

*Exploring Differences in Attendance Awareness Between Adapted and Maladapted
Junior High School Students in Post-pandemic Japan*

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Abstract

This study investigates differences in attitudes towards school attendance between junior high school students who struggle with school adaptation and those who do not. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced remote learning through ICT tools in many schools, which allowed students to experience learning outside the traditional classroom setting. This shift may have contributed to a more diverse perception of the necessity of daily attendance, particularly among students who experience maladaptation. We focus on the concept of "masked attendance," defined by the Nippon Foundation (2018), referring to students who physically attend school but experience internal struggles and reluctance. "Masked attendance" and "disguised school attendance" convey similar meanings. A questionnaire survey conducted in October 2022 targeted 403 junior high school students in the Tokyo metropolitan area, classifying them into three groups: masked attendance, frequent absentees, and well-adapted students. Analysis revealed that students with masked attendance consistently rated their school experiences more negatively than well-adapted students and demonstrated a stronger belief that daily attendance is unnecessary. However, no significant differences were found regarding the perception of school as an appropriate place for learning. These findings suggest the importance of recognizing the internal struggles of masked attendance students and exploring tailored support strategies within the context of post-pandemic education.

Keywords: Compulsory Education, "Masked Attendance", School Maladjustment, Learning Environment, School Refusal

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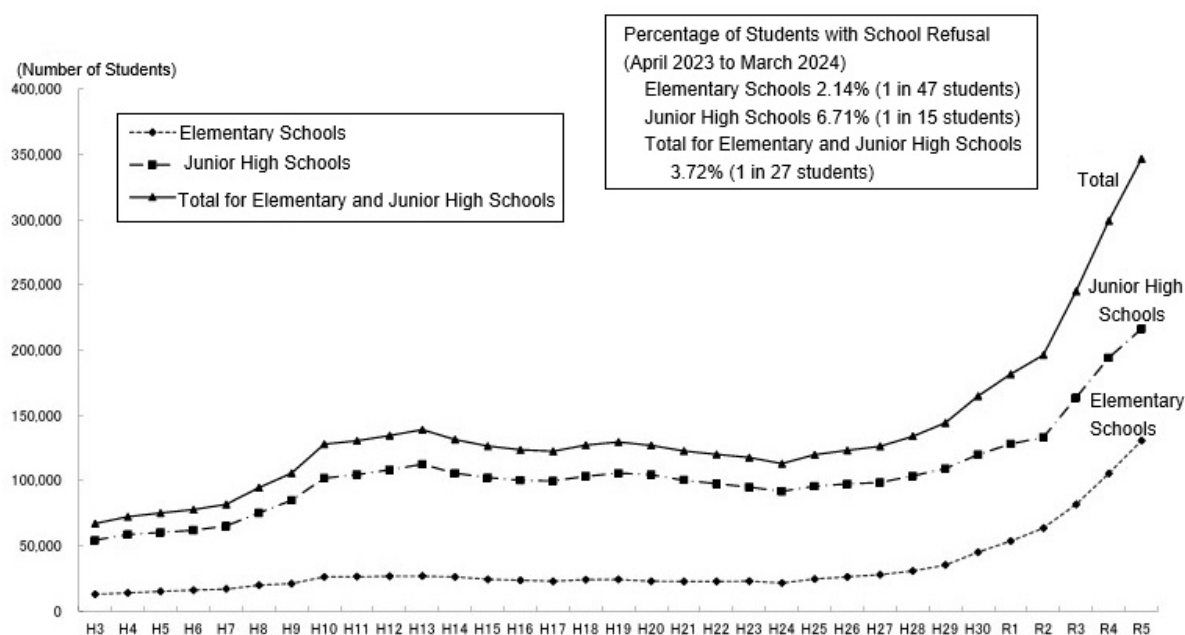
Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine whether there are differences in attitudes toward attending school between middle school students who experience school maladjustment and those who are well-adjusted. Furthermore, the study aims to explore potential support strategies for students with school maladjustment within compulsory education institutions that cater to a diverse student population.

The number of students refusing to attend school in Japan has been increasing annually. According to the "Survey on Issues Related to Student Guidance, Including Problem Behaviors and School Refusal Among Students for Fiscal Year 2023" published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 2024, the number of students refusing to attend school in elementary and junior high schools was 346,482, an increase of 47,434 students (15.9%) from the previous year. As shown in Figure 1, the number of students refusing to attend school has increased for 11 consecutive years, reaching an all-time high in 2023. This represents 3.7% of the total student population, meaning approximately one student is refusing to attend school in every class.

Japanese schools start in April and end in March of the following year. Therefore, the years shown in Figure 1 represent academic years, and the numbers indicate the number of students who were with school refusal from April of that year to March of the following year.

