

ARTICLE

Features of Free Schools' Contribution to Communities

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Abstract

This study examines free schools' contribution to communities in Japan. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) implements the community school program, under which community residents participate in the management of conventional public schools. MEXT also provides conventional elementary and lower secondary schools with guidelines that indicate that the schools can use shopping streets as fields on which students can study communities and commerce during comprehensive studies and social studies classes. Free schools are alternative, not conventional, schools. They employ peculiar methods to connect with and contribute to communities without the community school program or comprehensive studies and social studies classes. This study clarifies the features of free schools' relationship with and contribution to communities.

1. Introduction

In 2004, the National Diet of Japan amended the Act on the Organization and Operation of Local Educational Administration (*Chihō kyōiku gyōsei no soshiki oyobi unei ni kansuru hōritsu*). This amendment introduced the community school program, under which residents in communities around public schools participate in the management of schools. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced that 7,601 public schools (including kindergartens [*yōchien*]) had employed the community school program on May 1, 2019. This implies that 21.3% of the public schools in Japan are managed by the community school program (MEXT 2019). Community residents' participation in the management of conventional schools not only incorporates residents' opinions into the schools' principles, it also gives the schools the benefit of residents' help (*Komyuniti sukūru no suishin tō ni kansuru chōsa kenkyū kyōryoku sha kaigi* 2015, 18–19; MEXT 2018, 2 and 5).

Moreover, MEXT highlights the standard elementary (*shōgakkō*) and lower secondary school (*chūgakkō*) curricula, which contain the subject comprehensive studies (*sōgōtekina gakushū no jikan*) that assigns students tasks involving posing questions to address and conduct research. MEXT assumes that as a subject, comprehensive studies provides students with opportunities to study their communities, and it is recommended that schools use shopping streets (*shōtengai*) as fields so that students can study communities during these classes (*Shōgakkō/Chūgakkō gakushū shidō yōryō [Heisei 29 nen kokuji] kaisetsu: Sōgōtekina gakushū no jikan hen*). Many stores on shopping streets are privately run, dealing in foodstuff and other daily necessities that community residents purchase. Moreover, many shopping streets address community problems. Therefore, shopping streets are regarded as suitable fields for studying communities. MEXT also recommends field studies to observe and inquire into stores in elementary school social studies (*shakai*) classes to aid with students' comprehension of commerce (*Shōgakkō gakushū shidō yōryō [Heisei 29 nen kokuji] kaisetsu: Shakai hen*). Through comprehensive studies and social studies classes, schools can intensify their relationships with shopping streets or communities.

Free schools (*furī sukūru*) cannot utilize the community school program and do not have to conduct comprehensive studies or social studies classes because they are not conventional schools under the stipulations of the School Education Act (*Gakkō kyōiku hō*). Free schools are alternative schools in Japan for non-attendant (*futōkō*) children, who are defined as students who, in a certain academic year, do not attend elementary or lower secondary school for 30 days or more. Non-attendant children would face difficulties at conventional schools, but at free schools, they pass the days studying and participating in activities. In serving non-attendant children, free schools are not obligated to adhere to MEXT's standard curricula and guidelines for elementary or lower secondary schools.

While free schools do not implement the community school program and are not required to conduct comprehensive studies or social studies classes according to MEXT guidelines, several free schools establish networks with community residents on their own volition. Hiromoto (2018) reported that community residents helped a free school by inviting its students to the community's athletic meets, visiting the school to converse with students, and showing students their workplaces so they could observe and learn about occupations. In return, students at the free school contributed to the community by helping with community festivals, completing tasks such as serving customers and assisting with cooking food at stalls (Hiromoto 2018, 8–10). Hiromoto (2020) also recounted city residents' cooperation with a non-profit organization (NPO) that operated a free school in the city and free school students' reciprocal contribution to city residents. Specifically, city residents helped the NPO by offering the use of a cultivated field free of charge, selling the NPO a building at a reduced

price, and allowing free school students to work at residents' stores so they could interact with people and consider future job directions. In return, the students volunteered at a daytime care facility for the elderly, gave concerts and plays at events, and read books to young children as part of an after-school care program (Hiromoto 2020, 285–88). These instances suggest that free school students not only receive aid from community residents but also contribute to communities, demonstrating that free schools can connect with communities without the community school program or comprehensive studies and social studies classes.

