and administered it to all fifth-year and sixth-year elementary school students as well as all junior high school students enrolled in Fukui's public schools elementary and junior high schools. The results of this survey provide points of improvement in making schools a more attractive place for students⁽⁴⁾.

2.1.3 Independence support measures.

In regards to independence support, a high priority is put on cultivating trustful relationships with the students and their families. Each case is considered carefully with a planned response according to the case. This is done in cooperation with the prefectural board of education and municipal boards of education, and instruction may be adapted for the students. All solutions are considered, including, if necessary, the solution to have the student abstain from attending school⁽⁴⁾.

2.2 The Act on Securing Educational Opportunities Equivalent to Ordinary Education at the Compulsory Education

According to articles 8 through 13 of the Act on Securing Education Opportunities Equivalent to Ordinary Education at Compulsory Education Stage, the prefectural and local officials will try to take the measures listed below. Since bullying and truancy happen to anyone, the aim of this law is to protect school refusal students by securing educational opportunities for them.

1. Schools and related agencies should take necessary measures to support all truant students and enact efforts to prevent bullying.
2. In school refusal and bullying situations, necessary measures should be made to promote the importance of information amongst related officials such as school faculty, administrative staff, psychologists, welfare experts, etc.
3. Schools and educational support centers specifically designed for dealing with school refusal shall be developed and enriched.
4. Aim to take necessary measures to support truant students' learning activities outside of school and monitor the mental and physical conditions of the students.
5. Schools should not try to force students to attend school when it is beneficial for them to be absent. The mind and body conditions of the students refusing school should be taken into consideration. In addition, learning opportunities outside of the classroom should be considered and appropriate information for diverse learning given⁽⁵⁾.

2.3 Guidelines from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology for Responding to School Refusal Students

1. Teachers should not just watch a situation unfold, but instead take appropriate measures at an early stage.
2. Increase the number of opportunities to talk with the student and listen carefully.
3. Understand the situation of the students by gathering information from parents and other faculty members.
4. The responsibility should not be that of the homeroom teacher alone, it is important to consult and correspond with many faculty members.
5. When it is difficult for the school to deal with the situation it is necessary to obtain cooperation from a specialized individuals and organizations, such as education officials specializing in non-attendance⁽⁶⁾.

2.4 About home visit

1. Even in situations where it is better to avoid forced contact, such a student refusing to meet with teachers, it is important to keep communicating to the student that the teacher cares about the student.
2. Many school refusal students have a feeling of “leave me alone” and the complex feeling of “feeling lonely when left alone”. It is important to try not to make students feel like they are abandoned⁽⁶⁾.

3. Truancy Situation in the United Kingdom

As of December 2017, the overall student absence rate in the UK was 4.5% and according to department of education figures one in 10 of those students are classed as ‘persistently absent’⁽⁷⁾. A ‘persistently absent student’ is described as one who misses school at least 10% of the time. This equates to 10.1% of all students enrolled in publicly funded primary schools as being persistently absent, 13.3% of students at secondary schools, for a combined total of 11.5%. Following a BBC investigation into this matter, students gave a range of reasons for being absent including anxiety, depression, bullying and having little interest in the subjects they are taught. The investigation also found that truancy is not necessarily linked to economic factors. Bath and North East Somerset is one of England's wealthiest local authorities according to deprivation indices, but it had one of the highest levels of truancy from 2015 to 2016. At the other end of the scale, Manchester, a city which ranks highly on deprivation levels, had one of the lowest levels of truancy⁽⁸⁾.

The attitude towards school attendance and absence in the UK puts a greater emphasis on the parents rather than the school or teachers to make sure that the student is meeting their education requirements. The period where the student must receive education is described as: ‘between the school term starting after their 5th birthday and the last Friday in June in the school year where they turn 16’⁽⁹⁾. Within this period, if the student does not attend school for even one day during the school term, then the school will contact the parents. If the local council (the officials in charge of the school district and surrounding area) feel that a student’s educational needs are not being met, then they will first issue warnings and offer guidance to the parents. In the case that this advice is ignored, the council can move to prosecute the parents.

