

Bullying and School Absenteeism in Japan

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Abstract:- Education is the most important part in preparing generation of a nation. The success of a nation can also be measured on how education is organized. Japan is one of the countries in the world with good reputation in terms of education. However, it does not mean Japan has no problem in the delivery of education. Problems concerning student behavior also happened in Japan, one of them is *futōkō* or school absenteeism in this case the absence of students in school for long periods of time. Students who are absent in school for a long time will have a negative impact, especially in terms of socialization. The increasing number of students who are absent from school leads to anxiety among parents and the community, so the government is considered important to address the problem immediately. Japanese government through Ministry of Education designed policies to help students who are absent in school to continue receiving education. In addition to the government, non-profit organizations or NGOs also work on programs to help these students. The government and NGO collaborate in schooling support networks so that *futōkō* issues can be resolved.

Keywords:- *Futōkō; School Non-Attendance; Education Policy; Free-School; Schooling Support System.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Japan is one of the world's reputable countries in the provision of education based on curriculum and learning outcomes. The ministry exercises control over the implementation of education, from elementary school to higher education and its substance. Schools must follow complete guidelines on what to teach and how to teach in the classroom every day [1] However, in the implementation of education system in Japan, there are still many problems related to behavior and social pressure to achieve student learning outcomes. Problems related to education in Japan include *ijime* (bullying), and *futōkō* (absent in school). The pressure on learning outcomes that must be good sometimes makes students in Japan depressed. These problems may be the reason on death of students and become serious problem faced by schools, parents and countries.

One problem that occurs in the world of education in Japan is non-attendance school or in Japanese term *futōkō*. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology (MEXT), institution deals with primary and secondary schools, stated that *futōkō* is the condition that a student cannot or does not want to attend school for more than 30 days in one academic year due to psychological, emotional, physical and/or social problems, but not related to

illness or economic problems [2] The Japan Times reported on August 16, 2014 that the total number of students who did not attend school for more than 30 days or more with reasons other than health and economic problems amounted to 119,617 students in primary and junior high schools nationwide [3]. The phenomenon of *futōkō* or non-attendance school has become an alarming issue, as it has not been resolved to date.

A student does not present in school because of a reason. The Japanese government through the Ministry of Education conducted research on this subject to find out reasons. Some factors behind the phenomenon of *futōkō*, among others, is the existence of *ijime*, having problems with friends, having problems with teachers, not satisfied with the achievement of learning outcomes and problems with school rules [4]. In other words, almost all contributing factors are in the school environment. This can be related to relationships with classmates, teachers, school rules and activities undertaken.

Katsunobu Shimizu in his article entitled “Defining and Interpreting Absence From School in Contemporary Japan”, stated that factors of student not to attend school is due to problems with school rules. The Japanese education system is characterized by high centralization and dominance by the central government, such as censorship of textbooks and the enactment of school rules [5]. The central government implements various school regulations in detail, such as hair color, bag type and so on. In Japanese dramas and comics that showcase school life, it is common for teachers to stand in front of school gate to ensure students are wearing the right stuff and how to wear it in accordance with school rules. Sugimoto argues that school rules are more directed to authoritarian training than as a student guide, so that it may encourage a student to act inappropriately. Schools are no longer a fun place for learners because there are so many rules they have to run.

Student's behavior is the price to pay from strict school rules in form of *ijime* (bullying). *Ijime* or the suppression occurred and triggered another problem, *futōkō*. A student who experienced bullying in school prefers not coming to school due to fear. The problem is not only on rules and oppression occurred but also on achievement where student must be brilliant becomes a burden for students. A student with learning problems may have less satisfactory learning outcomes and become one of the reason of a student absent at school [6]

A student who is absent at school within a few days has fear when they enter school. They are afraid of not being able to catch up with the lessons, resulting in a decline in learning achievement. The stigma of intense competition into the next level requires them to study very hard that may lead to boredom and mental fatigue. Schools in Japan still focus on academic success, exam-based curriculum and assessing a student's academic achievement so that they experienced tremendous pressure to achieve academic success. Students in Japan often do not have social life as teenagers with many friends and activities to their liking. It also became one of the causes of this phenomenon. Students who are absent from school feel that school is not a place where they can have friends so it does not matter to them if they do not come to school.

Students who are absent from school are not only due to school environmental factors, *ijime* and friendships, but also because of individual factors [7]. Students with low self-esteem, difficulty to get along and high level of concern have a tendency to become a *futōkō*. They are faced with situations and conditions that are not comfortable in the school environment, so they withdraw from school. At the beginning, they prefer to stay in the health room on reason of illness to skip classroom hours and then they decided not to come to school. Some students choose only present on subjects or school activities that they like only and this can also be the trigger of a student not coming to school in the long term [8].

