

**Book review: *Gakko ni ikanai kodomo no shakaishi: Futoko to free school no genryu [A Social History of Children Not Attending School: The Origins of Non-Attendance and Alternative Schools]***

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**Abstract**

Yuya Tanaka's *A Social History of Children Not Attending School* is a thoughtful depiction of the issue of children not attending school in Japan and the changing awareness thereof, as handled largely by private-sector organizations and individuals, from the 1960s through the 1980s. Its focus is on the process through which the phenomenon of children not attending school came to be viewed as a problem and the changing understanding of that problem, as well as on the complex interactions among diverse actors in the process of creating measures and alternatives to address the situation. The author, himself at one time the proprietor of an alternative school, writes with well-informed sympathy and clarity about the issues of the times, detailing the multiple viewpoints and actors involved with thorough reference to contemporary documents, newspapers, magazines, and other materials.

*Keywords:* alternative schools, school non-attendance Japan

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Chapter 1 discusses the initial encounters of children not attending school with specialists, the launch of the Japanese Society for Child Psychiatry, and the response to children not attending school from doctors and administrators, including acknowledging on the one hand that non-attendance was not a disease (and in some cases “treating” it with family counseling) while providing on the other hand official diagnoses which would permit children’s absence from school. Temporary institutionalization was also practiced, in some cases forcibly, either for “treatment” or as a would-be form of alternative schooling.

Chapter 2, focusing on the 1970s, discusses educational issues arising in elementary and secondary education and the appearance of “drop-outs” and “dropped-outs,” presenting various early forms of alternative schools for children not attending school, such as “mothers’ arithmetic schools,” cram schools, and the national associations for support outside schools which sprang up in this time period.

Chapter 3, focusing on the 1980s, discusses violations of children’s rights at school such as bullying, and corporal punishment, as well as the rise of explicit interest in “free” (alternative) schools, embodied in the Free School Research Association; it also touches on

forms of alternative education abroad and the governmental Ad Hoc Council on Education established in 1984 to address educational problems such as these violations of rights and the resulting rise of child suicides, along with the Women's Private-Sector Council on Education, an unofficial parallel body active in the late 1980s which called for more "freedom" in education.

Part II is centered on Okuchi Keiko, the founder of the early alternative school Tokyo Shure. Chapter 4 begins by introducing the psychiatrist Watanabe Takashi, whose clinical experience with children not attending school led to a gradual shift in his perception of the issue, from essentially a problem of the children themselves and their households to one of the schools and the surrounding social framework (a shift from "abnormal behavior" to "a natural reaction"). Okuchi Keiko, herself a teacher, encountered Watanabe in 1980 when her elementary-school son began to refuse to attend school, developing serious physical symptoms which were alleviated by Watanabe's understanding of the issue. Watanabe also introduced Okuchi to the Kibokai, a group founded in 1973 by parents (largely mothers) of children not attending school; their view was that rather than, in accordance with the prevailing wisdom of the time, forcing children to attend school in any way possible (and blaming mothers for their children's non-attendance), alternative options should be found, and that—as Okuchi had discovered through her son's meeting with Watanabe—not attending school should not be pathologized.

Chapter 5 examines the process through which Okuchi moved away from her original teaching position and toward alternative education, with a focus on her submissions to the educational journal *Hito [Mensch]*. Her writings discussed the difficulties of balancing work and family as a "mother teacher," including the particular expectations placed on women from both directions, as well as references to the possibilities of not attending school

based on her own son's experience. She became involved with the so-called "people's education movement" and in 1985 resigned from her job teaching elementary school to open the alternative Tokyo Shure.

Chapter 6 focuses on the debate of the late 1980s on medical treatment for children not attending school, which played out largely between Okuchi, who was now running Tokyo Shure as an alternative school for children in this position and a hub for related grassroots movements and calls for the reform of existing schools, and the psychiatrist Inamura Hiroshi, who believed that these children required medical treatment. Their argument took place in newspaper and magazine articles, with both Inamura's pathologization and Okuchi's positive outlook proving divisive among teachers and academics.

Chapter 7 addresses the changes in administrative awareness and treatment of children not attending school, including surveys by the Ministry of Justice and others, councils of experts, and shifts in Ministry of Education policy from countermeasures to prevention in advance.

The book concludes by pointing out the importance of understanding and research concerning the people involved without being dominated by fixed ideas, as well as support for children not going to school in learning places outside school.

The author, himself at one time the proprietor of an alternative school, writes with well-informed sympathy and clarity about the issues of the times, detailing the multiple viewpoints and actors involved with thorough reference to contemporary documents, newspapers, magazines, and other materials and thus enabling readers to grasp the complexity of the situation as well as its connections and parallels to the context of today. It is to be hoped that at some point a second volume discussing the 1990s through the current day will appear in order to extend this understanding further.

### References

Tanaka, Y. (2024). *Gakko ni ikanai kodomo no shakaishi: Futoko to free school no genryu [A Social History of Children Not Attending School: The Origins of Non-Attendance and Alternative Schools]*. Keio University Press.