Vulnerabilities of Children-in-Poverty under the COVID-19 Pandemic:

The Necessity of Face-to-Face Support Activities during the Time of Social Distancing

Yota Watanabe

Graduate School of Arts and Letters, Tohoku University

1. Introduction

This paper examines Japanese cases of child poverty to show that maintaining "face-to-face contact" is required to provide social and educational support for children-in-poverty, even though social distancing is required in all social and educational services due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also shows how the lifestyle called "the new normal" recommended in the time of social distancing causes new difficulties for children-in-poverty. The paper is based on my own anthropological fieldwork in Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture, Japan.

Advocates of "the new normal" lifestyle insist that we avoid close contact and use online tools to prevent the COVID-19 infection. This lifestyle has also been introduced in schools. However, I found through my fieldwork that support providers for children-in-poverty tried to maintain face-to-face support rather than switching to online support. Why do they emphasize face-to-face support rather than online support? Is it a problem unique to poverty?

To answer these questions, I analyze the situation faced by children-in-poverty from the children's perspectives, as an autonomous subject who exercises their own agency in facing poverty. However, previous studies on children-in-poverty often failed to see children as active agents and overlooked their own perspectives on the situation they faced. Consequently, children's interests and needs are often reduced to those of their families (Ridge 2010: 15). To correct this reductionism, this paper ethnographically documents children's own perspectives on the situation they face during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I conducted anthropological participant observations at the "Learning and Social Support by Sendai City with NPO ASUIKU," a sproject run by the NPO ASUIKU, from January 2021 to September 2021 as a volunteer staff. NPO ASUIKU is a non-profit organization specialized in providing social and educational support for children-in-poverty in Sendai City, where my university is located. To gain an intimate understanding of children's own perspectives on their situation, I adopted the anthropological method of participant observation to be able to build a good rapport with children attending the program and engage in free and open conversation with them. To understand the reason

why "face-to-face" support is necessary despite the call for social distancing, I analyze the children's narratives focusing on the vulnerabilities peculiar to children-in-poverty.

I conducted my fieldwork and wrote this paper in compliance with the rules and regulations of the privacy policy set by NPO ASUIKU. In addition, this research was approved by the Research and Experimental Ethics Committee of the Graduate School of Arts and Letters, Tohoku University. The place names and group names used in this paper are real but, to protect privacy, pseudonyms are used for individuals and for the classroom where I conducted my fieldwork.