Figure 1: Trends in Students With School Refusal
(Adapted From Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2024)



Note: "R5" means 2023 and H3 means 1991.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan, many compulsory education schools conducted remote classes using ICT. As a result, many middle school students experienced "being able to study school subjects without physically attending school." This experience may have diversified students' perceptions of school attendance. Particularly for students who feel maladjusted to school, the resistance to being absent may have decreased, creating an environment where choosing not to attend school became easier.

In this study, we use the concept of "masked attendance," one of the classifications defined by the Nippon Foundation (2018), among middle school students experiencing school maladjustment. "Masked attendance" refers to students who, while spending time in the classroom and doing the same activities as everyone else, internally feel that they do not want to attend school, find school distressing, or dislike it (daily). These students attend school and spend time in the classroom but constantly feel they do not fit in. Based on the results of the questionnaire survey, we classify students into three types: (i) students corresponding to masked attendance, (ii) students with frequent absences, and (iii) students who are well-adjusted to school. We then examine the actual situation of masked attendance among middle school students in the post-pandemic period and whether their attitudes towards attendance differ from those of well-adjusted students.

Method

Participants

The survey participants consisted of 403 first- to third-year students from a public junior high school in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Due to the lack of consent from 2 students, the number of valid responses was 401. The breakdown was as follows: 131 first-year students, 142 second-year students, and 130 third-year students; 195 females, 193 males, and 15 who preferred not to say.

Materials

The survey asked about basic feelings of school adjustment, absence status for the current year, attitudes towards attending school, and evaluations of time spent at school.

Basic Feelings of School Adjustment: Regarding "basic feelings of school adjustment," the following nine items were asked, each rated on a five-point scale from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree:"

- (1) I like this school.
- (2) There are fun things at school.
- (3) There are unpleasant things at school.
- (4) I want to talk to and ask questions to the teachers.
- (5) I feel that the teachers try to understand our feelings.
- (6) I think what the teachers say is mostly correct.
- (7) I am often alone.
- (8) I feel anxious about how others see me.
- (9) There are times when I don't want to go to school.

Absence Status for the Current Year: The absence status for the relevant year was asked using a five-point scale: "Never Absent," "Absent for 1-3 Days," "Absent for 4-6 Days," "Absent for 7-9 Days," and "Absent for 10 or More Days." It was specified that absences due to COVID-19 infection, close contact, or vaccine side effects were excluded from this item.

Attitudes Towards Attending School: "Attitudes towards attending school" were assessed with two questions: "I don't think I need to attend school every day" and "I prefer studying outside the classroom". Both questions were rated on a five-point scale from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree."

Evaluations of Time Spent at School: Regarding the evaluation of time spent at school, the following 12 items were asked, each rated on a five-point scale from "Very Enjoyable" to "Not Enjoyable:"

- (1) During the commute to school
- (2) Morning homeroom (*Asa-gakkatsu*)
- (3) Class
- (4) Break time between classes
- (5) Lunchtime
- (6) Lunchtime recess (*Ohiru-yasumi*)
- (7) Afternoon homeroom (*Shu-gakkatsu*)
- (8) Cleaning time
- (9) Club activity (*Bukatsu*)
- (10) During the commute from school
- (11) School events such as sports day
- (12) Off-campus events such as field trips

In many schools in Japan, there are homeroom periods called "morning homeroom" held before the first class of the day, and "afternoon homeroom" held after all classes in the classroom have ended before students move to their club activities or go home. These sessions are conducted by the homeroom teacher and are not just for announcements but also for various educational activities designed by each teacher. Additionally, there are other unique periods within the school day that are characteristic of Japanese schools. "Lunchtime" and "cleaning time" are also examples of such periods. In the junior high school where the survey was conducted, there was a school lunch program. "Lunchtime" is considered an educational period called "lunch guidance," during which teachers provide instruction. And in many schools in Japan, there is an educational program where students clean the school themselves. "Cleaning time" refers to this period.

Procedure

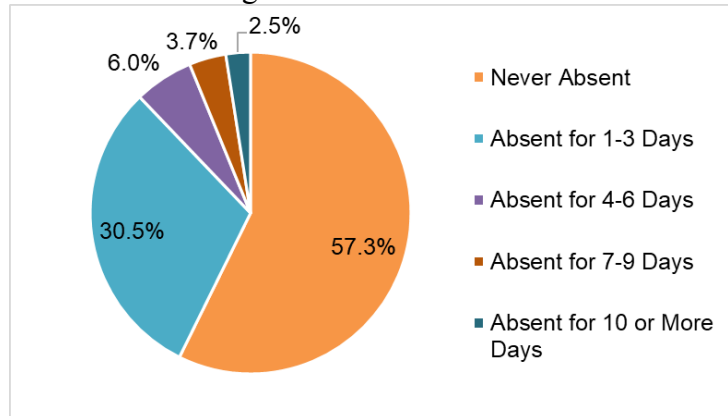
A questionnaire survey conducted in October 2022. This study was conducted using a questionnaire survey administered via Google Forms. The survey participants were provided with the URL and QR code for the Google Forms survey through their school. Each participant completed the survey independently.