II. DEFINITION OF PROBLEM

As we enter the globalization era, technology provides access to a wider knowledge. To gain knowledge, one may not necessarily come to school as a traditional education system [9] There are many ways to learn something without requiring a child to come to school but with consequences on the loss period of socialization from the child. Aside from being one of the places to transfer knowledge, school also has a function as a place to socialize and interact with others. The problem of *futōkō* phenomenon is not only students who do not want to come to school or do not want to learn, but further into the realm of student. Knowledge or cognitive aspect is important but social aspect is also important, therefore a student who does not want to come to school will experience a period of solitude or away from socialization. At the time they live their own time, no adult supervises and directs them when they make mistakes. The period of socialization will be lost from their daily activities and it will be bad.

This phenomenon is of particular concern to the government and the people especially parents considering the adverse impacts in the future if the number of students who do not attend school continues to increase. Government is considered important to make education policy to overcome it. Various organizations also created programs to help overcome these phenomena. Every element of the government, private institution as well as parents considers this phenomenon should be overcome. Therefore, the cooperation of each element is necessary so that students who

do not want to go to school still get a decent education and have a good future. Responding to these problems the government and nonprofit organizations create a program so that students who do not attend school still continue to be educated as if in school. This research will elaborate the program in helping the government overcome the *futōkō*.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Shimizu Katsunobu in his article entitled Defining and Interpreting Absence from School in Contemporary Japan: How the Ministry of Education Has Framed School Non-Attendance, discussed how Japanese government through the Ministry of Education has identified the *futōkō* student phenomenon during the period 1950 to 2000s [10]. This phenomenon has gained public attention so the government must continue to publicize their opinions on this phenomenon.

Shimizu conducted an analysis of reports and statistical data that has been issued by the Ministry of Education for several decades. Shimizu cites Ito that there has been a change of social outlook towards children absent from school in 15 years since 1960s and the main issue of children absent from school was economic factors and other factor is related to school as the trigger [11]. This article also discussed the change of mentioned triggers of this phenomenon by year. It also provided statistics on the number of Japanese children who refused to attend school and reasons for not going to school. Shimizu also presented category division table of non-school children based on data from the Ministry of Education. The division of categories of children who did not attend school appeared in 1980-1987 then revised in 1988.

Shimizu came to the conclusion of the analysis based on the data obtained, that there are four factors that influence the concept of the Ministry of Education on this phenomenon: (1) during 1980s there are many parents protested the pathological view of children who refused to attend school; (2) the emergence of a report issued by the Ministry of Law, on the absence of students in schools, where the phenomenon is seen as a human rights-related issue because of the violence that occurred in schools as the main trigger; (3) the political agenda of the Ministry of Education itself, such as the policy of school system that gives children greater freedom to choose their schools; (4) the obligation of the Ministry of Education to respond to the altered nature of children, meaning that the Ministry of Education should facilitate the increasing number of students who decide not to attend school.

In a thesis entitled “Understanding *futōkō* as a Social Problem in Japan”, Brittany Nicole Lozano) explained that *futōkō* student is a growing social problem in Japan, where a student experienced so much anxiety from the school environment, so physically they cannot attend school [12]. Nicole wanted to consider the presence of *futōkō* as a social issue related to Japanese society. Actually, *futōkō* as basic understanding only mean students who are not in school. However, the meaning is actually deep as a social problem

that refers to the behavior of children due to high level of anxiety caused by their experience in school.

Further discussion lead to educational reform that has been done by the Ministry of Education. Nicole also conducted research on the extent to which *futōkō* issues affected educational reform. Based on the growing definition and discourse, Nicole succeeded in exposing the social perception of *futōkō* from its history to the time this article published. This perception shows that there has been a shift in responsibilities felt by students and the school institution they attend. More social actors are involved in critical discussions of *futōkō*. The finding of this research suggests that the free-school program is one of ways to solve *futōkō* education problem. The program is aimed at *futōkō* and expected to help them to re-enter the social structure.

Both of these studies focused on examining *futokkō* phenomena from different perspectives. Shimizu described how the government framed this phenomenon and factors that made government worked on *futōkō* concepts to be more easily understood by schools and communities, but specifically did not discuss policy in overcoming this phenomenon. Nicole used *futōkō* concept as described in Shimizu's article, but Nicole elaborated this phenomenon from a societal point of view, where *futōkō* is not only a problem in education, but a problem in society. Nicole held conventional view that schools are not the only place for children to learn and free-school institution is one of answers to fulfil *futōkō* education, without having to return them to school.