What are the distinguishing features of the relationships between free schools and their communities? Free schools differ from conventional schools in that there are small numbers of enrolled students and an open curriculum. Students at free schools may have faced serious problems at conventional schools. These student experiences can define the relationships between free schools and communities. The national, prefectural, and municipal governments are not obliged to provide free schools with the management grants-in-aid that conventional schools receive. Therefore, compared to conventional schools, free schools need more help from communities. In this respect, free schools have an impetus to root themselves in communities so that they can obtain aid from residents. There is also another side of free schools' relationships with communities: free school students' contribution to communities. If students at free schools make contributions to communities, they can build self-confidence and root their schools in the communities through their roles as community helpers. This article aims to reveal free schools' characteristics in the context of making contributions to communities.

2. Methodology

Literature on the community school program has reported that community residents provide aid to conventional schools. Recent studies have described residents who assisted teachers in classes (Tanabe and Itō 2019, 513) and taught students about the natural environment, culture, and the history of their communities (Ishihara et al. 2019, 78; Yasui 2019, 114). These studies suggest that schools can readily hold discussions with community residents to request their aid for schools under the community school program. Furthermore, MEXT (2015) and Yamashiro (2014) have informed us that students at elementary and lower secondary schools where the community school program is being implemented have contributed to communities. Elementary and lower secondary school students have volunteered to vitalize tourism in communities and assist with community festivals (MEXT 2015, 5; Yamashiro 2014, 29).

The literature has also addressed comprehensive studies and social studies classes' utilization of shopping streets. Yano (2018) recounted how elementary school comprehensive studies and social studies classes were conducted using observation and interviews at stores on a shopping street. After conducting fieldwork, students used sentences and pictures to describe their findings and the information they obtained through observation and interviews. Yano concluded that the students' research on the shopping street stimulated their learning intentions (Yano 2018, 74 and 76-79). Sakamoto (2018) reported his experience of social studies at an elementary school, where, after his students had observed a shopping street that is adjacent to the school during a social studies class, the shopping street proposed that the students serve customers and sell them commodities to gain an understanding of the details that pertain to the shopping street. This proposal was actualized in another social studies class (Sakamoto 2018, 42 and 44). In sum, useful shopping street experiences advanced student learning during comprehensive studies and social studies classes.

In its September 18, 2012 issue, *Naigai kyōiku* reported on an elementary school's comprehensive studies class in which students investigated a shopping street, experiencing jobs at stores on the street, interviewing store workers, and making signboards illustrating the stores' features, thus contributing to the stores' advertising needs. Some students wished to work at the stores in the future. A shopkeeper even reversed his/her decision to stop operating his/her store after students exhorted him/her not to close (*Naigai kyōiku* September 18 2012, 12-13). This report suggests that the shopping street benefitted from the students' comprehensive studies class activities.

For free schools, both aid from community residents and students' contribution to communities are significant. Free schools cannot suppose that the national, prefectural, and municipal governments will provide grants-in-aid for their management. If residents volunteer at free schools, the schools can reduce their staff salary costs. Furthermore, residents' participation in free school activities create opportunities for free school students to interact with people. While aid from community residents is significant, free school students' activities in communities are also beneficial because these activities influence the students' mental growth. Students who previously had traumatic experiences at conventional schools or who have developmental or learning disabilities tend to suffer from low self-esteem. Contributing to their communities and receiving praise from community residents for their good works can help build their self-confidence, thus free school students' contribution to communities may enhance their mental health.

How can free school students contribute to communities? What can free schools substitute for the community school program or comprehensive studies and social studies classes with help from shopping streets? If surrogates for the program and the two

abovementioned subjects are identified as methods that many free schools can employ, these substitutes will be regarded as models of methods for rooting free schools in communities.