Results

Identification of Students With "Masked Attendance"

First, the overall distribution of the number of absences is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Absence Status






As previously mentioned, “masked attendance” is a concept derived from the survey results by the Nippon Foundation (2018). It refers to children who, while generally spending time in the classroom and doing the same activities as everyone else, internally feel that they do not want to go to school, find school difficult, or dislike it (every day). In other words, these students attend school and spend time in the classroom, making it impossible to identify them based on the number of absences, but they constantly feel that they do not fit in at school.

Students corresponding to masked attendance (hereafter referred to as the masked attendance group) were those who answered "Does not apply" or "Does not apply much" to the question "I like this school" regarding school adjustment, and whose attendance status was "Never Absent" or "Absent for 1-3 Days."

Additionally, students who were somewhat prone to school refusal (hereafter referred to as the somewhat prone to school refusal group) were those who answered "Absent for 7-9 Days" or "Absent for 10 or More Days" regarding their attendance status. Furthermore, students who were well-adjusted to school (hereafter referred to as the well-adjusted group) were defined as those who did not fall into either the masked attendance group or the somewhat prone to school refusal group.

Using this extraction method, as shown in Table 1, the masked attendance group was 8.4%, the somewhat prone to school refusal group was 6.2%, and the well-adjusted group was 85.4%.

Table 1: Distribution of Each Attendance Type

The masked attendance		34 students 8.4%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response to "I like this school." → "Disagree slightly" & "Disagree" • Attendance status for the year → "Never absent" & "Absent for 1-3 days"
The somewhat prone to SR		25 students 6.2%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance status for the year → "Absent for 7-9 days" & "Absent for more than 10 days"
The well-adjusted		344 students 85.4%	Other students

Evaluation of Time Spent at School by Masked Attendance Students

The evaluation of time spent at school among the three groups: the masked attendance group, the somewhat prone to school refusal group, and the well-adjusted group, was compared using one-way ANOVA. The results are shown in Table 3. It was demonstrated that students in the masked attendance group rated their time spent at school significantly more negatively than students in the well-adjusted group. This negative evaluation was consistent across various contexts, including daily school life during arrival and departure, within the school during classes and breaks, and outside school activities such as sports days and field trips.

Awareness of School Attendance Among Masked Attendance Students

A comparison of the mean responses between masked attendance students and well-adjusted students using one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference in the statement "I don't think I need to attend school every day." The results indicated that masked attendance students were more likely to believe that daily attendance at school was unnecessary compared to well-adjusted students.

Regarding the question "I prefer studying outside the classroom," no differences were observed between the attendance types. This suggests that there is no significant difference in the perception of school as a place for learning between masked attendance students and well-adjusted students.

The details of these results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean Scores and Tests of School Attendance Attitudes by Students With Masked Attendance Group and Other Groups (Comparison of Means via One-Way ANOVA)

		<i>M</i> (Mean)	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	Multiple comparisons	
"I don't think I need to attend school every day."	The masked attendance	3.59	1.46	7.90**	0.00	Masked Attendance	The somewhat prone to SR
	The somewhat prone to SR	3.00	1.71			<i>n.s.</i>	
	The well-adjusted	2.60	1.41			**	<i>n.s.</i>
	TOTAL	2.71	1.46				
"I prefer studying outside the classroom."	The masked attendance	2.91	1.42	0.36	0.70	Masked Attendance	The somewhat prone to SR
	The somewhat prone to SR	3.04	1.51			<i>n.s.</i>	
	The well-adjusted	2.83	1.25			<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>
	TOTAL	2.85	1.28				

