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Nantoka Naru (It Will Work Out)

An Ethnography of *Ibasho* and School Non-Attendees' Voices in
Furīsupēsu (Japanese Free Spaces/Japanese Free Schools)

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Abstract (Deutsch)

Die vorliegende Masterarbeit untersucht, wie *Furīsupēsu Blossom*, ein japanischer alternativer Bildungsraum für Kinder, die *futōkō* (schulische Nichteilnahme) erfahren, zu einem *ibasho* wird: nicht nur zu einem Ort des Wohlbefindens, sondern auch zu einem beziehungsgeprägten Umfeld, in dem die Anerkennung und Bestätigung der eigenen Existenz Resilienz und Selbstvertrauen fördert sowie die Voraussetzungen dafür schafft, Zukunftsperspektiven zu erwägen. Auf Basis einer dreimonatigen ethnografischen Feldforschung wird beleuchtet, wie *ibasho* durch alltägliche Praktiken innerhalb von *Blossom* Gestalt annimmt. Eingebettet in Japans Bildungslandschaft, die durch steigende *futōkō*-Raten und kulturelle Erwartungen an die schulische Bildung gekennzeichnet ist, setzt sich diese Abhandlung mit anthropologischen, kritisch-pädagogischen und *care*-ethischen Perspektiven auseinander. Anstatt *Blossom* als vorgefertigte Alternative zu betrachten, die lediglich Unterstützung bereitstellt, richtet sich der Blick darauf, wie Kinder, Jugendliche und Erwachsene gemeinsam ein Gefühl von Sicherheit, Autonomie und Anerkennung schaffen. In diesem Kontext erscheint Autonomie nicht als uneingeschränkte Freiheit, sondern als relational gelebte Praxis, die kontinuierlich mit anderen ausgehandelt wird. Die Narrative der Kinder und Jugendlichen verdeutlichen, wie sich durch frühere Schul- und *futōkō*-Erfahrungen entstandene Stigmata und internalisierte Defizitvorstellungen schrittweise wandeln, wenn sie auf Formen der Fürsorge und Anerkennung in *Blossom* treffen, wodurch sie Selbstvertrauen zurückgewinnen und sich neue Möglichkeiten vorstellen. Diese Untersuchung verfolgt, wie Teilnehmende, die zunächst auf Unterstützung angewiesen waren, allmählich Fürsorgerollen für jüngere Kinder übernehmen und so zu einem Kreislauf peer-gestützter Transformation beitragen. Weiters zeigt sie, wie Lernen und Entwicklung bei *Blossom* durch Alltag, Relationalität und gemeinsam gestaltete Praktiken entstehen, bietet Einblicke in die kollaborative Entstehung von *ibasho* sowie in übergreifende

anthropologische Fragestellungen zu Bildung, Kindheit und *place-making* und stellt damit schulzentrierte Annahmen infrage, die Lernen in solchen Räumen als „bloßes Spielen“ abtun.

Abstract

This thesis examines how *Furīsupēsu Blossom*, a Japanese alternative educational space for children who experience *futōkō* (school non-attendance), becomes an *ibasho*: not only a place of comfort, but also a relational environment in which recognition and affirmation of one's existence cultivate resilience, self-confidence, and the conditions for imagining futures. Based on three months of ethnographic fieldwork, it explores how *ibasho* takes shape through everyday practices within *Blossom*. Situated within Japan's educational landscape, marked by rising *futōkō* rates and cultural expectations of schooling, it engages with anthropological, critical pedagogical, and care-ethics perspectives of education. Rather than treating *Blossom* as a fixed alternative that simply provides support, it attends to how children, youths, and adults collaboratively foster a sense of safety, autonomy, and recognition through everyday routines and non-hierarchical interactions. In this setting, autonomy emerges not as unbounded freedom but as relational practice continuously negotiated with others. The narratives of children and youths illuminate how stigma and internalized deficit views formed by prior school and *futōkō* experiences gradually shift as they encounter forms of care and recognition at *Blossom*, reclaiming confidence and new perspectives. This research traces how participants who initially relied on support gradually take on caring roles for younger children, contributing to a cycle of peer-supported transformation. Further, it illustrates how learning and growth at *Blossom* unfold through everyday life, relationality, and co-created practices, offering insights into the collaborative making of *ibasho* and broader anthropological questions of education, childhood, and place-making, thereby challenging school-centric assumptions that dismiss learning in such spaces as “just playing.”

