Communication for Caring: A Case Study of a Regular Teacher Who Works for a Japanese High School with Three-shift System

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A high school with three shifts (*sambusei*), where students can choose their schedule from three time-table options, is a new kind of formal educational facility in Japan. This type of school has been designed to facilitate access for students with various lifestyles. In such a school, the responsibilities of faculty and staff are adjusted to each student's special needs. Traditionally in Japan, regular teachers have had responsibilities which would be expected of educational counselors. This study investigates how the quality of collaboration among caring professionals including school teachers, a part-time counselor, and other staff members at a *sambusei* high school affects the students. The focus is on a regular science teacher who is assigned to deal with the students' behavioral and psychological problems. The authors observe the guidance activities of this teacher and conduct interviews with teachers including *yogo-kyoyu* (health coordinators), in order to investigate how this teacher communicates with other school staff in the *sambusei* school setting. The authors also discuss how schools deal with students' problems in an East Asian situation where schools do not have full-time school counselors.

By examining contrastive research studies between people in the West and East, Nisbett (2003) reports that those in the East generally pay attention to the whole system more than individuals, while Westerners tend to do the opposite. In Japan, there seems to be a general tendency that the effects of education are attributed to the school system as a whole rather than an individual worker's abilities. Educators have rarely been described as "specialists" in Japan (Takahara, 2006). The cooperation of the staff members in a school has been considered more important than individual contributions.

The fact is that the individuals who work as coordinators may have played important roles in guidance activities. For example, Kondo, Hosaka and Okamura (2000) imply that the role of key faculty members is important to make the guidance activities effective. Although there are numerous reports that focus on the effectiveness of guidance activities in Japanese schools, only a few examples discuss it from the viewpoint of the individuals' abilities. Observation of a school system from the inside, instead of the larger view from the outside, may offer useful information about education in Japan, as Koga (2004) suggests. However, discussion has often been ignored concerning how a school system is structured around key personnel.

This study discusses guidance activities at a public high school in Japan by paying special attention to a teacher who has had a key role in that field. A description of the communication methods of this teacher brings up topics of discussion about how guidance counseling in an Asian school should be conducted.

Basic Information about Japanese Schools

Firstly, as basic information, the current situation of school education in Japan is briefly explained below:

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is a division of the national government in Japan. Its closest analogy is the Department of Education in the United States, although there are a number of differences between them. The basic curriculum for the K-12 equivalent education in Japan is unanimously designed by MEXT, unlike the United States, where it is unique in each local area. Japan is divided into 47 prefectures, and each prefecture has a Board of Education. These Boards of Education are largely under the control of MEXT, and they are not as independent as the education departments of the "states" in the United States.

The school system in Japan does not have local varieties: 6 years in elementary school and 3 years in middle or junior high school comprise the compulsory education facilities. Other forms of education that do not follow MEXT standards, such as home-based education, the Waldorf School, and other forms of alternate schools, are not acknowledged nor can they be called "schools" officially. Private schools also need to follow the same curriculum standards designed by MEXT as the public schools, although they are allowed to teach some special disciplines such as religion. Private schools are distinguished from public schools by their limited financial support from the national government.

This unified school system offers the same quality of education to all the children in the whole country. The system has worked well to minimize the achievement gap. The same quality of education based on the same curriculum is available in any local area. However, contrary to the ideal, educators have recently perceived a widespread achievement gap among children. In addition, the academic achievement of the whole student body has decreased over the years (see Shimizu, Akao, Arai, et al., 2008). Some educators have argued that the unique assets of individual students need be focused on, rather than encouraging the traditional form of unified education. Currently, education reform has been one of the major concerns in the society.

