CREATING A NETWORK FOR ALTERNATIVES IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

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Abstract

The purpose of this report is to find out a way to create networks among the multiplicity in educational practice. Rapid increases in number of children’s non-attendance at school in compulsory education level past a decade in Japan posed a question of existing schooling system. Non-attendance at school of children can be questioned as discordances between practices in school education and social system in rapid change. Many agents (organizations/individuals) are taking measures to challenge the problem: boards of education, parents’ associations, free schools, counselors, medical institute, supplementary private school and so on. However, collaborations between the agents are often difficult because there are conflicts of system, of philosophy and sometimes of interests. The disaccords are causing conflicts and stagnation in various aspects in practical level. To get a clue to solve this problem, the author organized a team to create networks to bridge over the multiplicity and consequently to promote reconstructions of educational practice. IT and Internet play central role in the activities. The report is an action research of our activities. The report consists of the following four parts. First, reviewing available studies and statistics, the author shows the views with regard to the backgrounds of the increase in number of non-attendance at school. Secondly, the author discusses why the networking is indispensable to face reconstruction of educational system by employing the theory of knowledge management. Thirdly, the author shows his attempts to bridge over the multiplicity and explain its’ theoretical backbone. Finally, the author points out factors required to create network to face the rapid social change through the examination of his attempts and its’ outcome

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to find out a way to create networks to bridge the multiple options available in educational practice. The rapid incidence of children’s non-attendance at school at the compulsory education level for a decade has posed serious questions about the relevance of the existing schooling system in Japan. This non-attendance can be seen as a reflection of discordances between practices in school education on the one hand and the flux in the social system on the other.
Many agents (organizations/individuals) are taking measures to resolve the problem: boards of education, parents’ associations, free schools, counselors, medical institutes, supplementary private schools and so on. However, collaboration between the agents is often difficult because there are conflicts of system, of philosophy and sometimes of interests. These dissonances have resulted in stagnation in various approaches to cope with the above-referred problem of non-attendance amongst children. To get a clue to solve this problem, the author organized a team to create a network (Alternative Education Network: AEN) or the [Orutanet] to bridge over the multiplicity of the available alternatives and consequently to promote reconstruction of practices in school education. IT and Internet play an important role in the activities. The report is in fact an action research of our team activities.

The report consists of the following four parts. First, reviewing the available studies and statistics, the author tries to trace the various reasons for the increase in incidence of non-attendance at school. Second, by using the theory of knowledge management as a tool, the author discusses why networking is indispensable for the reconstruction of this alternative educational system. Third, the author elucidates his attempts to bridge over the multiplicity in these alternatives and explain its’ theoretical backbone. Finally the author points out the factors required to create a network to tide over the rapid social change through the examination of his attempts while comparing them with other similar attempts.

Non-attendance at School and Diversification of Educational System in Japan

History of Non-attendance at School

The phenomenon mainly called ‘Non-attendance at School’ [futoko] in Japan today used to be called ‘School Phobia’ [gakko kyousyou] or ‘Truancy’ [taigaku] till 1960s. From 1970s to 1980s the phenomenon was mainly called by the name of ‘School Refusal’ [tokokyohi]. The word ‘Non-attendance at School’ [futoko] has become more common after the 1990s.

The above sketch of the history of the nomenclature of non-attendance shows how similar phenomena are looked upon by the society. As we see, the focal point of observation on non-attendance has shifted from childrens’ personality to social issues of schooling.

According to the Basic Statistical Surveys on Schools [gakko kihoncyousa], the number of non-attendance category children had started to increase after 1975. Up to 1980s, however, non-attendance ratio had been less than 0.1% in elementary school and less than 1.0% in upper primary school respectively.

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However, a marked increase starts after 1990s as indicated in the chart given below.