A number of free schools employ methods for contributing to the community under the notion that free schools and their students build networks with community residents. This study inquires at two free schools that shall be referred to by the pseudonyms Free School K and Free School T. Operated by NPOs, Free Schools K and T are located in cities where, according to the cities' governments' websites, the populations were 117,226 on January 1, 2020 and 733,081 on March 1, 2020, respectively.

In the city where Free School K is located, elderly people accounted for 29.8% of the population on January 1, 2020, according to the city's government's website. The percentage of elderly people in the city's population was marginally higher than Japan's on October 1, 2019 (28.4%) (The Cabinet Office 2020, 2). The city is not excepted from the harshness that characterizes Japan's aging society. City residents include Vietnamese individuals, who have, since 2017, been the second most populous after Japanese people. The number of Vietnamese residents overtook the number of Chinese residents in 2017, according to the city's government's website. Many Vietnamese people in the city work in fishery because the city is prosperous through oyster aquaculture; however, the city grapples with a progressively aging, multicultural society. Therefore, Free School K attempts to create programs that urge students to address these community problems.

Notably, Free School T is located on a shopping street. Many shopping streets are facing an increasing number of store closures and a decline in shoppers. The more closed stores there are on a shopping street, the more likely shoppers are to assume that the street is in decline. According to research results as of October 1, 2018, 31.9% of the investigated shopping streets in Japan had increased store closures versus 11.4% with decreased store closures over three years. Addressing the reasons for shopping street store closures, 74.0% of the respondents pointed to aging storekeepers or elderly storekeepers' lack of a successor (Randoburein 2019, 1, 13, and 69). Furthermore, several newspapers have reported that supermarkets and large suburban retail stores have attracted shoppers away from shopping streets (*Kahoku shimpō* July 19 2019; *Mainichi shimbun* December 1 2019; December 18 2019; *Takadanobaba shimbun* April 8 2019; *Wakayama shimpō* January 16 2015; January 26 2018). Free School T's relocation to a shopping street decreased that street's store closures by one and may stimulate liveliness on the street.

At Free School K, from 2 pm to 5 pm on January 10, 2020, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with three staff members, including the representative (*daihyō*) and the chief director (*rijiichō*). The Free School T representative granted the researcher a semi-structured interview from 1 pm to 2:10 pm on February 21, 2020. Before the interviews,

the researcher clarified the research purpose and undertook to protect the participating free school students and staff members' human rights and privacy. Web pages and documents pertaining to Free Schools K and T provided supplementary information about the schools' activities. After the interviews, emails were sent to the free schools to ascertain details about the information that was obtained from the interviews and the documents.

3. Results

Free School K

Free School K opens a cafe inside its building on some days per month, providing visitors, including residents and staff from a group home for the elderly, with set lunches and beverages. In the cafe, students help staff members take orders, serve dishes and beverages, and provide entertainment by playing musical instruments, performing magic, and conversing and playing card games with visitors. Students also participate in free school staffs discussions about the cafe's menu. Free School K staff were elaborating an idea that students could make presentations to visitors about their handicraft and research. The free school put a wood-burning stove in the center of the cafe as the symbol of both the cafe itself and the school at large. The staff wished for various residents to visit the cafe and interact with students while gathered around the stove.

Furthermore, free school staff proposed that students form a neighborhood association (*chōnaikai*) or a nostalgic organization consisting of neighbors who are acquainted with each other rather than a resident association (*jichikai*), which is a contemporary, systematic organization. Nowadays, links among residents in neighborhoods in Japan tend to be lost. The program of children's neighborhood association started in April 2020 and has provided students with opportunities to discuss varied issues with residents. The staff envisaged that their students could restructure a neighborhood association through cafe-based activities and endeavor to prevent social isolation among the elderly. Elderly persons who reside in the group home not only visit Free School K's cafe, they also participate in the school's events, such as a lesson in making *miso*, soybean paste used as seasoning. Free School K students and staff visit the group home to put on concerts for the elderly using a violin and handbells called tone chimes. Free School K therefore gives students and elderly community members the opportunity to interact with each other.