IV. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is conducted by qualitative method where researchers took data using literature studies about education in Japan, *Futōkō* phenomenon and the theme of the research. The data is obtained from books, international journals and e-books. Data analysis is an advanced process done after data collection and reading documents related to the research theme. Analysis is conducted by incorporating researchers' views argumentatively. Data analysis is used to get answers to research questions and therefore data analysis should be conducted accordingly. Data analysis is conducted to cover several things. The first is data analysis of *futokō* concept according to Japanese point of view. Data analysis is in form of government policy and program implemented by non profit organization.

V. RESEARCH FINDING

The term *futōkō* was officially used by the Ministry of Education in 1998 contained in the annual report on Student Behavior and the Ministry of Education response (Problem Behavior by Children and Pupils and the MOE's Response). *Futōkō* refers to the condition of students absent from school for some reasons but not to health and financial reasons. Briefly Wong quoted the education ministry as describing the *futōkō* definition as: *Futōkō* is a situation where students are unwilling or unable to come to school for 30 days or more within a school year due to psychological, emotional,

physical or social reasons, but excludes health and financial reasons [13].

Based on the definition, the school can categorize its students easily and take appropriate steps to overcome it. Based on the concept, the government described the categories included in *futōkō*, including students who do not want to come to school because of cases of oppression (bullying) by other students and poor relationship with teachers. The next category is students who do not come to school because they hang out and play with groups that often commit abuses in the community, children who do not want or do not come to school because they feel apathetic or have strong guilt feelings because never absent in school. The next category is children who have anxiety-induced emotional confusion and the last is children who feel that life in school is meaningless, but chooses the direction they want, which they consciously do not want to come to school.

During the 1960s to the 1980s, the student's absence in schools increasingly caught the attention of child psychiatrists, who believed children who were absent from school had pathological problems that required special care. This is marked by the use of term of school refusal by the Ministry of Education until 1990s and this term was then replaced with *futōkō* (non-attendance school). In addition to publicizing change of mentions for this phenomenon, the Ministry of Education also published the number of students who were absent in school based on *futōkō* category. Researchers retrieved the latest data in 2015 in the Ministry's annual report.

Based on statistical data of 2014 academic year, there were 3,504,334 students who were registered as junior high school students in Japan [14] In table 1, there were data of students who were absent in school within 30 days or more from 1991 to 2014. Based on the data, within the span of 23 years, there were increase and decrease in the number of students absent in school. The highest occurred in 1996 with 13,569 increased students, while the most decreased *futōkō* occurred in 2002 by 12,516 students. The decline number of *futōkō* occurred until 2005 then increased again, not significantly, until 2008. Between 2009 and 2012, the number of *futōkō* declined and rose again in 2013 and 2014. The latest data in 2014 recorded the number of students who were absent in school within 30 days or more at the junior high school as many as 126,850 students.

Based on data displayed, the government continued to work to reduce the number of *futōkō* each year. The Ministry of Education through Central Board of Education and Administrative Councils has proposed educational reforms designed to cope with *futōkō* [15]. Several proposed reforms have been suggested, such as incorporating professional materials in the new teacher training curriculum so that teachers can also deal with *futōkō* issues. Another important step towards educational reform is the implementation of special zones for structural reform law.

Specific questions allowed local governments to make requests or exceptions to regulations issued by the central

government. For example, the local government wrote an entry on the Ministry of Education's website regarding *futōkō* issues. The input, among others, for the government to make a more flexible curriculum through the establishment of new types of schools for student who cannot attend school, enable learning activities using information technology for students, including students who cannot attend school and allow the establishment of schools by non profit organization for the student who cannot attend school. The existence of this special case issue allowed the central government to make the right policy and aim the right target since local government knew what is most needed, especially in educational problem.

VI. DISCUSSION

Among various problems in Japan's education, one of them is *futōkō*, the Japanese government announced the education reformation in 2002. The reform proposal had been worked on by the government a year earlier and was named the rainbow plan because it contained seven proposed strategic priorities [16] Some of these strategies are in line with the proposals provided by special zones for structural reform law, such as strategies to improve the effectiveness of the classroom by providing IT facilities and professional teacher training.

Through this reform also the government considered school day to five days. Based on these seven strategies, researcher took some strategies, which according to the researcher can help solve *futōkō* problem,

First strategy was to help adolescent to be open and warm Japanese people. This strategy was implemented through a school program involving youth participation in community services and moral education in schools.

Second strategy was the improvement of school environment into a pleasant and worry-free environment. Implementation of this strategy was through increased cultural and sports activities, taking appropriate steps on student behavior and protecting students from harmful information. Through this strategy, students were expected to come to school without fear to learn and socialize.

Third strategy was to make school as a trusted place by parents and society. Implementation of this strategy was to implement school evaluation systems, revitalize school boards by involving parents and promoting new forms of school according to the needs of the community.