Chart 1: Number and Ratio of Non-attendance Student (30 days and more)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Number of Children</th>
<th>Number of Non-Attendance Children &amp; ratio</th>
<th>Increase of Non-Attendance ratio</th>
<th>Total Number of Children</th>
<th>Number of Non-Attendance Children &amp; ratio</th>
<th>Increase of Non-Attendance ratio</th>
<th>Total Number of Children</th>
<th>Number of Non-Attendance Children &amp; ratio</th>
<th>Increase of Non-Attendance ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>9,157,429</td>
<td>12,645 (0.14)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5,188,314</td>
<td>54,172 (1.04)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14,345,743</td>
<td>66,817 (0.47)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>8,947,226</td>
<td>13,710 (0.15)</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>5,036,840</td>
<td>58,421 (1.16)</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>13,984,066</td>
<td>72,131 (0.52)</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>8,768,881</td>
<td>14,769 (0.17)</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>4,850,137</td>
<td>60,039 (1.24)</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>13,619,018</td>
<td>74,808 (0.55)</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>8,582,871</td>
<td>15,788 (0.18)</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4,681,166</td>
<td>61,663 (1.32)</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>13,264,037</td>
<td>77,449 (0.58)</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>8,370,246</td>
<td>16,569 (0.20)</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4,570,390</td>
<td>65,022 (1.42)</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>12,940,636</td>
<td>81,591 (0.65)</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>8,105,629</td>
<td>19,498 (0.24)</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>4,527,406</td>
<td>74,853 (1.65)</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>12,633,029</td>
<td>94,351 (0.75)</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>7,855,387</td>
<td>20,765 (0.26)</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>4,481,480</td>
<td>84,701 (1.89)</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>12,336,867</td>
<td>105,466 (0.85)</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>7,663,533</td>
<td>26,017 (0.34)</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>4,380,604</td>
<td>101,675 (2.32)</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>12,044,137</td>
<td>127,692 (1.06)</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>7,500,317</td>
<td>26,047 (0.35)</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>4,243,762</td>
<td>104,180 (2.45)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>11,744,079</td>
<td>130,227 (1.11)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>7,366,079</td>
<td>26,373 (0.36)</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>4,103,717</td>
<td>107,913 (2.63)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>11,469,796</td>
<td>134,286 (1.17)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>7,296,920</td>
<td>26,511 (0.36)</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3,991,911</td>
<td>112,211 (2.81)</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>11,288,831</td>
<td>138,722 (1.23)</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>7,239,327</td>
<td>25,869 (0.36)</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
<td>3,862,849</td>
<td>105,383 (2.73)</td>
<td>-6.1</td>
<td>11,102,176</td>
<td>131,252 (1.18)</td>
<td>-5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>7,226,910</td>
<td>24,086 (0.33)</td>
<td>-6.9</td>
<td>3,748,319</td>
<td>102,126 (2.72)</td>
<td>-3.1</td>
<td>10,975,229</td>
<td>126,212 (1.15)</td>
<td>-3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ratio and the number of non-attendance had risen consistently from academic year 1991 to academic year 2001. The ratio of non-attendance (30 days and more) rose by 162% and 169% in elementary school and lower secondary school respectively. Academic year 2002 onwards, the ratio has stabilized and the number has slightly fallen, since the number of children is decreasing.

**Background of ‘Non-attendance at School**

Although much ink has been spent on the backgrounds of ‘Non-attendance at School’, there is no evidence that the phenomenon can be attributed to concrete reasons in school (such as bullying), in home (such as pampering)
or in society (such as popularization of the internet). Instead, many studies, including the research conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), have pointed out the complicity of the background. It is a gradually prevailing discourse that non-attendance at school is a reflection of discordances between practices in school education based on a uniformed system on the one hand and a diversified social system in a state of flux on the other.

Seeing the complicity stated above, it seems reasonable to assume that there is no readymade solution to be adapted to the whole case. At the same time, stabilization of the ratio of non-attendance in the recent few years indicates the fact that certain efforts to solve the matter can affect the children, though to a limited extent. Government Scheme such as SSP (Schooling Support program) program introduced 1999, followed by SSN (Schooling Support Network) program introduced 2003 academic year, might have affected this rate.

However, the problem is sometimes serious for the children or the parent/s who is/are directly involved in the incidence. Monographs of non-attendance children show the internal/external conflicts of not going to school as a result of the pressures from the social environment. Some of the children express their grudges against their schools or even the anxiety about their future for not having gone to the school. The attempts of the author seek to empower the children and affected people involved in the phenomenon by citing multi-angled approaches and wider perspectives to cope with the matter rather than indicating a fixed solution.

**Theoretical Backbone of the Alternative Education Network (AEN)**

**Network for Non-attendance at School**

Taking the complicities and diversity of the background into consideration, it is not desirable that a rigid, structured scheme be formulated to help each child or the concerned people in trouble. However, certain measures can be devised to help each child on an individual basis. This drives us to the question as to how we can cope with the matter without fixing reasons and solutions. The solutions have to be different from a fixed-goal program. A novel way is to seek grass root level support from diversified people or organizations, for they can meet requirements of individuals better. A case in point, for example, is the increasing number of NPO activities and diversification of educational systems. But this will work efficiently only when their service meets the personal needs. Therefore, networks for the non-attendance can be a great aid for children as a whole.