The relationship between Free School K and the group home for the elderly was voluntarily established by a free school staff member who also works for the group home for the elderly people, thus demonstrating that free schools can utilize staff members' personal connections.

As shown above, there are Vietnamese people residing in the city where the free school is located. They are also confronted with a risk of isolation in the community because of Vietnam's and Japan's dissimilar languages and cultures. If Vietnamese residents interact with students at Free School K, they will enjoy opportunities for lighthearted contact with Japanese language and culture rather than having to systematically learn the same using textbooks in classrooms. On the other hand, by conversing, playing card games, and making handicraft with Vietnamese residents, Free School K students are able to listen to and acquire Vietnamese. In addition, interacting with Vietnamese residents may inspire students to travel to and work in Vietnam in the future. Vietnamese residents sometimes visit Free School K to deliver food as gifts for the school. School staff anticipated that Vietnamese residents' visits would evolve into interactions with students.

A Free School K staff member became interested in interacting with foreigners. She has volunteered to teach foreign residents in the city the Japanese language and made the acquaintance of some Vietnamese residents, who subsequently paid visits to the school. This is also an instance of a free school staff member's personal connections.

Free School T

Free School T was relocated to a shopping street in April, 2019. A staff member's parents formerly ran a store on the street, but elected to discontinue business. Increased store closures on a shopping street give the impression that the street's prosperity is declining. In this sense, although Free School T does not retail commodities, its presence helps the street maintain its liveliness.

Store employees who work near the free school cheerfully talk with students, who seem comfortable conversing with the workers. Non-attendant children who had traumatic experiences at conventional schools may be sensitive, encountering difficulties when interacting with people. Shopping street workers tend to be attached to their community because many shoppers reside in the community. The workers also appear to feel an attachment to the free school students who go to school on the same street. The Free School T representative expressed appreciation for the workers' attentiveness to his students.

On the day when the interview was conducted, dolls for Japan's traditional festival for praying for the sound growth of girls (*hina matsuri*) were displayed on a tiered stand near Free School T's front entrance. The dolls were exhibited on the display until March 3, the day of the *hina matsuri* festival. The free school representative displayed the dolls as an attraction for shoppers, particularly foreign tourists. Shoppers visited Free School T and delighted in gazing at the dolls and talking about them with school staff. The representative considered traditional events like the *hina matsuri* festival opportunities to interact with

shoppers and teach foreign tourists about Japanese culture.

Free schools have the advantage of few on-site restrictions. MEXT does not regulate free school site locations and dimensions. Many free schools are, however, confronted with difficulties in obtaining funds for institutional management (*Furī sukūru tō ni kansuru kentō kaigi* 2017, 10). Therefore, free schools must acquire buildings that are priced within their range of affordability. If, due to shopping street store closures, building prices or rents on shopping streets are inexpensive, then shopping streets can be deemed suitable places for free school sites by virtue of store workers' attentiveness to students and free schools' reciprocal contribution to the commercial environment by enlivening the streets for shoppers.

4. Discussion

What are the attributes of free schools' contributions to communities? How can free schools distinguish their relationships with communities from conventional schools'? This section compares Free School K to schools that have implemented the community school program and Free School T to schools that utilize shopping streets as fields during comprehensive studies and social studies classes.

Free School K Features

From October to November 2011, a survey of community residents who participate in the management of conventional schools was conducted with schools that have implemented the community school program. Responses were obtained from 562 schools. Community residents who participate in school management under the community school program are appointed as school management council members. According to the survey results, 59.7% of the council members had had experiences as resident association officers, 55.7% had been PTA officers at the schools they managed as council members, and 49.5% had volunteered at the schools (*Nihon daigaku Bunri gakubu* 2012, 9 and 30), suggesting that many council members are concerned with resident associations and/or schools. Council composition may induce peculiar tendencies in student activities under the community school program. These activities may involve offering assistance at resident association events or to resident association projects (e.g., street cleaning and community festivals), or interaction with community residents through school events (e.g., school festivals and athletic meets) and may be limited in terms of diversity.

