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Discourses on School Attendance Problems in Japan: A Comparative Perspective

A hybrid *u:japan* lecture by Susanne Kreitz-Sandberg

Thursday
2026-04-23
18⁰⁰~19³⁰



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What counts as a “school attendance problem”? Exploring how Japan and other countries define, measure, and respond to student absence

School attendance problems (SAPs) are a global phenomenon, yet they are conceptualised and addressed in markedly different ways across national contexts. In Japan, long-term school absence (*futōkō*) has received attention for decades, with official statistics on students absent for 30 days or more dating back to the 1950s. Research and public debate remain extensive and ongoing. In contrast, SAPs were only relatively recently highlighted as a “hidden problem” in Sweden, underscoring the need for international comparative perspectives.

Our study “School Attendance Problems in International Comparison” examined national, organisational, and individual dimensions of SAPs among secondary school students in Sweden, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan. It applied a mixed-methods design, combining analyses of national statistics and large-scale datasets with

qualitative case studies at organisational and individual levels.

Focusing on Japan within this comparative framework, the presentation explores how SAPs are defined, measured, and interpreted. Drawing on comparative statistics and a reanalysis of PISA data, it problematises the categories used to capture school absence. Case studies from Sweden and Germany illustrate different approaches to addressing SAPs and forms of collaboration among school actors. Across all countries, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have left lasting traces in students’ motivation to attend school in person. Interviews with students who have recently returned to school add further perspectives.

The presentation discusses recent policy developments in Japan, particularly within MEXT, concerning students who do not fit within mainstream schooling. It will also invite discussion on how comparative research on Japan can be designed to both deepen understanding of Japanese contexts and generate insights into researchers’ own societies.



Dr. Susanne Kreitz-Sandberg is Associate Professor in International and Comparative Education at Stockholm University. She has previously worked as a research associate at the German Institute for Japanese Studies in Tokyo and has taught at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf and Linköping University in Sweden. Her research focuses on youth, comparative education, and higher education, with particular emphasis on gender and education. She has extensive experience with both qualitative and quantitative methods in international research contexts. Among her recognitions, she received the Tamaki Prize at Vienna University for her work on youth suicide in Japan and Germany. Most recently, she led the project *International Comparative Perspectives on School Attendance Problems*, funded by the Swedish Research Council. This collaborative project involved partners at the University of Tokyo, Leipzig University, and the University of Birmingham, and reflects her ongoing engagement in research on education in Japan from a comparative perspective.

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