However, the author has observed that till now, the networks of this kind have been malfunctioning. Why? In the first place, though there are many options available for those who want to search their ways to grow...
outside the existing school (explained in the chapter below), many children, parents and teachers are not aware of these opportunities because the source of information is limited.

Furthermore, communication channels between the agents creating network and the recipients are not always active for either they don’t have any opportunities to communicate or they have differences in ideas; especially difference in perspectives with regard to whether they should return the child to the school or not, is creating serious gaps between organizations. According to the NIER research, 65.6% of ‘Support Centers for School Adaptation’ consider it is not desirable for the children to stay outside the school, but only 21.8% in ‘Free Schools’ agree with this view\(^{viii}\). The differences, in many cases, even lead to hostilities or antagonisms.

### ‘Ba’ and AEN

Though this is not the first time the importance of networks is stressed\(^{iv}\), the author believes that the problem lies in ‘by whom’ and ‘how’ the networks are organized. As to the first question, if a network is organized by some agents (including the board of education) and they are directly involved in the conflict stated above, then the agents who do not agree with the ideas are excluded from the network. If we consider non-attendance of the school as an antithesis of the present rather rigid system of education, the network to cope with the matter ought to be based on different logical assumptions. However, just leaving the network alone doesn’t always create networks based on self-organized system as is stated above.

This leads us to the second question: how the networks are organized? Knowledge Management theory, which has been receiving increasing attention in the course of the discussion on creativity of organization, perpetuates interesting points of view. Though it is beyond the scope of this brief paper to discuss Knowledge Management as a whole, the author has made use of one key concept of the theory—‘Ba’. The concept of Ba was originally used in the discussion of Zen Buddhism. Ba can be defined as a shared space for emerging relationships. The discussion of knowledge management suggests that the fertility of an organization lies in Ba, which can be seen as a converging point, where various kind of information flows at random, and self-reformation can take place autonomously\(^{x}\).

Considering the whole network as an organism, the theory can be extended to explain the case of the network for non-attendance children: what causes network malfunction is the conspicuous absence of Ba. Though there were varieties of alternative practices to support children, there has been little shared space between the agents, which created unnecessary antagonism and stagnation as a whole.

AEN, a concept the author introduces in the following chapter, does
not hold educational activities itself. However, the team works intensively to optimize the network and create affordability in the network through organizing Ba. In other words, AEN is supposed to work as a ‘Catalyst’ of the whole network. It aims to triggers mobilization of the network and support self-organized system to keep it working.

**Aims and Activities of AEN**

**Aims of AEN**

Considering the circumstances mentioned above, the author has organized a team (in Aug, 2003) to create Ba a focal point where the people concerned with the issue flock and creation can take place. The faculty members of a university (*Hyogo University of Teacher Education*) and students (undergraduate and graduate) who are interested in alternative education constitute the staff of the team so far.

More specifically the AEN aims:

- to find out unique practices and to accumulate knowledge about the practice and management behind the activities through active research,
- to offer information to the people concerned about the multiple options in educational opportunities and relevant places
- to support communications between agents related to alternative education and the children affected by non-attendance at school, and hence activate the network.

Aim is the final purpose of the activity to create Ba. Aim ①, and aim ② are indispensable premises of the Ba at work. The Ba AEN create are both in the cyberspace and in the assembly. Both opportunities are linked together to enhance the multiplier effect.

**Activities of AEN Team**

To achieve the above aims, the team for AEN carries out several activities. Areas of activities of AEN team are described as follows:

- acquisition and accumulation of ‘knowledge alive’ through fieldwork and participant observation by the agents related with alternative education or non-attendants at school,
- developing web contents and organizing the assembly to promote communication between the agents / individuals
- attempts to correct and to improve accessibility to the available information for the press, the correspondents and on the web,
- release of information mentioned above mainly through the websites

The interrelations amongst these activities are illustrated in the figure given below.

![Figure 1: Inter-relations of AEN Activities](image)

As is seen in the Figure 1, IT, (EMS, BBS, and especially AEN website), plays an integral part in the activities. It is aimed that AEN website works as a portal-site for those who search for the alternatives in education. It is possible to collect as much information as possible from AEN or the linked website. This is important because many people who are interested in Alternatives do not always know how to access varieties of information.