Free School K provides opportunities for students to interact with the elderly, through which students are furnished with an occasion to study Japan's aging society, which is a

major social issue. Students may encounter elderly people suffering from dementia and observe care workers assisting the elderly.

A number of Vietnamese residents visit Free School K. The school is planning to create opportunities for interaction between students and Vietnamese residents. While the idea has not yet been actualized, the school intends to invite Vietnamese residents to the cafe, offering them an opportunity to learn about Japanese language and culture by interacting with students.

At Free School K, students conduct the activities independently of resident association projects and unrelated to typical school events. Resident associations may not necessarily propose student interaction with group-home elderly persons and Vietnamese residents because these individuals do not participate in resident associations. Many school management council members under the community school program have experienced being resident association officers. In this sense, free schools can create novel activities without the community school program or assistance from resident associations. Furthermore, free school staffs acquaintances, such as elderly individuals at group homes and foreign residents, can get involved in student activities.

Free School T Features

Usuda and Nishimine (2006) conducted research with workers from the stores on two shopping streets that assisted with an elementary school's comprehensive studies class. In the class, fourth-graders interviewed the workers about their jobs. Usuda and Nishimine asked the workers about their interviews with the students. Among 42 respondents, 92.3% said that they desired to have more opportunities to be interviewed by students, while 81.0% wished to assist the class as interviewees during and after the next academic year. Moreover, 73.1% regarded the students' interviews as significant because the interviews sparked students' interest in and attachments to the shopping streets (Usuda and Nishimine 2006, 10 and 12-14).

Takeuchi (2004) surveyed fourth-graders at an elementary school. During a comprehensive studies class, the surveyed students had worked at stores on a shopping street. According to the survey results, 70% of the 49 students reported having very much enjoyed the shopping street job experience, while 28% simply stated that they enjoyed it (Takeuchi 2004, 60 and 62).

The abovementioned survey results suggest that shopping street workers and elementary school students value their interactions with each other. However, Yano (2018) identified some problems in classes that are conducted with assistance from shopping streets. Shopping street stores want to impose restrictions on the duration of student observations

because each store has a busy period. In addition, stores have capacity limits and cannot accept many students as observers at once. Shopping streets may decline conventional schools' requests for observations and interviews if multiple schools want to conduct observations and interviews at the same time. Conventional schools adhere to MEXT's guidelines for conducting classes. Therefore, many schools want to conduct fieldwork at one particular time of year. Moreover, shopping streets refuse schools' requests if they are not confident that they can guarantee students' safety or maintain food commodities hygienically while students are conducting their in-store research (Yano 2018, 80).

Free schools can obtain aid from shopping streets in a method that is dissimilar to conventional schools'. If they are established on shopping streets as Free School T is, their students will encounter workers on a daily basis, thus gaining opportunities to interact with them. Free schools have the advantage of flexibility; they can be located in the middle of a shopping street by repurposing closed stores as school buildings. As a shopping street constituent, a free school can contribute by enlivening the street through building adornments and activities that are related to seasonal events such as the *hina matsuri* festival.

If free schools are established in areas where many elderly people live, students will have daily opportunities to help elderly individuals. Similarly, students at free schools that are located in or near forests can learn forest management by observation and participate in forest preservation. In sum, free schools' site selection flexibility allows students to directly confront Japan's social problems.

5. Conclusion

While conventional schools can employ the community school program and request community residents' participation in school management, free schools can contribute to communities using their peculiar relationships with community residents. Whereas free schools do not have to conduct comprehensive studies and social studies classes, they can physically establish themselves on shopping streets, contributing both to the individual streets and the communities at large. In sum, by virtue of their flexibility, free schools can seek and develop novel methods for contributing to communities.

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