Consideration for the students' individual needs has been a trend in the educational system of Japan. Recently, national laws concerning special education were passed. However, some problems, such as the shortage of specialists, remain (Sugiyama & Hara, 2003). Absenteeism from school has been a crucial problem among students in Japan, where home-based education is not an option. In Japan, the problem of students who are absent over 30 consecutive days without a clear explanation is called *futoko*. The number of students with this problem has increased (MEXT, 2009) and has been viewed as a social problem (Asahi Shimbun, 2008). In addition to this issue, there is not enough discussion and consideration for the increasing number of students with foreign nationalities and the children of parents from foreign countries (Sakuma, 2006). In sum, educators in Japan have been searching for solutions to the problems concerning the diversity of students.

Although high school education is not compulsory by law, it has actually come to be semi-compulsory because education provided up to middle school is not enough to ensure that students can be independent. In order to acquire basic skills as a worker and to find a

satisfactory job, at least a high school education is expected in Japanese society. In Japan, the percentage of middle school students who go to high school was 97.8% in May, 2008 (MEXT, 2009). Whilst most students choose a high school education, absenteeism (*futoko*) is also considered a major problem in high schools. Japan would consider it a failure if the majority of students did not to attend high school classes, except for those who specifically chose to be full-time workers immediately after graduating from middle school.

In such a situation, MEXT began a school counseling program in 1995. The majority of school counselors have been working in middle schools, because many of the most serious problems such as bullying and absenteeism (*futoko*) occur in middle schools. The Japanese school counseling program is clearly different from that in the United States, which was initially implemented in high schools and focused on the students' career choice (Takahara, 2006).

Traditionally in Japan, every student belongs to a homeroom, and he or she follows the daily schedules designed for the classroom, and not for his or her own academic needs. The students attend classes as a group, and all the students in a classroom attend mostly the same classes. Any exceptions, such as skipping or repeating a grade, have been considered deviations that are quite rare. A homeroom teacher is in charge and cares for all students in the classroom. This teacher's responsibility covers academic, behavioral, developmental and psychological problems, the future plans and most other aspects of all students in his or her classroom. In fact, most of the jobs that are assigned to school counselors in the United States are assigned to the homeroom teachers in Japan.

School counselors in most Japanese schools are part-time workers who work only a few hours a week. They have limited duties such as interviewing students with psychological problems, and these problems are generally limited to absenteeism (*futoko*) and developmental disorders. In addition to this limitation, there is no guideline for school counselors like the standard by the American School Counselor Association. It has been discussed, since the initial implementation of the program, how school counselors should work in each school (see Nakajima, 2006).

In the United States, it is customary for the school counselors and administrators to deal with the students' behavioral, psychological, and developmental problems. However, in Japan, homeroom teachers and other staff members such as *yogo-kyoyu* deal with such problems. A *yogo-kyoyu* in Japan is a school staff member dealing with emergent physical and psychological problems of students and is often compared to a "school nurse" or "health coordinator" in the United States. However, the jobs are quite different from those of their American counterparts. School staff members including teachers and *yogo-kyoyu* share the school business and the care of students. Students' problems are dealt with by the entire school staff. What is assumed to be counselors' work in the United States is mostly shared business for all the staff members in Japan. Likewise student discipline is the responsibility of all the staff members, though there are some teachers who play leading roles. It is not just the responsibility of administrators.

Information about the School Targeted for This Study

The present study focuses on a school teacher (*A*) who works for a high school. This high school (*B*) is located in a suburban area in greater Tokyo. High School *B* was established in 1975 as a full-time regular high school. In April 2006 (the Japanese school year starts in April), along with the full-time regular school, a special course of "*teiji-sei sambusei*" (three shift part-time course) was started.

In the Japanese school system, the first year students in high schools are in 10th grade in the American system. The senior year (usually the final, third year) in high school is 12th grade. In the *teijisei* (part-time course) high schools, the students usually attend another year (fourth year) for completion. High School *B* is adopting a flexible graduation system in which the diploma is given when a student has completed the requirements. This system is different from the traditional system in which the diplomas are given to all the students of the same grade level at the same time. Although the standard number of years to achieve graduation is four years in total at this school, it is possible for a student to finish the whole course in three years or indeed, he or she can stay at school for over five years. This system is designed in consideration of each student's individual needs.