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1. Introduction

At *Furīsupēsu Blossom*,¹ a monthly event called “Birthday” is held to celebrate the children² whose birthdays fall within that month. Beyond marking individual birthdays, this custom serves as a routine moment through which the space celebrates the presence of everyone, regardless of who they are—a brief suspension of the everyday flow that brings the room’s occupants into a shared focus. On this particular day in the sweltering heat of August, a quiet sense of anticipation had begun to settle inside *Blossom*’s sharply cool, air-conditioned room before the celebration officially started. Mirai³—who is junior-high-aged and often seen practicing guitar at *Blossom*—and Kengo, a staff member, sat side by side on chairs, each holding a guitar as they checked the chords to “Happy Birthday.” They hummed the melody softly, their quiet rehearsal blending into the broader noise of children hastily moving in the room. The inside of *Blossom* is by no means spacious, and this constraint becomes especially apparent when more than forty people assemble simultaneously. Colorful paper decorations were strung across the room, with a handmade “Happy Birthday” sign hanging among them, creating a visibly festive atmosphere. Tables had been prepared with sweets and snacks intended for the later part of the event.

Near the center of the room, Rin—one of the long-time staff members, known for being especially bright and energetic even among the staff—was surrounded by a group of children as they worked to compile a handwritten list of all the August birthdays. They called out names from memory, corrected each other, and laughed when someone finally remembered a forgotten entry. Rin wrote down each name quickly, matching her pace to the children’s lively exchange. Once the list was complete, she raised her voice to draw attention

¹ *Furīsupēsu Blossom* (hereafter *Blossom*) is a pseudonym referring to my fieldwork site.

² In this thesis, a “child” is defined as anyone under eighteen years of age, following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989).

³ All personal and institutional names related to my fieldwork have been changed to pseudonyms.

and called out, “*Hai, sē no!*” (Okay, here we go!) to cue the start of the song. When the celebration finally began, slightly behind schedule, the room shifted from dispersed activity to collective attention, and those present began looking toward one another from across the room. During the part of the song when the names were sung, Rin delivered the list of August birthdays at remarkable speed, stringing all the names together into one continuous, breathless line. The children burst into giggles at the sheer velocity of her delivery, responding as much to the pace as to the naming itself.

Ordinarily, the inside of *Blossom* is characterized by overlapping activities: children darting around the room, video, card, and board games unfolding across tables, someone playing the piano with considerable enthusiasm, and a mix of voices and occasional shouts echoing in every direction. Yet for the duration of the song, this everyday cacophony momentarily receded. The group produced a brief but striking sense of togetherness, singing in uneven but collective unison. As a staff member, Hiroto later remarked, the moment resembled a large family gathering: densely populated, chaotic, yet temporarily unified by a common focus.

This monthly event is one of the only few activities in which all children are expected to participate—if they are present that day—at *Blossom*, the alternative education space for children experiencing *futōkō* (school non-attendance) in Japan, where I conducted my fieldwork. Situated within a large public playpark and operating with a tuition-free policy, *Blossom* is a space collaboratively shaped by children and staff through everyday routines and interactions. Moments like this birthday celebration illustrate how the space becomes lively, chaotic, relationally dense, and deeply meaningful, particularly for children who have experienced marginalization in school or at home.