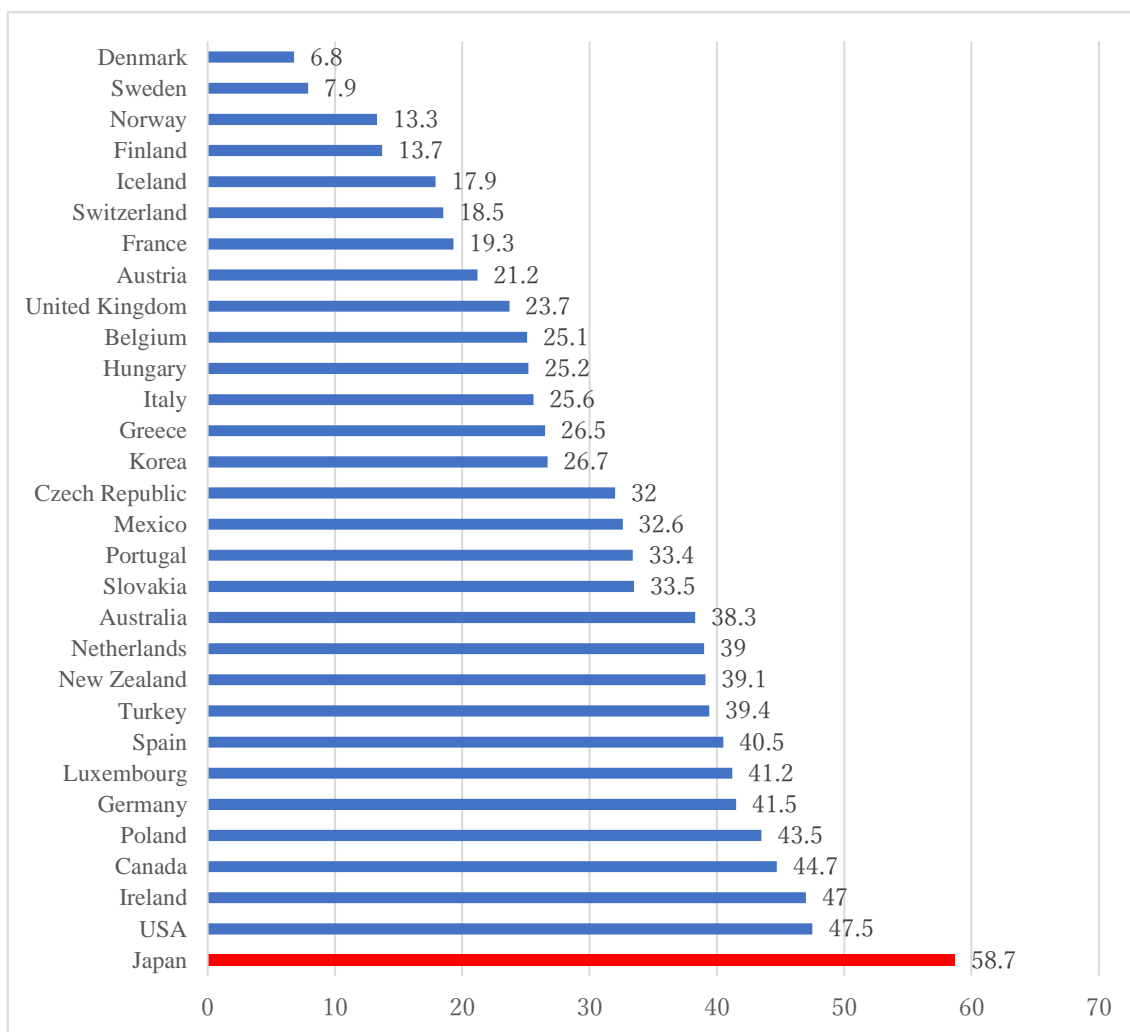2. Child Poverty in Japan and The Anthropology of Poverty

Child poverty in Japan is the most serious among the developed countries. The latest 2018 child poverty rate in Japan was 14.0%; it was 48.3% for single-parent families (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2019: 14). According to internationally comparable data, the child poverty rate in Japan was 14.9% in 2010, which was the 9th worst among the 35 developed countries (UNICEF 2012: 3). For single-parent families, it was 58.7% in 2003, which was the worst among the 30 developed countries (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2009: 3).

