

Enhancing School Connectedness in Japan: The Role of Homeroom Teachers in Establishing a Positive Classroom Climate

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This article briefly reviews school connectedness research in Japan, focusing on the relationship between school bonding based on Hirschi's (1969) theory and non-attendance or antisocial behavior at school among Japanese students. In addition, the article provides a case example illustrating the homeroom teacher's role in enhancing children's connectedness in elementary school. Since a national comprehensive guidance program does not exist in Japan, homeroom teachers are responsible for developing children's skills, competences, values, and connectedness to school through everyday classroom activities and school events. The case example illustrates how homeroom teachers can enhance school connectedness and how a focus on classroom climate can improve teachers' abilities to manage their classes effectively. Formal assessment instruments such as the Classroom Climate Inventory can assist teachers in this effort.

Keywords: school connectedness; classroom climate; teacher consultation; school counseling

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Although school connectedness and its effects on student performance and behavior has not been extensively studied in Japan, there is some indication of a link between low bonding to school and delinquency, antisocial behavior, and poor school attendance (Kurihara, 2010; Mitoh, 1996; Morita, 1991). With regard to delinquency, Hirschi's (1969) Bond Theory proposes social bonding as an important protective factor for preventing delinquency and non-attendance at school. Mitoh (1996), for example, investigated the relationship between school, friend, and family bonding and the deviant behavior of junior and senior high school students in normal educational settings and Juvenile Detention and Classification Center. School bonding emerged as a protective factor for the normal group; for the Juvenile Detention and Classification Center group, there was an interaction effect between school bonding and friend bonding. In cases where youth felt a stronger school bonding, strong friend bonding was a protective factor for delinquency; however, in cases where youth felt a weaker school bonding, strong friend bonding increased delinquency. School bonding thus emerged as an important consideration for delinquency prevention.

Morita's (1991) study, also based on Bond Theory, showed that students who felt weaker school bonding were at risk of absenteeism from school. Additionally, Goto (2000) surveyed 759 elementary school students and found that school bonding had a strong effect on students' sense of belonging. Based on administration of psychological scales with a focus on social bonding and psychological well-being, Miura and Haraoka (2002) found that the social bonding subscale of "Acceptance Relatedness" was negatively correlated with isolation, emptiness, pressure and incompetence, and positively correlated with self-esteem and fulfillment in a sample of 391 junior and senior high school students. Both "Instrumental Relatedness" and "Contributory Relatedness" aspects of social bonding were positively correlated with several measures of psychological well-being. Results suggested that students' feelings of

being accepted by people around them were important for their own psychological well-being.

In an application research, Kurihara (2010) was able to reduce the number of non-attendance days at a junior high school using small cooperative learning sessions in academic classes in an effort to make school bonding stronger. These results match the research result in other countries that school bonding or connectedness is a critical factor in predicting both attendance and the later likelihood of dropping out of school (Finn, 1989).

Although there are a few researches about school bonding in Japan, the available ones suggest that strong school bonding (connectedness) serves as an important protective factor for enhancing academic performance, good behavior, and attendance at school. Efforts to enhance school bonding are likely to pay off in increased motivation and performance, better behavior, and a stronger commitment to the values promoted by schools.

The Role of the Homeroom Teacher in Japan for Increasing School Connectedness

In Japanese schools, the person who has the most important role for increasing school connectedness or bonding is the homeroom teacher. There is a unique classroom-homeroom teacher system from elementary to senior high school in Japan. In this system, students stay in the same classroom (homeroom) and occupy their assigned seat all day long except for music, art, physical education (PE), and other lab-related activities, and the homeroom teacher is responsible for guiding students in their class in areas of academic, personal-social, and career development. Given the large amount of time students spend together, building a sense of community in the classroom is crucial for their mental health and satisfaction with the school. Homeroom teachers play a major

role in developing students' interpersonal skills by leading activities such as class meetings, school events like sports days or school festivals where students collaborate on art or drama projects, student responsibilities such as cleaning the classroom, serving lunch to other students, or creating a classroom newspaper for students, and many other activities that require effective interaction among students.