In Japan, *futōkō* (school non-attendance), a term referring to children who are unable to or do not attend school for extended periods of time due to various factors, has been a

long-standing social concern (Shimizu 2011, 165; Minamide 2016, 77; Hou et al. 2023, 1). The number of elementary and junior high school students (ages six to fifteen) classified as *futōkō* has increased for twelve consecutive years, reaching over 350,000 in 2024 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2026).⁴ Among students in the early grades of elementary school (ages six to eight), this figure is seven times higher than a decade ago (NHK 2025). While recent studies indicate that rising rates of school non-attendance are evident across various countries (Fredriksson et al. 2023), in Japan, children categorized as *futōkō* have historically been increasing since the 1960s under labels such as “*gakkō kyōfushō*” (school phobia) and “*tōkō kyōhi*” (school refusal) (Fujita 2002, 95–96; Shimizu 2011, 173–74). Until the emergence of the free school movement in middle of the 1980s—led by parents of *futōkō* children advocating for a critical reassessment of the existing school system and a more accurate understanding of *futōkō*—school non-attendance was commonly attributed to children’s personal failings, such as laziness, and pathologized as a problem to be “cured” (Fujita 2002, 95–96; Sagawa 2010, 48; Shimizu 2011, 165–66). Today, the more neutral, umbrella term *futōkō*⁵ is generally employed to describe the phenomenon without implying individual blame (Fujita 2002, 96; Shimizu 2011, 166–67).

Furīsupēsu/furīsukūru (Japanese free spaces/Japanese free schools)⁶ have come to serve as an *ibasho* for such children who disconnect from conventional school. *Ibasho*, literally translated as “a place to be” in English, is a Japanese concept that emerged within *futōkō* context and describes a space of comfort and acceptance, but also a relational place

⁴ In Japan, the period of compulsory education comprises nine years, encompassing six years of elementary school and three years of junior high school.

⁵ Although there are persistent arguments that the term “*futōkō*” also carries a negative connotation and is too ambiguous, making it a subject of ongoing debate, no widely accepted alternative has emerged to date. For this reason, this thesis also employs the term “*futōkō*” (Hijikata 2017; Hōjō 2019).

⁶ As Minamide notes, *furīsukūru* (Japanese free school) lacks a clear definition, and even when the activities are largely similar, the terminology often differs by organization with alternatives such as *furīsupēsu* (free space) or *ibasho* being used (2016, 78, 86). In existing research and common usage, the term *furīsukūru* is generally used over *furīsupēsu*. In this thesis, I primarily adopt the term *furīsupēsu*—except when citing existing research on *furīsukūru* or when discussing such institutions in a general sense—because the fieldwork site identifies itself as such and to highlight its emphasis on liberation from the conventional framework of “school.”

where recognition and affirmation of one's existence cultivate resilience and confidence, creating conditions for imagining futures (Tsutsumi 2002; Bamba and Haight 2007; Ishimoto 2010; Sagawa 2010; Tanaka 2021; Saka 2023). While the scope of *furīsupēsu/furīsukūru* is remarkably broad (Minamide 2016), they are generally understood as spaces that developed through Japan's free school movement led by parental efforts to create places of learning and socializing for the rapid increase in children experiencing *futōkō* in the mid-1980s, influenced by international free school initiatives⁷ such as Summerhill School in England (Yoshii 1999, 86–87; Minamide 2016, 77–78). The *furīsupēsu* referred to in this thesis is situated within this wider landscape. These spaces distinguish themselves from mainstream schooling by emphasizing child-centered approaches, acceptance, and sympathy, dismantling hierarchical teacher-student relationships, and promoting learning beyond the constraints of subject-based curricula (Fujita 2002; Morita 2008; Sagawa 2010; Minoura 2012; Inoue 2013; Minamide 2016; Saka 2023). Against the backdrop of rising *futōkō* rates, the role and significance of *furīsupēsu/furīsukūru* have grown steadily. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has gradually acknowledged their importance through legal reforms—for example, by making it possible to count an attendance at *furīsupēsu/furīsukūru* as equal to that of conventional school (Shimizu 2011).⁸

Recognizing the importance of *furīsupēsu/furīsukūru*, Japanese scholars have conducted a wide range of studies, both quantitative and qualitative. Among these are numerous works employing anthropological and ethnographic approaches to illuminate

⁷ According to Yoshii and Minamide, international free school movements engage in experimental efforts to create alternatives to existing school systems, and they tend to adopt—at least to some degree—a liberal-education orientation (Yoshii 1999, 86–87; Minamide 2016, 77–78). As representative cases, Yoshii points to Summerhill School in England, the Steiner schools in Germany and the Clonlara School in the United States (1999, 86).