Table 1: International Comparison of Child Poverty Rates
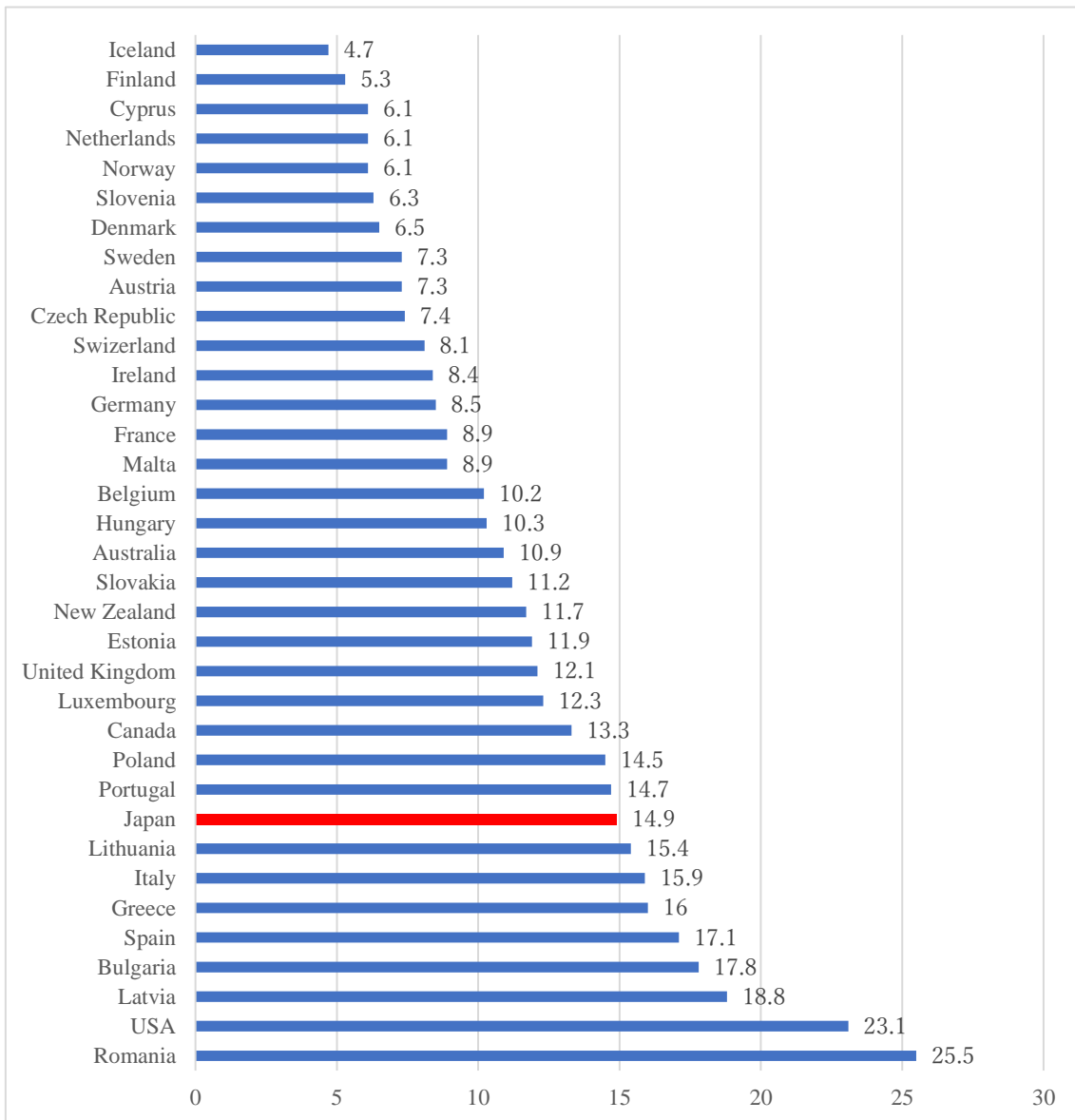
Source: My compilation from UNICEF (2012: 3)

Table 2: International Comparison of Child Poverty Rates for Single Parent Families

Country	Value
Denmark	6.8
Sweden	7.9
Norway	13.3
Finland	13.7
Iceland	17.9
Switzerland	18.5
France	19.3
Austria	21.2
United Kingdom	23.7
Belgium	25.1
Hungary	25.2
Italy	25.6
Greece	26.5
Korea	26.7
Czech Republic	32
Mexico	32.6
Portugal	33.4
Slovakia	33.5
Australia	38.3
Netherlands	39
New Zealand	39.1
Turkey	39.4
Spain	40.5
Luxembourg	41.2
Germany	41.5
Poland	43.5
Canada	44.7
Ireland	47
USA	47.5
Japan	58.7

Source: My compilation from Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (2009: 3)

This situation has worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a survey conducted by NPO ASUIKU, in Sendai City, about 40% of the participating households replied that they "worked less" or "were unemployed," and over 50% reported "less income" because of the COVID-19 pandemic (NPO ASUIKU 2021: 5–7). In addition, about 70% answered that their current family budget was "very tight" or "somewhat tight," and over 50% answered that their household budget balance in 2020 was "in red" or "greatly in red" (NPO ASUIKU 2021: 8–9). Regarding the recent condition of children, about 5% answered that they "turned rowdy," about 25% answered, "more easily frustrated," about 6% replied, "they stopped going to school." Regarding the parent-child relationship, about 20% answered that they were "more easily irritated by their children" (NPO ASUIKU 2021: 14–16). These data show that the COVID-19 pandemic made poverty worse and had harmful effects on the relationship between parents and children and the children themselves.