Table 3: Evaluation of Time Spent at School by Attendance Type

		Number	M	SD	F	p	Test of Significance	
During the commute to school	The masked attendance	34	2.56	1.40	10.89	.00	The masked attendance G	The somewhat prone to SR G
	The somewhat prone to SR	25	3.44	1.19			**	
	The well-adjusted	344	3.49	1.07			**	<i>n.s.</i>
	All	403	3.40	1.13				
Morning homeroom	The masked attendance	34	2.03	1.00	23.39	.00	The masked attendance G	The somewhat prone to SR G
	The somewhat prone to SR	25	2.88	1.01			**	
	The well-adjusted	344	3.20	.95			**	<i>n.s.</i>
	All	403	3.08	1.01				
Class	The masked attendance	34	2.18	1.29	21.86	.00	The masked attendance G	The somewhat prone to SR G
	The somewhat prone to SR	25	3.28	1.10			**	
	The well-adjusted	344	3.33	.93			**	<i>n.s.</i>
	All	403	3.23	1.02				
Break time between classes	The masked attendance	34	3.26	1.48	25.55	.00	The masked attendance G	The somewhat prone to SR G
	The somewhat prone to SR	25	4.20	.87			**	
	The well-adjusted	344	4.31	.72			**	<i>n.s.</i>
	All	403	4.22	.86				
Lunchtime	The masked attendance	34	2.50	1.31	22.73	.00	The masked attendance G	The somewhat prone to SR G
	The somewhat prone to SR	25	3.72	1.06			**	
	The well-adjusted	344	3.73	.98			**	<i>n.s.</i>
	All	403	3.62	1.07				
Lunchtime recess	The masked attendance	34	3.38	1.52	23.42	.00	The masked attendance G	The somewhat prone to SR G
	The somewhat prone to SR	25	4.28	.84			**	
	The well-adjusted	344	4.40	.72			**	<i>n.s.</i>
	All	403	4.30	.87				
Afternoon homeroom	The masked attendance	34	2.09	1.24	29.73	.00	The masked attendance G	The somewhat prone to SR G
	The somewhat prone to SR	25	3.40	1.22			**	
	The well-adjusted	344	3.47	.95			**	<i>n.s.</i>
	All	403	3.35	1.07				
Cleaning time	The masked attendance	34	1.85	1.13	18.71	.00	The masked attendance G	The somewhat prone to SR G
	The somewhat prone to SR	25	3.16	1.31			**	
	The well-adjusted	344	3.00	1.03			**	<i>n.s.</i>
	All	403	2.91	1.11				
Club activity	The masked attendance	34	3.00	1.52	10.77	.00	The masked attendance G	The somewhat prone to SR G
	The somewhat prone to SR	25	4.00	.96			**	
	The well-adjusted	344	3.96	1.13			**	<i>n.s.</i>
	All	403	3.88	1.19				
During the commute from school	The masked attendance	34	3.12	1.55	10.97	.00	The masked attendance G	The somewhat prone to SR G
	The somewhat prone to SR	25	3.88	1.27			*	
	The well-adjusted	344	3.99	.95			**	<i>n.s.</i>
	All	403	3.91	1.06				
School events such as sports day	The masked attendance	34	3.38	1.58	16.63	.00	The masked attendance G	The somewhat prone to SR G
	The somewhat prone to SR	25	4.24	.97			**	
	The well-adjusted	344	4.38	.88			**	<i>n.s.</i>
	All	403	4.29	1.00				
Off-campus events such as field trips	The masked attendance	34	3.59	1.48	17.21	.00	The masked attendance G	The somewhat prone to SR G
	The somewhat prone to SR	25	4.16	.99			*	
	The well-adjusted	344	4.48	.78			**	<i>n.s.</i>
	All	403	4.39	.91				

Note: G means group, SR means school refusal.

Discussion

It was found that students who engage in masked attendance, even though they attend school and spend time in the classroom just like well-adjusted students, are unable to positively evaluate almost all aspects of their interactions with the school. Furthermore, regarding their awareness of school attendance, it was revealed that these students hold a more negative view of daily attendance compared to well-adjusted students. However, when it comes to perceiving school as a place for studying, there is no significant difference between masked attendance students and well-adjusted students.

Conclusion

From the above findings, two significant conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, it is evident that even though students may appear to spend time in the classroom in the same manner, there is a notable number of students who experience feelings of maladjustment. These students may harbor doubts about the necessity of daily school attendance. This highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the underlying issues that contribute to their negative perceptions of school life. It suggests that schools need to implement more supportive measures to help these students feel more comfortable and engaged in their daily school activities.

Second, despite the experience of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, where students studied outside the traditional classroom setting, there remains a strong perception among junior high school students that the school classroom is the most suitable place for studying. This indicates that the physical environment of the classroom plays a crucial role in the learning process and that students value the structure and resources provided by the school setting. It underscores the importance of maintaining a conducive and supportive classroom environment to facilitate effective learning.

Furthermore, the study reveals that while students may perceive the school classroom as the appropriate place for studying, the state of adaptation to school varies significantly among them. This diversity in adaptation levels suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to education and support may not be effective. Instead, it is crucial to adopt a more individualized approach that takes into account the unique needs and experiences of each student.

Recognizing students who spend their school life feeling "not enjoyable" is a critical first step in providing the necessary support. By identifying and understanding the specific challenges these students face, educators and school administrators can develop targeted interventions to improve their school experience. This may include providing additional emotional and psychological support, creating more inclusive and engaging classroom activities, and fostering a positive school culture that promotes a sense of belonging and well-being for all students.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of understanding the diverse experiences and perceptions of students regarding their school life. It calls for a more nuanced and empathetic approach to education that prioritizes the well-being and engagement of all students. By doing so, schools can create a more supportive and positive learning environment that enables every student to thrive.

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