Apart from website, AEN, the assembly is another *Ba* the AEN organizes. The AEN assembly is held once in a few months. People who are related to non-attendance at school, teachers in school, university staffers, students etc organize alternative practices and take part in the assembly. They discuss certain issues from different points of view. The discussion can be continued on EMS (Electric Meeting System) even after the assembly.
Structure of AEN Cyberspace

Focus of the Website

Basically, the websites are open to anybody who is interested in non-attendance or the alternatives in educational practice. However, in order to set the design policy, the team is making assumptions with regard to the people who utilize the website. They are: non-attendance children or children who are searching for alternatives to the school education, parents, curators or school teachers who support these non-attendance children, those agents which supply opportunities or information about alternatives in educational practice, and researchers who are interested in the theme related to alternative education. The website is created with a friendly design and the content is put in simple language so that junior high school students can understand the idea behind the project.

Framework of the Website

The AEN website comprises of four major categories: a) Haunt for Growth [Sodachi no Hiroba], b) Haunt for Wits [Chie no Hiroba], c) Haunt for Communication [Fureai no Hiroba], and d) Links.

Each category is named keeping the familiarity and the concept of Ba in mind. Each category includes several sub-categories. For the management of the website, especially for the security management, special sites for staffers are also created other than the mentioned categories. These can only be accessed selectively. The EMS can be accessed from the Internet or mobile phones and discussions can also be held when required. The broad framework of AEN website is illustrated diagrammatically below.
Following are the explanations for each of these categories:

a) **Haunt for Growth**

‘Haunt for Growth’ is a space where many kinds of alternative practices are introduced. The major categories are as follows: ① Camps and Workshops for the Children, Free Schools and Free Spaces\(^{\text{xvi}}\), ③ Studies in Remote Villages\(^{\text{xvii}}\), Support Center for School Adaptation\(^{\text{xviii}}\), Counseling Centers, Support Schools\(^{\text{xix}}\) and Supplementary Private Schools, Unique Schools, Study Abroad.

Each category is intended to include “memoirs of participants”, “visitor reports”, “voice of the staffs”, “letters form the agencies” etc. so that visitors can explore the practice from various aspects. This multi-angled viewpoint is required because the evaluation of the practice can differ due to the observers’ social / personal background. Generally, “memoirs of participants” and “visitor reports” are written by university students who have participated in the activities or who have carried out fieldworks in the agencies. “Voice of the staffs” and “letters form the agencies” are collected from the agencies who carried out correspondence with us.
b) Haunt for Wits

‘Haunt for Wits’ is a space where many kinds of useful information is available. The major categories are as follows: Memoirs of Non-attendance, Parents Association of Non-attendance Children, Consultation Centers for Children, Voice from Schools, Research, News and Reports, Assemblies and Events, Book Reviews.

Although the contents differ from category to category, they are supposed to help the visitors to explore the phenomenon of non-attendance in children from various aspects, making it a multidimensional approach. ‘Memoirs of Non-attendants’ and ‘Parents Association of Non-attendance Children’ contains mainly the insiders’ reports. The rest of the sub-categories mainly contain the reports of specialists or students.

c) Haunt for Communication

‘Haunt for Communication’ is a space where communication and sharing of experience can take place. The major categories are as follows: ① Bulletin Board System (BBS), ② Introduction of staffs, ③ Staffs’ Diary, ④ Electronic Meeting System (EMS).

The Bulletin Board System (BBS) is open to everybody, from a child to an adult. Everything from serious conversation to gossip and rumours are available on the web. The Staffers can join in the conversation sometimes but they are chosen not to give ‘advice’. This is because they believe the problem could be solved those only who can see complexity of the personal issues, which is hard to achieve in cyberspace. Electronic Meeting System (EMS) is closed to limited members whom any of the staffers know personally though they might have participated in AEN assembly etc. for subtle issues, which can be discussed there. The discussion can be supported by accurate data and knowledge with the help of university faculty staffs.

d) Links

This category groups as many websites as possible related to the sub-categories of ‘Haunt for Growth’ and ‘Haunt for Wits’ mentioned above. These are collected by the AEN team and linked from AEN website. The contents of the websites are simply elaborated and divided into 8 regions in Japan to improve accessibility. Over 300 websites have been chosen till now (Mar.2005) and are ever increasing. Since the staffers are
not always able to confirm the practices of the agents and links ahead, precautions not to over believe website information are enumerated on the front page in this category.