These quantitative data, however, do not tell how the children themselves see the situation (Watanabe 2021: 111). We cannot grasp poverty only in quantitative terms. Problems such as relative deprivation (Townsend 1979: 31) and social exclusion (Gordon et al. 2000: 54–56) need to be addressed qualitatively.

Another problem is that poverty has become less localized and, thus, invisible in Japan as conspicuous slum areas have disappeared (Kaneko 2017: 55). I have argued elsewhere that one of the causes of this invisibility is "the exclusion from the premise," that is, the exclusion of children's perspectives from the premise of poverty studies makes child poverty invisible (Watanabe 2021: 101). To make child poverty visible, I argue that much more attention needs to be paid to the children's own view of the situation that they are in and that such perspectives reveal problems unseen by adults such as researchers or policymakers. Therefore, I propose that the anthropology of poverty ought to: (1) shed light on the perspectives of people-in-poverty, (2) include those excluded from previous research on poverty in the research premise, and (3) engage in discussion across disciplinary boundaries and cross-fertilize research on poverty (Watanabe 2021: 110–111). This paper attempts to make invisible poverty faced by children under the COVID-19 pandemic visible by focusing on their perspectives on the situation.

3. The Cases

Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture, is a major city in the Tohoku region of Japan. The area is 786 km^2 (Sendai City 2020a: 1), and the population is approximately 1.1 million (Sendai City 2021b). The poverty rate and the child poverty rate are not available for most municipalities and prefectures, including Sendai City and Miyagi Prefecture. According to Tomuro (2016), who independently measured the child poverty rate for each prefecture, the child poverty rate in Miyagi Prefecture was 15.3% in 2012, which was higher than the average child poverty rate (13.8%) for Japan. However, according to official measurements by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, the child poverty rate in Japan in 2012 was 16.3% (2019: 14). Therefore, the actual child poverty rate in Miyagi Prefecture might be higher.

The number of recipients of School Financial Assistance (*Shugaku-enjo*) is often used as an approximation for the child poverty rate (Abe 2014: 3). The School Financial Assistance provides financial support, such as transportation expenses, school lunch expenses, supplementary teaching materials expenses and so on, for elementary and junior high school students whose family income is below a certain amount (Sendai City 2020b). In Sendai City, the rate of the School Financial

Assistance recipients was 12.7% in 2015 (Sendai City 2018: 12), somewhat lower than the 15.23% for Japan that year (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2020: 2). However, still, 12.7% means 10,070 children, not a small number, and these figures indicate that child poverty in Japan is rather serious.

3-1. "Learning and Social Support by Sendai City with NPO ASUIKU" project

　　NPO ASUIKU started to provide learning support for children after the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011. In addition, NPO ASUIKU now runs a wide range of support programs, such as children's cafeteria (*Kodomoshokudou*), food banks, free schools, and home-visiting care to children that the NPO supports. "Learning and Social Support by Sendai City with NPO ASUIKU," in which I participated and conducted fieldwork, is one of those services provided by NPO ASUIKU. It is sponsored by Sendai City and offers afterschool tutoring to junior high school students in poverty. The children do not have to pay any fee as the project is funded by donations to ASUIKU, as well as by Sendai City. Some children voluntarily join the project, while others are introduced into it by Sendai City through the Livelihood Protection (*Seikatsu-hogo*) Program, which provides poverty relief under the Livelihood Protection Law. Junior high school students who live in Sendai City and whose families are either under the Livelihood Protection Program or covered by the Child Rearing Allowance (*Jido-fuyo-teate*) Program are eligible for this afterschool project. The Child Rearing Allowance Program offers financial support to single-parent families below a certain income level (Sendai City, 2021a).

　　"Learning and Social Support by Sendai City with NPO ASUIKU" is held twice a week using a community space in the city or an apartment as its "classroom." There are 20 such classrooms in the city, and children can participate in one of them based on the distance from their homes and other conditions. I conducted my fieldwork at one of them, which I shall call Classroom S in this paper.