In this way, the homeroom teacher has a major role and responsibility for developing children's life skills and sense of community, which enhance school connectedness, engagement and bonding through classroom activities. This is the traditional way of guidance for students in Japan. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2010) recently published a "Student Guidance Outline," the first in 30 years, suggesting that teachers need to give students the experience of joy and of understanding themselves and others through classroom activities designed for learning autonomy, developing practical and healthy attitudes, and enhancing the skills of career decision-making, problem solving and academic learning. In this way, classroom activities are a central part of student guidance. In Japan, the homeroom teacher's classroom management strategy is one of the main ways of influencing student guidance.

A case example is used here to illustrate how homeroom teachers can enhance a sense of community and school connectedness through classroom activities. A method for psychological support personnel (consultants) to enhance homeroom teachers' classroom management skills through classroom assessment will also be introduced.

Method

Participants

Elementary school teachers (Ms. A and Ms. B) were consulted. They worked in the same middle-sized public school in a small city in

a western area of Japan, located in a predominantly working-class community. Ms. A, in her 50s, was the homeroom teacher for Class A with 39 students (23 males, 16 females) in sixth grade. Ms. B, in her 30s, was the homeroom teacher for Class B with 39 students (23 males, 16 females) in sixth grade. The students in both classes engaged in a great deal of negative behavior when they were fifth graders, so students were regrouped (as being the norm in Japanese public schools) and their homeroom teachers changed when they became sixth graders.

Instruments

Classroom Climate Inventory

Student's perceptions of classroom climate were assessed by the *Classroom Climate Inventory* (CCI), which was constructed and standardized for teacher consultation and aligned specifically with the need to assess aspects of classroom climate in Japanese schools. The original version of the CCI (Ito & Matsui, 2001) was developed from classroom observations and interviews with teachers and students in Japanese junior high schools, utilizing the *Classroom Environment Scale* (Trickett & Moos, 1995), the *Learning Environment Inventory* (Fraser, Anderson, & Walberg, 1982), and the *Classroom Atmosphere Scale* (Silbergeld, Koenig, & Manderscheid, 1975). The validity of the original scale was confirmed by a principal component analysis based on results from 2,456 junior high school students in 85 classes (Ito & Matsui, 2001). Concurrent validity of the scale was established by correlating students' subscale scores with related aspects of school engagement including school morale, mental health, and general satisfaction (Ito, 2005). The brief version of the CCI (Ito, 2009) for elementary students was constructed by shortening the original scale to 26 items of six subscales, including "Involvement in class activities," "Friction," "Satisfaction," "Self-disclosure," "Task orientation," and "Order." Factorial validity for this structure was established based on responses of

2,569 elementary students in 98 classes. Concurrent validity of individual subscale scores was reflected in subsequent research by Ito (2009), which found significant positive correlations between each of the six subscales and measures of school morale and general self-worth.

CCI item responses were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Each subscale’s internal reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) scores ranged from .79 to .93. Examples of items are “Students in this class are eager to participate in class activities” and “Students care for the entire class.” Table 1 lists the six subscales and a brief explanation of each. Results of the CCI can be shown graphically by depicting class mean scores, which are standardized scores expressed in standard deviation units.

Scales for individual mental health

Three scales for assessing aspects of students’ overall mental health and adjustment to school were administered along with the CCI. When combined, scores on the three scales can be used as a screening measure for identifying students who lack motivation in school and are at-risk for truancy and/or school refusal. All are 5-point scales with response choices ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” The *School Morale Scale*, a 6-item self-report instrument used to measure students’ motivation for attending school, was constructed from a subscale of the *School Morale Test* (Matsuyama, Kurachi, Sudo, & Miyazaki, 1984). High scores on this scale have been associated with high motivation at school (Matsuyama, 1979) and with high sociometric status (Matsuyama, Kurachi, & Nishiyama, 1976). Internal consistency of the six-item version of the scale (Cronbach’s alpha) is .83 based on previous research (Ito, 2009). The *Somatic Symptom Scale*, which was constructed with reference to the *Simplified Medical Index–Health Questionnaire* (Mori, Hayashi, & Togawa, 1987) is a 7-item self-report measure used to capture students’ somatic responses to stress. It was selected specifically for