High School *B* has 98 staff members including both full-time and part-time workers. As of April 2008, the number of students was 208 (71 boys and 138 girls) for the full-time course and 476 (209 boys and 267 girls) for the *sambusei* course. Because this course started three years previously, three grade levels of students were attending in 2008, and there will be four grade levels for the 2009 school year.

In Japan, the *teijisei* or part-time course was initially designed for students who need to work during the daytime mainly for economical reasons. However, the students choose the *teijisei* course not only for economical reasons but for other reasons such as difficulty in attending the full-time course because of their psychological-behavioral needs (Kadowaki, 2004). Most of the students attending the *teijisei sambusei* (part-time course of three time table options) course in High School *B* have not chosen the course for economical reasons. Traditionally, the *teijisei* (part-time) course had only a night schedule, but High School *B* has three time options: Morning Course (8:55-12:55 a.m.), Afternoon Course (1:10-4:40 p.m.), and Night Course (5:25-9:00 p.m., including dinner break). The students can choose one of these three time schedules. This form is relatively new in Japan (Koshiba, 2007).

High School *B* has a policy to accept diverse students: At least 2 out of every 30 students in each classroom have developmental disorders, and approximately 70% of the students have experienced absenteeism (*futoko*) problems. Some of the students were in hospital-schools (schools for hospitalized students), which means these students have had serious problems that have prevented them from regular attendance in school.

A unique feature in High School *B* is the "personal tutor" program. In this program, each student can choose a teacher as mentor, whom the student is free to talk to about various issues. In the traditional Japanese school system it has been unusual, or even considered rude, for an individual student to consult a teacher other than his or her homeroom teacher. The homeroom teacher has been the only available human resource for a student, because the homeroom teacher is supposed to be responsible for all the aspects of the students in their

classroom. The personal tutor program is an idea of changing the fixed relationship between students and school staff.

In High School *B*, two regular (full-time) teachers form the leaders of guidance division: one teacher for the full-time course, and the other teacher for the *teijisei* (part-time) course. Along with guidance counseling, these teachers, like other teachers, have other duties such as committees for various school activities and after-school club activities. A school counselor is working two days a week in High School *B* in cooperation with these two teachers.

As a full-time teacher, *A* teaches Information Technology at High School *B*, and has teaching duties of 16 class periods (the duration of one class period is 45 minutes) a week. He has 29 years of experience as a high school teacher. He is also in charge of the environment preservation committee, and supervises the cleaning of rooms and preservation of school equipment. His responsibilities include the after-class activity of the computer club. Because the workload for guidance activities is heavy, he does not work as a homeroom teacher.

Method

The authors had interviews with a selections of teachers and *yogo-kyoyu* (health coordinators) who volunteered to talk about *A*'s activities. These interviews were conducted in an informal way, and the authors asked the interviewees how they perceived *A*'s activities and the guidance program in High School *B*. The interviewees responded to these questions freely. One author (Takahara) gathered information by interviewing *A* himself. The authors also observed two guidance meetings, which were attended by the above-mentioned two full-time teachers in the guidance division, three *yogo-kyoyu*, and a school counselor. The authors had interviews with a total of 12 people, two of whom were interviewed more than once. One author (Koshiba) is actually a part-time school counselor in High School *B*, and she observed the guidance activities as a participant of the school education team. This means that the present study is based on observations by the two outsiders and by one insider.

Results

The guidance activities in High School *B* had already been started before the *sambusei* course was introduced at the school in 2006. The guidance division was preserved even when the school staff changed due to transference and resignation. It is common in Japan that the system itself is preserved despite changes in personnel. Based on such a tradition, *A* and the other staff established the current guidance program which is still being developed. As such, the group-oriented tradition of school activities has worked well for *A* to start his activities. The past activities in High School *B* have been passed on to the staff members, and the current staff members, including *A*, are exploring more effective ways of guidance activities that are required for the current students.