　　Classroom S, a three-bedroom apartment unit, is used twice a week on weekdays from 18:00 to 21:00. One NPO staff member, two part-timers, and several volunteers tutor or play with children. In addition to providing "learning support," playing cards or talking with children are also important activities because the purpose of this project is not just academic. Children who come to the class often suffer not only from poverty but also from problems such as domestic violence, child abuse, and school non-attendance. Therefore, providing "learning support" is the only way to make a connection with children. A more important objective is to keep an eye on the children so that supporters can immediately intervene in their homes and schools when

problems arise. Through the activity of Classroom S, its staff carefully examines whether children spend their days safely and try to find out if they have any trouble that they cannot voice at home or school. Furthermore, some NPO staff are social workers and can work with parents, schools, children's welfare centers, and other public institutions. They may discover issues children face outside Classroom S, and if they do, they share the information with Classroom S staff. Alternatively, they may relate the information about problems discovered in Classroom S to relevant outside parties. In this way, the staff focuses on building and maintaining relationships inside and outside Classroom S so that they can find out any problems that children may have.

These "face-to-face" support had to be temporarily suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some children used Zoom to join online classes. However, after the state of emergency in Sendai City was lifted, Classroom S resumed "face-to-face" support as before, taking necessary infection prevention measures. Why did they do so when such intimate contacts were strongly discouraged under the banner of "the new normal" lifestyle? Was there any reason particular to child poverty?

One reason was that some children could not go online. For example, many economically deprived families did not have Wi-Fi in their homes, and some did not have smartphones or PCs. Some children did not have their own rooms where they could concentrate on online learning or talk about their problems freely without being overheard by their families. The Single Mother Research Project that surveyed 1,866 single mothers in Japan found that 36.8% did not have a PC or a tablet, and 30.3% could not connect to the internet or could not connect without worrying about the data limit (The project of a single mothers survey and The forum of single mothers 2020: 20–21). Some households choose not to give their children communication devices, such as smartphones and PCs, even if they could afford them. Therefore, the lack of an Internet environment may be a common problem for all children regardless of the income level of their families.

Another reason was that children may not always be safe in their homes, even if they could go online at home. The children, who come to Classroom S, often have no "refuge (*ibasho*)," a place where children can feel safe physically and mentally, in their homes because of problems such as domestic violence, parental neglect, or frictions and tensions among their family members. For those children without "refuge," coming to Classroom S is not just about getting support, educational or otherwise. This gives them a legitimate reason to leave home (and avoid any danger). In other words, physically moving away from home and coming to Classroom S is necessary for them to secure safety and peace.

Next, I would like to turn to the general activities held at Classroom S.

3-2. Classroom S

A session in Classroom S starts at 18:00. However, two part-timers come to work at 17:30 to make preparations. Both the staff and children must disinfect their hands with alcohol and measure their body temperature before entering the classroom. At the entry point, they have to fill in the following columns of the attendance notebook: "name," "arrival time," "return time," "body temperature," and "answer to today's question." "Today's question" is a simple daily question made up by a part-timer. For example, "What will you do during the summer vacation?" or "What did you eat for breakfast today?" The answers to this question not only give the staff some clues to start a conversation with children but also help them understand if the latter have any problems outside Classroom S: how the children are doing at home, whether they spend their days safely, and whether they are eating properly. This notebook was also used in other classrooms.

Subsequently, the two part-timers tell the Classroom S staff important information taken from the "daily records" of children so that all staff can share what they have to know about every child in the classroom. This is done because not all staff attend all sessions. Part-timers have fixed working days, but volunteers come freely as their work or study schedules permit. Some volunteers come twice a week and others only when they can. Every staff member peruses this important information and shares it among themselves.

From 18:00 onward, children come one by one. The time they arrive varies. Some come shortly after 18:00, while others come after 19:00. Some come after school activities, while others come after having supper at home. How children spend time in classrooms differs. Some start studying as soon as they come to the classroom, while others play cards or chat with staff before studying. Some children rarely study at all. At Classroom S, it is free time until 19:15, and study time begins after that. However, in reality, this rule is not rigidly enforced because the actual playing time for a child depends on the time the child comes to the classroom. For example, a child who comes at 18:00 can play for about an hour until 19:15. However, a child who comes at 19:00, when club activities at school are over, has only 15 minutes of free time. Therefore, in consideration of the time when the children arrive and the time when the classroom ends, the free time and study time are discussed and decided between staff and children.