Table 1. Definition and Item Example of Subscale of the CCI

Definition	Item no.	Item example
Relationship domain		
<i>Involvement in class activities</i> (5 items): Extent to which students are interested in class activities and put a lot of energy into these activities.	A3	Students in this class are eager to participate in class activities.
	D2	Students are concerned when things are not working out well in the class.
<i>Friction</i> (5 items): Negative and cliquish groups in the class, who create conflict for class as a whole.	C1*	There are very few troubles in this class.
	F7	Some students in this class form cliques and do not mix with other classmates.
<i>Satisfaction</i> (4 items): Extent to which students are satisfied and enjoy their homeroom class.	B1	Students truly enjoy being part of this class.
	B3	Students look forward to seeing their classmates every morning.
<i>Self-disclosure</i> (4 items): Openness to classmates and teacher, so that students can express their feelings to each other.	G2	Students in this class can share their feelings openly with each other.
	G3	Students can talk openly even when the teacher is present.
Personal growth (development)/Goal orientation domain		
<i>Task orientation</i> (4 items): Emphasis on academic learning, concentration, and motivation.	H1	Students in this class are attentive during the lessons.
	H4	Students in this class are very hard-working.
System maintenance and change domain		
<i>Order</i> (4 items): Extent to which students follow class rules and behave in an orderly manner.	I3	Clear rules exist in this class.
	I7	Students respond immediately to the teacher's instruction.

Note: * indicates a reverse item.

this study because it measures somatic symptoms (e.g., easily irritated, headache) commonly understood and experienced by elementary students. Specific items were chosen to reflect the three-factor (anxiety, tension, frustration) structure of the original scale (Mori et al., 1987). Internal consistency of the 7-item version is .75 (Ito, 2009). Finally, the *General Self-worth Competence Scale* (GSWCS) (Matsui & Murata, 1997) is a 10-item self-report scale based on Harter's (1981) *Competence Scale*. It was administered to provide a measure of students' self-worth competence. The factorial validity of the GSWCS was confirmed by a principal component analysis from 790 junior and senior high school and college students. The Japanese version of the GSWCS was shown to be positively related to self-esteem in a sample of Japanese students (Sakurai, 1983). Internal consistency of the scale was .86 in a study by Ito (2009).

Procedure

The CCI and mental health scales were administered in July and January in the same school year and teacher consultations based on these results were held in August (the summer vacation between the first semester and the second semester) and February (near the end of the school year).

Situation Before the Consultation

In April, at the beginning of the school year in Japan, both Ms. A and Ms. B observed that almost all students in their classes often behaved in rude ways and frequently used violent and rough language. In academic lessons, there was a lack of concentration and focus. Ms. A and Ms. B strived to help students learn what they should and should not do in school. Bullying was never allowed in their classes. The teachers experienced many difficulties in developing trust in their relationships with students. For example, whenever teachers told the students to stop using violent language and to concentrate on academic tasks, the students

responded with “Why do you scold only me? Everyone else is doing the same thing.”

In July, before the summer vacation, the local education authority introduced the author as a consultant to the school where Ms. A and Ms. B worked, using the CCI and other measures to assist teachers. Ms. A and Ms. B were willing to administer these measures in their classes in the middle of July.