3.1 Response to Truancy in the United Kingdom

Local councils have a wide range of options at their disposal for responding to truancy. This can range from appointing an educational supervisor to oversee the case to prosecuting and imposing jail sentences for parents of truant students. The following are the legal actions used to enforce school attendance.

3.1.1 Parenting Order

A parenting order forces parents of truant students to attend parenting classes. Parents may also be subject to do what the court says needs to be done in order to improve their child’s school attendance.

3.1.2 Education Supervision Order

If the local council thinks parents need support getting their child to attend school but the parent is not cooperating, the local council can apply to a court for an Education Supervision Order. A supervisor will be appointed to help parents get their child to attend school. The local council can do this instead of, or in addition to, prosecuting parents.

3.1.3 School Attendance Order

Parents of truant students may get a School Attendance Order if the local council thinks their child has an attendance issue affecting their education. Parents have 15 days to provide evidence that they have registered their child with the school listed on the School Attendance Order or confirm that parents are providing their child with home education. If this order is not obeyed, parents may receive a fine or be prosecuted.

3.1.4 Fine

The local councils have the right to impose a fine upon the parents of truant student for £60, which will rise to £120 if not paid within 21 days. If the fine is not paid after 28 days, parents may be prosecuted for their child's absence from school.

3.1.5 Prosecution

When prosecution is necessary, parents of truant students may be fined up to £2,500, be issued a community order, or have a jail sentence imposed for up to 3 months. The court also may also impose a Parenting Order.

It is worth noting that fines and prosecution are a last resort for parents who actively refuse to make their children go to school. The local council and school governing body will provide counselling and training sessions to parents as a first step. Assuming this goes well the parents might be asked to agree to a 'Parenting Contract'. This is a voluntary written agreement between the parent(s) and either the local council or the school's governing body. Between them, they agree to find ways to improve the child's attendance. If the parent(s) refuse to make a contract or don't abide by a contract, it may be used as evidence if the local council decides to prosecute the parents. In 2014, 16,430 people in England were prosecuted for failing to make sure their child attended school – an increase of 25 percent from the previous year. Figures have also revealed that almost 12,500 of those taken to court were found guilty⁽¹⁰⁾

4. Truancy Situation in the United States

While statistics about truancy that are directly comparable to Japan and the United Kingdom may not exist, the United States Department of Education did publish a report on chronic absenteeism in the United States. A chronically truant student is one who is absent for fifteen days of the school year. It was found that a shocking seven million students, 16% of students (or about 1 in 6 students) were labeled as chronically truant in the 2015-2016 school year. Chronic truancy was found to be most prevalent in high schoolers, with 21.1% of high schoolers labeled as chronically truant, 14.1% of junior high students, and 13.6% of elementary school students⁽¹¹⁾

In 2015, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), a federal education law, was enacted to help address the truancy issues plaguing the United States. According to the US Department of Education, students are chronically truant for a variety of reasons including poor physical or mental health, transportation issues, community violence, poverty, and family circumstances⁽¹¹⁾. The ESSA combats chronic truancy by providing funding to combat these issues with teacher training, mental health services, bully-prevention programs, or family engagement programs⁽¹²⁾.

In the United States most educational laws and guidelines are set at the state level, which can lead to differences in how truancy is treated state by state. That being stated, the overall approach usually the same and only minor details are different. Specifics discussed in this section are from California's educational law since it is America's most populous state.

4.1 Response to Truancy in the United States

In the United States, responses to truancy are usually done so in the context that a child's attendance is the responsibility of the parents. Law enforcement plays a large role in responding to truancy and, together with school officials follow set procedures that not specific to the student.

4.1.1 Parental Notification

The first step school officials take is to notify parents that their student is not present in class. This is usually done in a cost-effective method such as a telephone call or e-mail. In states such as California, this phone call also serves as a notification to the parents that it is their child's attendance is the parents' responsibility and they may face prosecution ⁽¹³⁾.