Free time is important in Classroom S because it is through playing and chatting during free time that staff can strengthen their relationships with children and hear from them

about what they are doing at school and home. Children with some problems are more likely to reveal them in casual conversations during free time. Therefore, the staff pay close attention to what children say during their free time and try to notice any signs of trouble in children.

In both free and study times, a specific staff member may attend a specific child. Who attends to whom depends on each child's circumstances and personal relationships within the classroom. For example, a female staff member may attend to a child who is not good at interacting with the male staff. Alternatively, the staff member who shares a common hobby with a certain child attends that child. The staff strive to create a classroom in which every child feels welcome and, thus, desires to come again. It is important for this project that good relationships are maintained with all children to keep them coming to the classroom.

The children go home at 20:30. Many children return home on foot or bicycle. Some children are picked up by their parents. After all the children have gone home, a meeting called "Looking back on today" is held. In the meeting, that day's staff talk about what they want to share with all other staff members. The topics of the talk may include how children looked at the day and what they showed interest in during the conversation. This meeting is important for identifying urgent problems and sharing them among all staff members. In some cases, NPO staff may cooperate with social workers and parents to deal with problems. At the end of each month, the staff discuss any change in each child from the previous month. This monthly meeting is called "Looking back on this month."

In these meetings, the staff discuss not only problems that the children have but also positive things such as something the children were happy about or some fun they had or what praises they received at home or school, or just what children were able to do. Knowing these positive aspects helps the staff to connect more closely with the children, which allows the latter to talk freely about potentially serious problems. The staff keeping close connections with the children help NPO ASUIKU, parents, and related organizations to solve problems when they arise.

I shall now turn to two cases I encountered in my fieldwork: Sakura and Shota.

3-3. Sakura's Case

Sakura is a third-grade junior high school student in Sendai city. She lives with her mother, an older brother in high school, and her younger sister. She started to come to Classroom S at the beginning of her first year of junior high school. This is because her older brother also attended Classroom S when he was in junior high school. I met her in January 2021. We spent time playing together and preparing her for the high school

entrance examination. Sometimes, she said, "I don't want to go home" and "I have nowhere to go."

Sakura has had problems with her family for some time. Her mother compares her to her brother, who is, according to her, better at studying. Moreover, her mother often was strict with her. She was also harshly disciplined. Therefore, at her home, she often clashed with her mother and brother. In addition, she and her brother cleaned, washed, cooked, and took care of her younger sister. This is because their mother often had to leave home on business trips.

Sakura was also dissatisfied with the differences in her mother's treatment of her brother and sister. In particular, she was dissatisfied that she was not given a smartphone. Her brother had a smartphone, but she could not get one until she entered high school. Most of the junior high school students around her had smartphones, so she often could not get into conversations with her friends, and she complained about it.

This is an ongoing situation. On the one hand, troubles between Sakura and her mother intensified since April 2020, because she had to stay at home for most of the day and spent more time with her mother due to the school closure and the prohibition of afterschool club activities due to the pandemic. Her stress at home continued to increase because her mother sometimes left her at home and went out with other family members. Furthermore, her high school entrance examination was coming, which further increased her stress. This resulted in the following statement, "I don't want to go home," in Classroom S.

On the other hand, her mother struggled with Sakura's developmental characteristics. Her mother planned her life based on Sakura's characteristics. However, her mother's strictness and emphasis on observing the rules did not match Sakura's characteristics. Subsequently, her mother often talked about this problem with social workers.

Sakura attended another learning support classroom in addition to Classroom S. Therefore, she could attend learning support classrooms five days a week. However, she had nowhere to go on Tuesdays and Thursdays when neither class was held. When she did not want to go home on those two days, she wasted her time at a fast-food restaurant near her home at night. Even on the days when Classroom S was held, she often spent time at a fast-food restaurant after 20:30 after the class ended. However, she could not always go to a fast-food restaurant because her monthly allowance was only 900 yen, which was not enough to spend at restaurants for at least eight days per month.