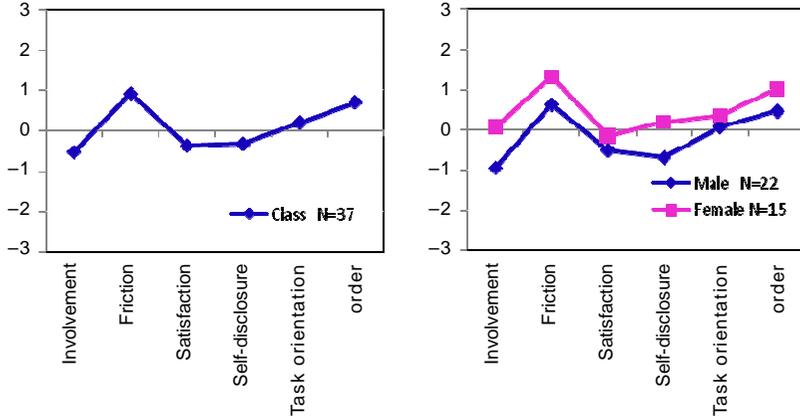
Results

CCI Results in July

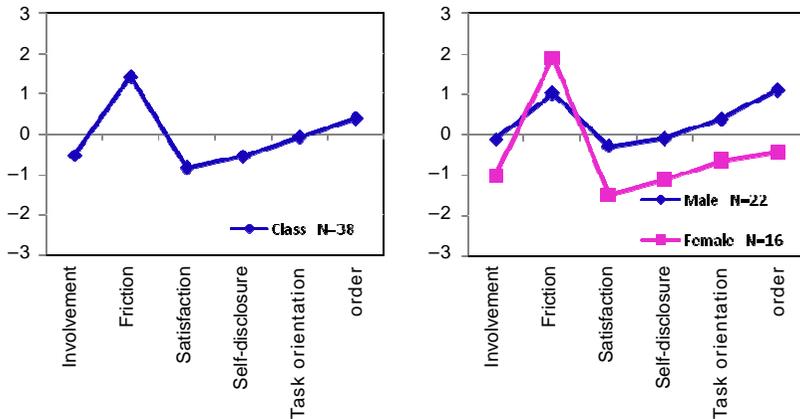
Figure 1(a) illustrates the profiles of Class A. The profile of the whole class in July was low in the subscales of “Involvement,” “Satisfaction” and “Self-disclosure” and high in the subscales of “Friction,” “Task orientation” and “Order.” There appeared to be much friction in this class, and the students did not expend much energy for classroom activities, so this was a class that lacked a sense of community or connectedness. The profiles by gender show that the subscales of “Involvement” and “Self-disclosure” yielded particularly low scores for male students. Specific items that were especially low for males included “Students put a lot of effort into class activities” in the “Involvement” subscale, “Completing homework and class activities are very important for students in this class” in the “Task orientation” subscale, and “Students in this class obey the rules” in the “Order” subscale. The boys in Class A perceived the classroom climate more negatively and they were becoming less willing to communicate openly with teachers and peers, losing their interest or concern about the class, and disobeying the teacher’s instruction. On the other hand, for females, scores on the subscales of “Friction” and “Order” were relatively high. One item that was especially low for females was “Students truly enjoy being part of this class” in the “Satisfaction” subscale. Items that were especially high

Figure 1. Results of the CCI in July (Year X)

(a) Class A



(b) Class B



Note: The vertical axis shows standard mean subscale scores expressed in standard deviation units. The zero line shows the average level of each CCI subscale.

were “There are students in this class who dislike each other” and “Some students in this class form cliques and do not mix with other classmates,” both of which were in the “Friction” subscale. The girls in Class A felt more friction than the boys, and they perceived the students in the class as divided into small groups or cliques, to the detriment of the larger classroom community.

Figure 1(b) illustrates the profiles of Class B. The profile of the whole class in July was low in the subscales of “Involvement,” “Satisfaction” and “Self-disclosure” and high in the subscales of “Friction” and “Order.” The results by gender show that male students perceived the classroom climate more positively than did females, especially in “Order” subscale. One item that appeared especially low for males in Class B was “There are very few troubles in this class” in the “Friction” subscale. Although the boys in this class experienced a generally positive climate, they felt more friction and order than average.

Female students, on the other hand, perceived the climate more negatively, with especially low ratings in the subscales of “Involvement” and “Satisfaction” and high in the subscale of “Friction.” Many items were rated especially low by females, including almost all items in the “Satisfaction” and “Order” subscales, and the item “Students in this class can share their feelings openly with each other” in the “Self-disclosure” subscale. Females in this class felt a high degree of friction and a lack of safety, which discouraged natural self-disclosure, resulting in less satisfaction and interest in their class.