Concerning *A*'s guidance activities, the interviewees unanimously agreed that (1) the effectiveness of the guidance activities in High School *B* owe much to the two leading teachers including *A*, and (2) the activities are based on the collaboration between these two teachers and other staff members. The two teachers in the guidance division are actually

working as coordinators. The students in High School *B*, particularly the students in the *sambusei* (three shift system) course, have various difficulties that many teachers have never dealt with in other schools, and the collaborative work among the school staff is important.

The school staff not only needs to view the students as a whole, but care for each student individually, taking into account his or her unique needs. The teachers, particularly the homeroom teachers, in High School *B* recognize the importance of guidance activities. The teachers consult *A* to discuss action plans for students' problems. They often have meetings or discussions on how they can handle the situation. These meetings take place in the guidance room, which can be characterized by "easy access" for the school staff.

A communicates with other staff both through informal conversations and in various meetings. Along with the weekly meetings about guidance activities, staff members hold occasional meetings for each case under the leadership of *A*. *A* emphasizes cooperation of the school staff, and urges that the heavy load should not be concentrated on certain teachers, particularly the homeroom teachers. *A* makes efforts not to isolate homeroom teachers, and encourages all the staff members to collaborate on problems. This is to avoid the tendency in Japan that the homeroom teachers are expected to deal with the students' problems all by themselves.

When a teacher comes to the guidance room, *A* actively listens to the teacher. Once the teacher works out a good idea to solve a problem, *A* offers the necessary support for the teacher to put the idea into practice. *A* asks other staff members to support the teacher, whenever it is necessary. *A* reports to the entire staff on how the situation is changing by practicing successful ideas, and using such occasions as formal and informal meetings. *A* adopts empirical methods and tries to find solutions by looking for past successful solutions, rather than coercing other staff members to believe in their theories and methods.

For the difficult cases where students need professional help, *A* consults the school counselor. If necessary, the counselor personally sees these students. Going to see the counselor during the class time is not counted as absence in High School *B*, which is quite rare at present in Japan. *A* strongly believes that school counseling should be on a full-time basis. It seems that *A* has a clear idea about school counseling, although it is a newly introduced program in Japan. It has not been common practice in Japan for a teacher to seek help from other professionals, but *A* is willing to work to help professionals who can offer support to his job.

The information network that *A* utilizes is not limited to the school staff. He often communicates with parents or guardians, and staff from outside facilities. When the problems occurring in a school are related to developmental disorders, *A* does his utmost to access public and medical facilities in order to obtain accurate information. In High School *B*, as mentioned earlier, several students have been hospitalized for various disorders. This example shows that High School *B* is one of the precursors in that the school has established the communication network with hospitals and other facilities (c.f., Koshiba, & Takahara, 2008).

A's effort is also recognized in the publicity of guidance activities. By cooperating with other staff members, *A* informs the students and staff as to how to seek help when they need it. For example, *A* publishes a newsletter named "News from the Guidance Room" ("*Kyoiku Sodan Dayori*") in order to inform the whole school of the various activities of the guidance

division. This newsletter includes information about the psychology of teenagers, which may help the students understand themselves. Such information also helps the teachers to understand the importance of guidance activities.

A explores possible approaches to students' problems, and tries to obtain knowledge necessary for his activities, such as new approaches to guide students with developmental disorders. To communicate with school counselors and other specialists, one needs to know the technical terms and certain professional knowledge. *A* makes every effort to gain such knowledge. He is willing to engage in professional development with guidance personnel, to include but not be limited to participation in workshops and reading related books and articles.

The guidance room is effective not only for the students, but also for the staff members to maintain their own mental health. One of the teachers, despite 20 years' experience, is having a hard time dealing with the students' various problems. These students have difficulties he has never handled before. For this teacher, the guidance room is the place where he feels free to talk about his struggles. *A* is attentive to his complaints even when *A* is busy with other jobs. When this teacher needs to report to the administrator about students' problems, *A* not only gives him advice but accompanies the teacher to the administrator's office. "The guidance room is a big help to me in mitigating my stress," said this teacher.