New school forms were also a concern of the government to overcome *futōkō* problems. Children who cannot come to school cannot just stay home and not get along in a community. They have to keep in touch with the education system. Based on Nicole's research, bringing them back to conventional schools was considered not the right solution as school environment kept them out of school, such as bullying.

One of new school concept was free-school, private education institution and non-profit organization that pay special attention to children who cannot come to school or *futōkō* [17] (a) most free-schools did not have strict and oriented rules that help students individually to find what they really want to do, (b) free-schools also provided counselling to overcome problems that made them unable to come to conventional schools and heal the psychological problem, (c) free-schools also applied guidelines for children who wanted to return to school, but there was no compulsion about it, (d) each free-school has different policy on the procedure to bring students back to conventional school. One example was a free school established by the Education Council sponsored by the government provided guidance that children should not be forced to return to conventional schools.

Free-school class also taught general subjects like conventional school; the fundamental difference was that free school could not hold activities that are in dire need of many groups, such as sports and extracurricular activities. Therefore, socialization in a large group cannot be accomplished. According to researchers, although free school may help *futōkō* in the cognitive aspect but the socialization aspect could not perform well in the free school.

The free school established by NGOs in cooperation with the government was collaboration between conventional school of elementary and junior high school level. The form of cooperation was to provide a graduation certificate to children who attended free-school class. It also showed that free school began to gain recognition in Japanese society. In addition to graduation certificates, the Japanese government also frees children who attended free-school classes in university entrance exams, so they are detached from the heavy burden of university entrance exams. This new policy further proved that Japanese government is increasingly flexible in making educational policies.

The Japanese government continuously works to solve *futōkō* problems by involving non-profit organizations and private parties. One of them is a practical research program on the use of NGOs in response to *futōkō* problem [18]. In this program, the government entrusts the development of effective learning curriculum and program of activities to NGOs, private sector and public facilities that have experiences providing guidance and support to children who are not coming to school and their parents. The program further clarifies that the Japanese government is very serious about handling this phenomenon, as it embraces all those who can help children who do not come to school. In this case, MEXT as a government representative, prepares a *futōkō*-related research report, distributes the research results to the local education board or prefecture, NGOs and private parties so it can be referred in determining state policy.

In this program, in addition to develop effective learning curriculum, NGOs can also develop activity programs to build communication skills and the ability to engage in interpersonal relationship. This program was seen in outdoor activities such as camping programs devoted

exclusively to *futōkō* students. The purpose of this camping program was to improve the ability to communicate in the environment and form self-concept in students. To achieve that goal the *futōkō* are involved in various activities that can train the basic abilities and rules of life, guide their talents to achieve goals and help them to gain success and solve problems.

Unfortunately, *futōkō* students who participated in such programs are still very few. The NGOs also play active role in the guidance process for children who withdrew from the environment, as well as supported for non-school children due to truancy and delinquency. In addition to NGOs and the private sector, the program also involved City Education Councils, Education Support Center or Education Support Center and elementary to secondary schools. Involvement of such parties is conducted in terms of information exchange, understanding local needs, checking progress of the programs, improving service efforts and sharing research reports. The network formed between the government, NGOs and private sector becomes a school support network or schooling support networks. Schooling support network involved various elements of society and was expected to help solving the phenomenon of *futōkō*, not just to return students to conventional schools, but also rather to provide learning facilities that are safe and enjoyable for learners.

VII. CONCLUSION

In the global era, the Japanese government must keep pace with various phenomena that arise in the world of education. Policy should be made more flexible and easier for learners to gain access to education. The existence of non-formal school will continue to grow in accordance with the need of society and problems that occur in the world of education in Japan.

The government can no longer rely solely on conventional schools as education center although it is still preferred. The compulsory system up to high school level in conventional schools should be maintained so that children may continue to understand the importance of coming to school while non-formal school such as free school is an answer to *futōkō* phenomena.

The involvement of NGOs and private sector is also increasingly needed to ensure that students are still getting the education they need. Free school can facilitate the *futōkō* student in the aspect of knowledge but cannot optimize socialization. Therefore, many programs should be put as priority in the aspect of socialization for *futōkō* students to be ready to be part of the society.

FUTURE SCOPE

The percentage of *futōkō* in 2021 was 1.3% for elementary-school students and 5% for junior high school students, totaling more than 240,000 students and reaching a record high, alongside a 25% increase from the previous year, attracting significant social attention [19]. Approximately 55% of *futōkō* students have serious long-

term absences of 90 days or more [20] There was fluctuation of school absenteeism in Japan, and its mean that poses challenges not only to the students themselves but also to their family relationships and the staff at their schools

These school absenteeism and the relationship to Japanese society changed remain as socio economic and technological development in the future

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest associated with this manuscript.

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