Consultation in August

In August, the author consulted with homeroom teachers on how to change the existing classroom climates using the CCI and other assessment results. After explaining the CCI results by the consultant, Ms. A told that she had actually worried previously about student

performance in the areas of “Task orientation” and “Order” in her class and was concerned about students’ scores on these subscales. She noted a lack of concentration among students during academic tasks and their lack of conformity with class rules and obligations, especially among boys, which were consistent with the CCI item results. Some students behaved very well but others misbehaved, so the students were divided into smaller cliques, as the CCI result of girls suggested. She felt it was difficult to engage students in whole-class activities because many students lacked focus and did not work well together when divided into small groups. She said she found it necessary to revise the curriculum of moral education classes and to continuously guide students to consider their classmates’ feelings and avoid using negative words. She also needed to find a new way to assist students to get along and connect with each other and feel a sense of team spirit.

Ms. B also said that she was aware of the high friction in her class, which was consistent with the CCI result. There were many quarrels in her class, especially among some boys. Girls disliked this situation and were losing their sense of commitment to the class. She thought this was because of the high degree of friction, as reported by the CCI.

The consultant provided some examples of how to build up team spirit, such as giving chances for the entire class to collaborate or work together at school events, and taking the time everyday to talk about the importance of friendship to students in her class. Afterward, Ms. A thought that she should praise students more to engage them in classroom activities that were designed to increase involvement and to connect students to the class as a whole. Rather than scolding students for misbehavior, Ms. B thought that she should find a way to guide her students through the process of changing the class climate by building up team spirit, with which students care about each other. Ms. B had been so busy working with the boys that she had little time to focus on the needs

of girls. In view of this, she decided to talk to and care for the girls in her class more, beginning in September. In subsequent discussions, the teachers continued to reflect on their way of classroom management and what they should do to create a better climate.

Teachers' Response to Consultation

In September, at the beginning of the second semester, teachers decided to do the following things to create a more positive school climate: (a) having students keep a diary to record their everyday behavior so that teachers can better understand students' lives and feelings; (b) encouraging students to participate more in the challenging events at school, such as the swimming competition and PE festival; (c) telling students whenever someone in the school and the local community praised their behavior; (d) reporting students' good behavior to their parents more concretely, with an emphasis on building up a reliable relationship with parents.

In fact, the homeroom teachers did a number of things to encourage cooperation between students. For example, there was a city swimming competition in September. Only children who could swim fast would normally be selected to participate in that competition, so usually only about 20% of students could attend. But the homeroom teachers encouraged all children to participate, even those who were not good swimmers. The idea was for all to go to the competition together, to participate as a team, and to cheer for each other. Everyone had a chance to participate in the competition, some as swimmers and some as cheerleaders. After the event, students felt more like a family. They felt more "togetherness" and connection to their class, and had increased self-confidence. In September and October, children spent many hours preparing for the PE festival. Ms. A and Ms. B told the children: "You could do the most beautiful group performance program, which has never

been done before at the PE festival in this school.” The teachers then created and taught the new performance, adding music and storytelling to the script. In the performance, teachers taught students that everyone had their own role and every role was important. During the same period, teachers utilized the life story of a figurant actor who plays the role of an anonymous samurai (warrior) who was killed in a swordfight scene to provide lessons in moral education and to illustrate collective responsibility. Also Ms. A and Ms. B praised the students and parents whenever students were praised by someone in the local community and they reported each student’s good qualities to all class members at every opportunity. In doing so, the children recognized the positive characteristics of each other and how to get along better with instead of quarreling and feeling disinterested in others.