Concluding Remarks

AEN as Compared to Similar Ventures

Needless to say, there are other attempts to inform about alternatives in educational practice or to create networks for non-attendant children. There are guidebooks, newspapers and other websites aiming at helping non-attendant children by empowering them with knowledge. The advantages of AEN as compared with these other mediums are as follows.

First, the attempt of AEN is to bridge over the multiplicity of system, philosophy and interests. Though there are unions or cooperation between the similar kinds of practices, there are scarce opportunities to have a common ground to exchange their experiences and opinions with different agents. AEN, then emerges as a space for democratic communication as well as exchange of information.

Second, more stress is placed on subjective information by those involved in these practices as participant observers. At the same time, it is different from impressions we see in brochures or leaflets issued by the present organizations because the field report AEN makes is detached from the agents’ interest. These types of reports often contribute to the ‘inter-subjective’ sharing of the practices imperative to form creative Ba.

Thirdly, it is easier to compare or counterpoint the practices in AEN for all information is gathered on a website which is accessible for everyone. This is especially beneficial for children and agents who want to develop their potential relative to other practices.

Fourthly, in AEN, with the help of organic combination of IT (especially EMS) and assembly, they can continue and develop the content regarding the theme they are interested in. In AEN, they try to make the most of the advantage of Internet (two-way communication and continuity) while covering the disadvantage (anonymity) by assembly.

Foresight and Criticism

Though the characteristics of the AEN were discussed in tandem with social needs and compared with other such attempts in this paper, what seems to be lacking is a thorough examination of the outcome of AEN. It would, however, require another paper to describe the outcome for the influence of AEN is supposed to be a
wide-ranged phenomenon in itself. Access analysis of the AEN website and questionnaires to the assembly participants are being carried out regularly. The Access analysis shows there could be instability and regional gaps in the use of AEN. The results of questionnaires show that a pressing need is felt to have this kind of a network and hence it is worth an attempt. However, these may not be enough to examine the whole influence of AEN. To investigate this, questionnaires to the agents about the use of AEN, protocol analysis of the BBS or EMS, long-term observations in each agent can be carried out. Actually we need further consideration and a sound opinion at this point of time.

Finally, the author would like to point out a positive effect of this attempt. The author feels that AEN can make a great contribution to the education of university students. Many students who have observed or were involved in unique practices through the AEN activities expressed how this wondrous experience opened their eyes to other possibilities in alternative modes of education. So the attempt has managed to pull the students out from their ivory towers of the university. In this sense, the author believes AEN can be a Ba for the university students too.

Reference

i Translation into Japanese or English is given in brackets in this report.


iii Official statistical number of non-attendance (50 days and more, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Science) is available after 1966.


v ‘Konngo no futoko heno taiou no arikata ni tsuite’ [On Coping with the Non-attendance of School], Report of Administrative Task Force on Non-attendance at School, 2003

vi In ‘Report of Administrative Task Force on Non-attendance at School’ op cit, they stopped using the word ‘problem’ [mondai] to discuss non-attendance at school.
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vii See, for example, T. Ishida, R. Uchida and E. Yamasita, Kodomotati ga Kataru Toukoukyohi: 402nin no Message, [402 messages of non-attendance children], Seorisyobou, 1993

vii T. Muta, Bokutatiga Gakkou ni Ikanakatta Riyuu [The reason why we did not go to school], Okumurasyoten, 2003


ix See, for example, T. Takagaki and T. Kasugai, Futoko Shien Network [Network for Support for the help of Non-attendance], Kamogawasyuppan, 2004. In ‘Report of Administrative Task Force on Non-attendance at School’ op cit, the networks are made much of.

x ‘Ba’ is translated into place, spot, room or space according to the Japanese-English dictionary.


xiii ibid.


xvi ‘Free Schools’ in Japan usually are small sized private schools that are not accredited by the government. The word ‘Free Space’ is used for organizations similar to free school that do not want to be identified as schools.

xvii ‘Study in the Remote Village’ [sanson ryuugaku] is an attempt of local public school. Students who want to study in
natural environment and are involved in local school. The aim is to increase the number of students in many cases.

xviii ‘Support Center for School Adaptation’ [tekiou shidou kyoushitu] is a center established by board of education. Many of them are run by retired teachers and aim to return the children to the school.

xix ‘Support Schools’ are private organizations aiming at supporting children by teaching them or guiding to return to the schools.