Discussion

It is the hard-working staff that makes the guidance activities in High School *B* effective. The staff is conscious of the need for guidance when there are various types of students in a school. However, the large number of problems that need solutions is not the only element to encourage staff to participate in guidance activities. The existence of a coordinator like *A* is a necessary factor. The coordinator needs to have skills for communication with students and other staff members, particularly listening skills. These skills have not been considered very important in the traditional school culture in Japan, and the skills that *A* has acquired are largely self-taught.

In Japan, the teacher who works as a leader of an activity tends to expect other staff members to follow the leader's ideas and expectations. The staff is expected to have the same value and behave like everyone else in a cooperative way. The collaboration of specialists has not been emphasized as it has been in Western countries. *A* has adopted a more democratic way to communicate with other staff members in that he is always ready to accept various opinions.

Waida (2005) contends that the awareness of problems and exploration of effective approaches are the necessary elements for effective guidance. *A* is following this principle in that he defines what the problem is and seeks appropriate help toward the solution. *A* understands the importance of school counseling, which has been recently introduced, and actively uses such human resources as a school counselor and *yoko-kyoyu*.

The role of a homeroom teacher in Japan is to take care of approximately 30 students in a homeroom with regard to all aspects of school life, and they must traditionally do this alone. This creates a heavy workload, and many teachers experience distress in their jobs. According

to Hosaka, Takahara, Watanabe, and Shimizu (2007), good relationships and appropriate support among the staff are the key factors to maintaining the staff members' mental health. Empathic understanding and supportive communication styles are considered not only effective for the students' problems but preventive factors against the burn-out problems of the staff. Some teachers in High School *B* have found that the *A*'s empathic communication style alleviates stress in their work.

In Japan, a school counselor is one of the few available specialists who work closely with students and teachers. There is however a pessimistic observation that the meaning of counseling as a specialist would not be understood fully in Japanese schools (Nakajima, 2006). In this situation, the staff in High School *B* feel a strong need for counseling services, which means that the school counselor is the busiest member of the school staff.

The difficulty of introducing a school counseling program to a Japanese school is described in several articles such as Kondo, Hosaka, and Okamura (2000). There is a school, for example, that spent years getting a part-time school counselor to be accepted. In that school, the staff had several meetings in order to discuss the duties of counselors and what counseling meant to school education. Murayama and Takiguchi (2007) insist on the need for collaboration between school staff and counselors, showing some successful examples. Murayama (2008) also discusses the importance of collaboration between school staff and counselors. In Japan, school staff members that accept the counseling program, rather than the counselors themselves, seems to be the key for an effective school counseling program. A school counselor in Japan is a supplementary staff member who helps and supports the main body of school staff. In such a situation, the guidance activities depend strongly on how a teacher like *A* plays the role of a coordinator between the school staff and counselors.

Uechi (2005) suggests that some teachers should play the role of counselors if psychology specialists are not easily available. According to him, regular teachers could be assigned as "teacher-counselors" in order to take care of students in need. In addition to these activities, these teacher-counselors engage in coordination, prevention, and other works necessary in a school. The example of *A* fits this model. Teachers are expected to play an important role regarding the students' academic, social, and individual development (Waxman, Padron, & Gray, 2004).

The ideal of school counseling can be observed in *A*'s activities not only in terms of the established system, but in terms of his communication style. The communication style that *A* uses in the guidance activities is close to so-called "active listening." This style of communication seems effective in handling problems. This may mean that this style is also useful in Asian countries like Japan, as in the Western countries. In the globalizing world community, an education program for both students and schools can be greatly enhanced by adopting a communication style such as active listening.

Some Current Issues

Although the guidance program in High School *B* seems to be beneficial for the students, the interviewees pointed out some issues concerning the new school system.