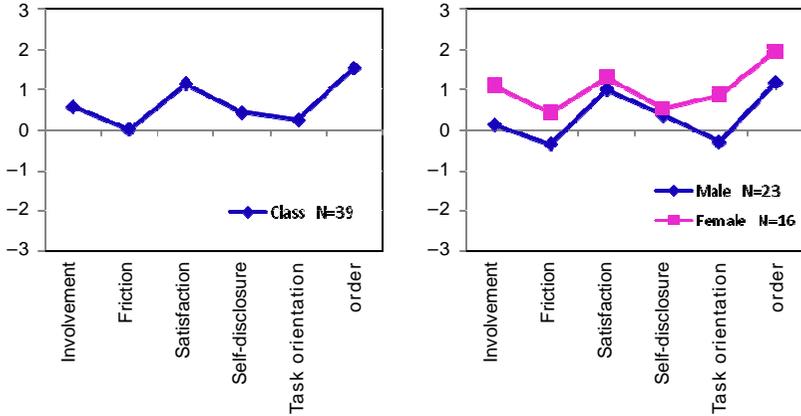
CCI Results in January and the Follow-up

The graphs in Figure 2(a) illustrate the profiles of CCI results of Class A about 5 months after the consultation. It shows that the classroom climate had changed substantially. The scores on the subscales of “Involvement” and “Satisfaction” became much higher and “Friction” became lower in the perceptions of both males and females.

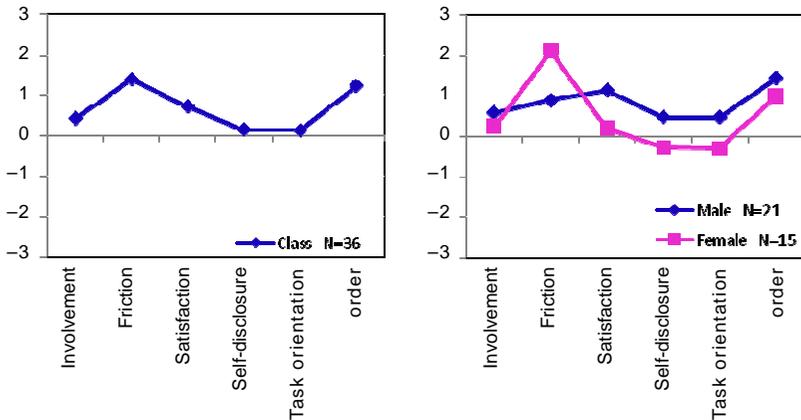
The graphs in Figure 2(b) illustrate the profiles of CCI results of Class B. It shows that the girls’ perception of “Friction” in the class was still high, but many other subscales had changed in a positive direction. In particular, the scores on the “Involvement” and “Satisfaction” subscales increased markedly. Table 2 shows the Mental Health Scale, School Morale Scale, and GSWCS results in July and January. As can be seen, students’ reported mental health symptoms decreased from the first to the second measurement. The school morale scores of both classes also increased substantially. The GSWCS scores, on the other hand, decreased slightly from the first to the second measurement.

Figure 2. Results of the CCI in January (Year X + 1)

(a) Class A



(b) Class B



Note: The vertical axis shows standard mean subscale scores expressed in standard deviation units. The zero line shows the average level of each CCI subscale.

Table 2. Class Mean of Mental Health Score

Time	Class A			Class B		
	School morale	Somatic symptom	General self-worth competence	School morale	Somatic symptom	General self-worth competence
Time 1: July	3.61	2.88	2.89	3.88	2.84	3.12
Time 2: January	4.18	2.57	2.51	4.15	2.55	3.08

These results indicated that the teachers' new methods of classroom management worked well to change the classroom climate in a positive direction, especially in the aspects of involvement and satisfaction with the class. Ms. A said in the February consultation that she had tried hard to raise her students' self-efficacy and sense of purpose in the class, so that students would be more connected to the class and to their homeroom teacher. She felt confident about her policies and enjoyed creating some new approaches toward classroom management after taking into consideration the CCI results, which helped her understand her students' attitudes toward the school. The children also became more confident through experiencing challenges at the whole-class events, such as the swimming competition and group performance at the PE festival together with their classmates. They experienced the series of challenges, cooperation, success, and praise from adults all around. This positive cycle brought the children a good sense of community in the class and a feeling of school connectedness, which was shown in higher scores on the School Morale Scale in January.