Under such circumstances, on February 23rd, a holiday overlapped with Tuesday when she had no place to go. A week before that, when I was attending to three third-grade girls, including Sakura, she told me the following:

Sakura "I don't like the 23rd. Why it's a holiday? Moreover, it is Tuesday."

I "I understand. You don't have this classroom on Tuesday and Thursday."

Sakura "It's hard to be with my mother all day. I wish I could stay overnight at school."

Later, I learned from her that she studied at home on that day. It may not seem odd that some children do not want to go home. However, not wanting to go home may put the child in danger. Uema (2017) interviewed girls in their teens and 20s working at a cabaret club in Okinawa Prefecture, Japan, and found that a 15-year-old girl, forced to live with an unfamiliar woman due to her father's remarriage, could not stand this situation and run away from home; subsequently, she engaged in *Enjo-Kosai* (援助交際), that is, paid dating, for four years to survive. Such cases are common. Many who do not have "refuge" get into trouble, especially at night.

3-4. Shota's Case

Shota is a boy in the second grade of junior high school in Sendai City. He lived with his mother, an older sister, who is a first-grade high school student. I met him in January 2021. Since April, I have been playing and studying together with him every time Classroom S was held. Shota suffered from child neglect in his family because his mother was too busy working from early morning to late night to spend time caring for him. Therefore, he was introduced to Classroom S by the administration.

In addition, Shota refused to go to school since the first-day assembly in April when he was in the second grade; he could not get used to the new class due to his absence on the first day of the new semester. In the new class, he made a few friends and went to school until March of his first year. There is another reason why he did not get used to the new class. In his new class, almost all the boys were excited about the same video game. However, Shota could not buy the video game for financial reasons. Therefore, he could not make friends and refused to attend school.

Shota did not attend school, but he came to Classroom S every time. He did not tell Classroom S that he was not attending school, and the staff, including myself, did not realize that. The reason Shota hid the fact that he refused to go to school might be because he wanted to present a different self, for no one in Classroom S knew how he was at home or school. However, since the latter half of April, he began to say to me, "Teach me please" and "What were the contents taught in the classes I missed on Monday and Tuesday?" When I asked, "Did you ask your friends to show you their notebooks?", he said, "No, I didn't." He went to school about once a week, though often late. However, he still could not make friends, and he could not ask his classmates to show him their notebooks.

Consequently, he had to ask for help from Classroom S.

In June, the staff of Classroom S discovered Shota's school non-attendance. When his mother tried to take him to go to school forcibly, he attacked his mother. The incident revealed that the relationship between him and his mother had worsened due to his mother's neglect and his school non-attendance. Since this incident, Shota was temporarily housed in a children's welfare center, and, as of now, he has not returned home yet. According to the staff of the children's welfare center, Shota himself refuses to return home.

For Shota, Classroom S was a place where he could forget the problems he had at home and school. Classroom S gave him a "refuge" where he could genuinely enjoy his time. It was also an alternative place where he was able to study.

4. Discussion

4-1. Why is "face-to-face" support necessary?

Why does the child poverty support project, "Learning and Social Support by Sendai City with NPO ASUIKU" continue to provide the same "face-to-face" support that it had provided before the pandemic? I would like to answer this question from the perspectives of Sakura and Shota as vulnerable children. What Sakura and Shota have in common is that they can physically leave their home by coming to Classroom S. Classroom S was a spatial "refuge" for them, whereas their home and school were not. It provided safe and secure "refuge" for them only if they could be physically present there.

In addition, for Sakura, being able to leave home without spending money and being in a safe place at night were very important. For Shota, Classroom S was important because he was able to present a different self from the ones at home and school. This cannot be achieved online. They had to be in Classroom S in person.

From these two children's perspectives, providing them with "refuge," a safe place where they can maintain multifaceted and multifunctional relationships with reliable adults, is the most important "child poverty support." Many studies have discovered a strong correlation between academic records and household income (Mimitsuka 2009: 1–4). Based on these findings, conventional child poverty support programs focused on educational assistance for children-in-poverty (Watanabe 2021: 90). In contrast, Sakura and Shota's cases reveal six different vulnerabilities: (1) low income, (2) lack of internet connection, (3) no safe place to stay at night, (4) no adults to rely on, (5) home's failure as "refuge," and (6) failure of both home and school as "refuge." To deal with these six vulnerabilities, child poverty support must provide (1) cheap or free support, (2) "face-

to-face" support, (3) a safe place at night, (4) various care, (5) support to leave their homes spatially, and (6) a third place away from their home and school.