The staff members in High School *B* recognize some problems that are not common in

other schools. The coexistence of two different courses in one school facility sometimes causes confusion. The students on *sambusei* course need some special care that is different from the care needed for students on the regular course. The teachers in High School *B* are trained as regular teachers in the same way, and they sometimes experience difficulties in dealing with the students on two different courses in the same way. One teacher confessed that some problems he comes across in the *sambusei* course are difficult to handle because he is not a teacher of special education. He thinks that these two courses need to be separated to create two different facilities with two different types of teachers.

One of the purposes of the guidance program in High School *B* is to support the students with "*futoko*" (absenteeism) problems: these students would not be able to attend classes without proper care. The guidance program in High School *B* seems effective in that 55% of such students continue to attend classes (Koshiba & Takahara, 2008). The school has offered a new environment for these students to get a fresh start. However, the environment is still not perfect. According to the teachers in High School *B*, many of these students are introverted and inclined to be depressed. They also feel afraid to interact with outgoing and aggressive students in the classrooms, and are reluctant to attend classes. Some teachers think that these students with *futoko* problems need to be separated from the students with aggression problems. The students need various types of care depending on their problems.

Such students are thought to need more help from specialists. The teachers in High School *B* are trained as regular teachers, partly because the school was originally a high school following a regular course. For the students who have different needs, particularly the students with developmental disorders, the placement of special education teachers may be required to improve the quality of education. Although the attendance of exceptional students in regular classes is considered desirable, each student still needs some individual care occasionally.

Sending students with serious disorders into regular classrooms is not always beneficial in terms of their welfare. High School *B* offers an entrance examination to screen out such students, like the other public high schools in Japan. Some parents and guardians and even some middle school teachers claim that this can be a form of discrimination. Parents and guardians of exceptional children want to send their children to regular classrooms, partly because of the trend for "inclusion" in education. However, this trend is making the high school teachers' jobs even more difficult. This is an issue of the whole community, including parents, guardians, and educators, which needs intensive discussion.

Currently in Japan, there are many staff members who are retiring due to old age (cf., MEXT, 2009). After experienced teachers like *A* retire, it will be hard to find a new teacher who will replace *A*'s position. A newcomer might struggle to quickly establish a cooperative relationship with people outside of the school, such as medical personnel. Experienced hospital staff members are also retiring, which may make it impossible to preserve the relationship between a school and outside facilities. In Japan, schools and hospitals have not been closely connected, and the relationship between the facilities and schools depend on the connection of certain teachers and medical doctors. How the school as a whole can connect to other facilities (Koshiba & Takahara, 2008) is an issue that needs further discussion.

School counselors in Japan are mostly part-time workers and their contract of

employment is on a yearly basis. It is important for a school counselor to have a rapport or a good relationship with individuals in a school. But one year is not enough to establish a good relationship. Particularly in Japan, it is more important for a school worker to have a long-term relationship with the school staff and to be trusted, than to have professional skills and experience. The employment system where school counselors and other staff members can work for longer periods of time is required for an effective guidance activity program.

Conclusion

Effective guidance counseling in Japan cannot be established simply by introducing counselors to schools. It is necessary for a school to have a coordinator who understands the value of school counseling and works as a liaison among counselors, school staff, students, parents/guardians, and other specialists from outside. A school counselor can work fully in cooperation with such a coordinator. The style based on active listening may work well for the coordinator. The present study has discussed the importance of this type of an individual who works for a school with non-traditional system.

On the other hand, there are limitations in the present study. The interviewees were limited to school staff members in High School *B* who were willing to talk about the school and guidance activities. The opinions, descriptions, and other information revealed in the present study may be from individuals who favor *A*'s activities, and they are far from comprehensive. Although the general view of teacher *A*'s guidance activities have been introduced, the whole picture needs to include the opinions of other staff members who rarely use the guidance services. Further research needs to include such opinions and discussions on why they are reluctant to use the available services. The opinions of students and parents/guardians also need to be included.

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