Ms. B said in the February consultation that she did many things with Ms. A and focused more on the well-being of girls during the second semester. As a result, the girls themselves became more understanding toward boys and sometimes gave advice to boys. Through the whole-

class events such as the PE festival, boys also learned how to support and encourage girls in their classes.

Conclusions

The evidence from this study suggests that classroom climate can be enhanced positively by consultation and by self-reflection using the data of the study results. Homeroom teachers have a major role in creating situations and opportunities for students to become better connected to school, to each other, and to teachers.

There is no national curriculum for psycho-education or classroom-based guidance programs to teach social and emotional skills in Japan. In most cases, the only available professional help in psychological areas is from clinical psychologists, who come to schools about once a week, usually for about eight hours as a school counselor (Yagi, 2008). Determining how to deliver the necessary mental health services to the whole school while assisting students to develop a healthy school life is one of the most important needs in Japanese education nowadays. One traditionally strong but sometimes challenging avenue for Japanese guidance is through the classroom-homeroom teacher system. The case example of Ms. A and Ms. B demonstrated that once teachers get some insights on how to manage the classroom situation, they can be instrumental in guiding their students in everyday school life through preparation for whole-school and classroom events.

In cases where teachers do not perceive the classroom situation correctly, they are less capable of managing the class effectively and have difficulty in providing guidance to individual students. In the classroom-homeroom teacher system, the links between homeroom teachers' reflection about the classroom situation and their management and behavior strategies in the class are critical. The CCI is one of the

tools for enhancing teachers' reflection with colleagues and consultants (school counselor) (Ito, 2003), and provides evidence for the accountability of teacher and school counselor practices (Ito, 2007). The results of the CCI can show students' feelings about the class as a whole and can assist school personnel to develop effective classroom management strategies. Sink and Spencer (2005) used a tool like the CCI to measure classroom climate. Doll, Zucker, and Brehm (2004) also used a tool similar to the CCI, called "Class Maps," to measure classroom climate for improving teachers' classroom management strategies. McLean (2003) used another type of the questionnaire for classroom climate assessment to assist teachers to create motivated classrooms.

Although this study provides some promising directions for school-based consultants interested in assisting teachers to develop more effective classroom management strategies, some cautions should be considered. Specifically, the generalizability of findings may be limited by the small number of participants and the somewhat unique Japanese educational system (i.e., classroom-homeroom teacher). Additional study utilizing various methods of classroom climate assessment (e.g., observation, student and teacher surveys) is needed to identify specific components of a "positive" climate that are most predictive of students' success and well-being.

Results of this study suggest that classroom climate may be a critical factor for students' mental health and also for motivation and academic achievement (Doll et al., 2004; Ito & Matsui, 1998; McLean, 2003). Especially in a school system where children spend long hours in the same classroom and the homeroom teacher has many responsibilities for guidance through everyday classroom activities, enhancing teachers' reflection about their attitude, policies and classroom management strategies is thought to be crucial for increasing students' connectedness to school.

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提升日本學生的學校聯繫感：
班主任在建立積極課堂氣氛所擔當的角色

本文首先概述日本在學校聯繫感方面的研究，主要探討以 Hirschi (1969) 理論為基礎的學校連結 (school bonding) 與日本學生缺課或反社會行為的關係。接着，文章會以一真實案例，闡明班主任在提升小學生學校聯繫感時所擔當的角色。由於日本並無全國的全方位輔導計劃，因此班主任有責任透過日常課堂活動和學校大型活動，以發展兒童各方面的技能和能力，並培養他們正確的價值觀和對學校的聯繫感。案例展示了班主任可以如何提升學校聯繫感，以及如何建立積極課堂氣氛來促進教師管理班級的效能。在這方面，課堂氣氛量表 (Classroom Climate Inventory) 等正規評估工具能有效幫助教師。

關鍵詞：學校聯繫感；課堂氣氛；教師諮詢；學校輔導