4.12 Punishment imposed upon the student

When a student has an unexcused absence, schools may issue a school-imposed punishment on the students. Punishment gets progressively more severe as the cases of unexcused absence increases. Since school attendance until the age of 18 is mandatory by law, law enforcement officials play an active role in disciplining students. After the first case of truancy, students are usually issued a written warning by a law enforcement official and an after-school detention. Large schools have a specific law enforcement officer assigned to the school just to deal with truancy and other school related issues. After a second case of truancy, students are usually required to attend a weekend student program and have a conference with their parents and school officials ⁽¹³⁾.

Upon a third case of truancy, students are usually classified as habitual truants and schools are required to report the student to a School Attendance Review Board, or to the county's probation office. The review board or a probation officer will be in charge of monitoring the student's attendance and may require the student to attend truancy programs or participate in community service. When a student records their fourth case of truancy the student officially becomes part of the juvenile court system which then may impose a wide range of punishments including imposing fines, requiring participation in court-appointed community service, attendance to court-approved truancy prevention programs, or even suspend or revoke driving privileges ⁽¹³⁾.

4.1.3 Punishment imposed upon the parents

In America, it is not only the truant students who may face punishment, the parents of truant students could also face punishment. Beginning with the first case of truancy, if convicted, parents may be forced to pay a fine that increases with each offense.

Punishments for chronic truancy in elementary schools and junior high school are even more severe, as truancy at this age is often the direct fault of the parents and not the student. Fines may reach a few thousand dollars and jail-time for those convicted may be as long as one-year. Courts may require parents to enroll and participate in certain programs such as parenting classes. In addition, a calendar of court-required meetings with psychologists, school officials, or law enforcement officers may be required. Not obeying any court appointment programs may lead to the incarceration of the parents or guardians of the truant student ⁽¹³⁾.

5. Comparison of initial response to truant students.

Today, bullying and school refusal at schools in Japan is a very big problem. In Fukui prefecture, school teachers are always looking for behavior changes in students after a long vacation or absence from school. The homeroom teacher is in charge of keeping track of students' attendance and is responsible for getting in touch with parents immediately when there is an unexpected absence and, if necessary, have a prompt consultation meeting with the principal or head teacher of the school. Despite these actions being able to solve many cases of truancy, there are times when cases of truancy cannot be resolved, and there are times when the best solution may not be to encourage school attendance.

In Japan, school officials respond to cases of truancy by communicating with the students and their guardians while carefully considering the situation to determine the best solution. School officials do this while trying to find a solution that

will be a favorable solution for the student. In regard to solving truancy, school officials do not follow a specific set procedure but instead find the best fitting solution for the student.

Meanwhile, the UK is making an effort to clearly define the procedure of correspondence at each step. When it comes to school refusal, it is clearly stated who will respond and in what way. There are clearly defined procedures and punishments that set forth by the local council. When a student is refusing school or truant, it is not the student's teachers but rather the local council who spearheads the move to get the student back in school.

For chronically truant students in the United States, besides initial contact with the parents or guardians of the truant student, it is local law enforcement that takes the initial responsibility to get the student to attend school. Police and Sheriff departments often have truancy officers who are trained to deal with these situations. If local law enforcement fails to get the student back in school, the student's case will then enter the judicial system and a judge will decide the best steps to take. Law enforcement and the courts are bound by law and required to respond to school refusal or truancy issues in a specific way, meaning that a student's unique situation is often not taken into consideration.

In the educational sociology course offered at the authors' university, truancy related issues such as school refusal and bullying were addressed. The students seemed to grasp the content, the reasons behind such issues, as well as the methods to resolve such issues. That being said, of course personal experiences and mass communication may influence the beliefs and understanding that students have about these issues. As this paper showed, there are currently many different methods to deal with similar educational issues, as seen in comparing Japan's response to truancy to that of the United Kingdom and the United States. Learning through comparison helps students of educational sociology better understand Japan's method of dealing with such issues and how it compares to other methods. This is good material for educational sociology students to discuss and learn about in class.

The authors are now all teaching at the same university but are very interested in truancy, bullying, and school refusal issues facing not only Japan, but many other countries. The authors found that despite facing similar issues, there is a great difference in the laws and guidelines set forth to deal with these issues. Therefore, the initial response and solutions to these issues vary differently by country. This paper is a summary of the authors' experiences and their discussions about truancy stemming from information collected about truancy from various online and print media sources in addition to government websites.

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