

Barriers to Support Service Use among Students with School Absenteeism (*Futoko*) in Japan: A Mixed-Methods Study

Research Overview

While Japan has expanded alternative options for students experiencing school absenteeism, research on those disconnected from such services remains scarce. This mixed-methods study examines why they remain unreached, showing that household resources do not ensure service use; instead, access depends on parents' complex roles and alignment with a child's needs.

Purpose

In Japan, students who are absent from school for 30 days or more per year are classified as experiencing long-term absence. *Futoko*—literally meaning “non-attendance at school” (fu = non, tōkō = to attend school)—is treated as a subcategory of long-term absence and is regarded as the most representative category of school absenteeism. In 2024, the number of elementary and junior high school students identified as *futoko* reached approximately 350,000, accounting for 3.9% of all students.

Since the 1980s, alternatives to returning to regular school attendance have increasingly been recognized for children experiencing *futoko*. In 2016, the Act on Securing Educational Opportunities legally solidified the right to diverse learning environments. Currently, public support options have expanded to include in-school support rooms, public education support centers, and specialized schools for students experiencing school absenteeism. Additionally, private institutions such as “free schools” have grown, particularly in urban areas.

Despite these policies, only 43,000 students were officially recognized as attending out-of-school facilities (MEXT, 2024). Furthermore, the Institute of Children's Developmental Science reports that approximately 15% of absent students are connected to neither school nor external support. The actual circumstances of these “unconnected” households remain insufficiently understood. This study aims to clarify, through quantitative and qualitative data, which parents do not utilize these support settings.

Methods

This study analyzes data from parents (aged 25–59) of absent students collected through

original surveys.

- Survey I (July 2025): An online survey (N = 1,286; 57.2% male, 42.8% female).
- Survey II (Nov 2025 – Jan 2026): Semi-structured interviews with 20 parents in total (16 from Survey I and 4 spouses).

In Survey I, we performed a binomial logistic regression. The dependent variable was defined as "1" for those utilizing no facilities in the two weeks prior to the survey and "0" for those utilizing a facility for at least one day. Independent variables included household income, residential area, and the respondent's educational background. In Survey II, verbatim transcripts were analyzed using "after-coding" to generate thematic categories reflecting the barriers to support.

Results / Discussion

Quantitative Findings (Survey I):

The analysis revealed no significant correlation between household income or urban residency and the non-utilization of facilities. Regarding educational background, fathers with a university degree or higher were more likely to utilize services (OR = 0.223, $p < 0.10$), though this indicates only marginal significance requiring cautious interpretation. A more prominent factor was the child's age: parents of students in upper elementary or junior high school were significantly more likely to report using no facilities compared to those with children in lower-to-middle elementary grades. These results suggest that resources typically used to secure education—income, location, and education—do not necessarily translate into the utilization of support facilities.

Qualitative Findings (Survey II):

Of the 16 cases analyzed, 6 involved children who transitioned to out-of-school facilities. Success often depended on parents' "negotiating power" and their ability to proactively research and present options while maintaining the child's desired ties to their original school. Conversely, reasons for not attending facilities included:

- The child's personal dislike of the facility (9 cases).
- Psychological ties to the original school (e.g., wanting to stay with friends or the expectation of returning after physical symptoms improve) (3 cases).
- Geographical barriers and the inability of parents to provide mandatory transportation (3 cases).
- Mismatched perceptions (e.g., viewing the facility as only for developmental disabilities) (2 cases).

Some families did not seriously consider external options because the child's home life was viewed positively (e.g., socializing through online gaming). Others saw no need for facilities if they lacked formal academic instruction or if care could be provided at home.

Conclusion

Quantitative data indicates that living in urban areas or possessing higher economic and cultural capital does not guarantee a connection to support services. Qualitative insights clarify that smooth connections through official referrals are rare. Instead, attendance is realized only through intensive parental "trial and error"—gathering information, negotiating with institutions, and carefully matching the child's preferences with available settings.

Whether a parent assumes this role depends on their educational expectations, strategies, and their perception of what functions an out-of-school facility should serve. Ultimately, the decision to utilize facilities is a highly individualized process shaped by a complex interplay of parental circumstances and the child's unique situation.