Table 3: Vulnerabilities of children and Necessary Supports

Vulnerabilities of children	Necessary Support
(1) low income	(1) cheap or free support
(2) lack of internet connection	(2) "face-to-face" support
(3) no safe place to stay at night	(3) a safe place at night
(4) no adults to rely on	(4) various care
(5) home's failure as "refuge"	(5) support to leave their home spatially
(6) failure of both home and school as "refuge"	(6) a third place away from their home and school

Source: My compilation

For Sakura and Shota, the biggest problem was the lack of "refuge." Home and school make up a large part of junior high school students' lives, but neither of them provided "refuge" for Sakura and Shota; only Classroom S did, which did not cost them much. Attending Classroom S did not require internet access, and it provided a safe place in the evenings. Classroom S was a safe and peaceful third option away from home or school, and it had adults on whom Sakura and Shota could rely.

Furthermore, the staff of Classroom S, including myself, had ears for Sakura and Shota because the staff had built and maintained good relationships with them. Therefore, the two children could talk about various things that they were not able to talk about at other places. The vulnerabilities of children-in-poverty do not always appear as a problem because troubling relationships at home or school remain invisible to most outsiders. By building close and intimate relationships with children, outside support givers can make invisible vulnerabilities visible and deal with them swiftly and effectively.

4-2. Problems with "the new normal" lifestyle

The problem with "the new normal" lifestyle is that it is premised on what is "normal" for white-collar, middle-class nuclear families with enough income and healthy relationships among the family members. Amenities such as private rooms for every child in the family and communication equipment and high-speed internet access for every family member are taken for granted. Such a premise is beyond reach for vulnerable children, such as Sakura and Shota. They lack resources for adopting "the new normal" lifestyle.

To correct the cultural and class biases implicit in "the new normal" lifestyle discourse, we must listen to a variety of vulnerable children, such as Sakura and Shota. To do so, we have to build and maintain good relationships with them as Classroom S is doing. By listening to children with vulnerabilities like Sakura and Shota, we find out that what they need is not necessarily a "face to face" learning environment but rather a safe and secure "refuge" where reliable adults are there to provide intimate care for them. "Face to face" contact is indispensable in providing such intimate care, and that is the real reason why Classroom S and the "Learning and Social Support by Sendai City with NPO ASUIKU" emphasize face to face interaction in their project. The "new normal" lifestyle fails in this regard. To genuinely assist children like Sakura and Shota, we need to find ways to provide an infection-free environment for intimate contact. The answer to how we can achieve this is beyond the scope of this paper, but my study at least makes some problems of "the new normal" lifestyle visible to those without vulnerabilities.

5. Conclusion

To repeat, "refuge," that is, a safe place and the multifaceted and multifunctional relationships with reliable adults, rather than a "face-to-face" educational environment, were needed in Classroom S. Only by considering the perspectives of Sakura and Shota, the children-in-poverty, I was able to see this.

In fact, Sakura and Shota always needed a "refuge" away from home and school. Their vulnerabilities existed before the COVID-19 pandemic but remained invisible. It was only because the pandemic and "the new normal" lifestyle forced social distancing and remote learning that the hitherto invisible vulnerabilities were intensified and, therefore, made visible.

Furthermore, the cases of Sakura and Shota clarify that people with various vulnerabilities were excluded from the premise of "the new normal" lifestyle. These cases revealed the implicit cultural and class premises that permeate our society.

Finally, this paper shows that the voices of vulnerable children need to be heard and put on the table of political debate. I hope that this paper demonstrates the strength of anthropological focus on emic perspectives and ethnographic reporting of their own perspectives in listening to the voices of vulnerable people who are often deprived of opportunities to speak out. I also hope that my research can forge a link between academic research and policymaking so that future policies on child poverty reflect the reality faced by children-in-poverty.

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