

When kids refuse to go to school: Three international families in Japan and their experiences with school refusal

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Youth refusing to attend school in Japan is a silenced, confusing, and complex phenomenon reaching back almost a century. Explanatory theories and discourses have shifted through the eras and strategies for resolving school attendance problems have responded in turn. And yet, there are more youth refusing school today than ever before. In hopes of reinvigorating interest in and extending the understanding of the topic, this research uses a hermeneutic approach that asks questions that are vastly different than those informing the body of knowledge to date. In this presentation, three families' experiences of school refusal and their moments of fear, breakthrough, and discovery are shared. The youth in question are bi-ethnic, (a vastly understudied subset of the population), with one parent identifying as Japanese and the other who does not. How this cultural diversity helps, hinders, or exacerbates the refusal experience is discussed in combination with other key intersections of difference. Medical, sexual, and neurological diversities are prominent features in their stories and demands that a new level of awareness in terms of understanding and practice be considered in the Japanese education system. Additionally, where the educational, medical, or governmental systems have notably served the families, or appallingly failed, is entwined through the stories. By exploring the experience, exposing the trauma, and extending the understanding through dialogue with parents of school refusers, universal stories of hope, resilience, and belonging have emerged.

Bio: Catherine Takasugi is currently a doctoral candidate at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary in Canada. School refusal in Japan is her area of focus. In addition, she is a part-time instructor at Aoyama Gakuin University, Daito Bunka University, and Waseda University, in Japan. She is most passionate about her seminar course in identity and diversity where she explores knowledge, knowing, refusals, fears, joy, and personal histories.

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