⁸ Because *furīsupēsu/furīsukūru* still fall outside the category of Article 1 schools (officially recognized institutions under Japan's School Education Act), children who stop “attending” conventional schools and instead go to a *furīsupēsu/furīsukūru* remain officially enrolled in their Article 1 school (Maeda 2022, 62–63; Morita 2022, 57–58). Accordingly, attendance at a *furīsupēsu/furīsukūru* can be counted as “school attendance” only if the principal of the child's “enrolling school” recognizes it appropriate (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology n.d.a).

everyday life within such spaces. For instance, Morita (2008) carried out three months of participant observation and interviews with staff at a small-scale *furisukūru*, offering a detailed account of its daily practices. Similarly, Saka (2023) examines a *furisukūru* through an anthropological lens, focusing on care and temporality. Saka’s study foregrounds staff approaches to children, highlighting a form of care that prioritizes living in the present—“today”—rather than immediately orienting toward the future. These prior studies have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of *furisupēsu/furisukūru*, complicating institutional perspectives and shedding light on staff practices. However, they remain largely framed from organizational or staff viewpoints. Despite the fact that *furisupēsu/furisukūru* exist primarily for children, research has rarely centered on how these spaces are perceived by children themselves or on their lived experiences and voices. Moreover, while several studies on *futōkō* have been published in English, research on *furisupēsu/furisukūru*, particularly ethnography, remains extremely limited in English-language scholarship. Consequently, *furisupēsu/furisukūru* as forms of alternative education, and their role as an *ibasho* are largely unrecognized outside Japan.

Moreover, this thesis is written by a researcher who is a former *futōkō*. I spent most of my compulsory schooling years not attending and remaining shut inside my house, primarily due to factors such as apathy and video game addiction, alongside other complex causes. However, my experience attending a *furisukūru* (different from *Blossom*) for about one year during my third year of junior high school became a major turning point that profoundly influenced my sense of well-being and my motivation toward academic learning. It eventually led to my decision to continue my studies, and ultimately, to this moment of writing this thesis. While I acknowledge that this positionality inevitably informs the lens through which I engage with *futōkō*, *furisukūru*, and *furisupēsu*, research on these fields conducted by researchers who themselves experienced *futōkō* and such alternative education

remains extremely rare, and virtually nonexistent in English. This thesis, therefore, offers a distinctive perspective to such scholarship.

Building on these contexts, this thesis investigates how a *furīsupēsu* becomes a meaningful *ibasho* for children who have disconnected from conventional school, and how these children themselves make sense of life within the space. The first research question, therefore, asks: “How does a *furīsupēsu* foster a sense of *ibasho* for children who have disconnected from conventional schooling?” Rather than treating *ibasho* as a given, it investigates how it is actively produced and maintained through spatial arrangements, everyday routines, and relational practices that resist hierarchical norms and standardized expectations. The second research question then turns to the children’s perspectives: “What are the lived experiences, perspectives, and voices of children attending the *furīsupēsu*?” Here, the focus is on their own accounts—how they interpret their experiences of conventional schooling and everyday life at the *furīsupēsu*, and how they navigate relationships. In doing so, this thesis seeks to shed light on the subtle, everyday decisions, challenges, and growth experienced by both staff and children within the *furīsupēsu*, thereby challenging school-centered assumptions that these spaces are merely places where children “just play instead of study.”

This thesis first reviews key bodies of literature that shape its analytical lens, drawing together anthropological approaches to education, childhood, place-making, and the otherwise, critical pedagogies, an ethic of care, debates surrounding *futōkō* as well as alternative education in Japan, and the concept of *ibasho*. This theoretical grounding provides the basis for understanding both the institutional context of *furīsupēsu* and the everyday dynamics observed in the field. Building on this conceptual foundation, this thesis then presents the research questions and clarifies how they address gaps in existing scholarship, particularly the limited attention to children’s own perspectives. It then outlines the

methodological approach used to answer these questions, the ethnographic fieldwork at *Blossom*, the interview and observational strategies employed, and the ethical and reflexive considerations involved in working with minors. With this groundwork in place, it turns to the broader educational landscape in Japan and the specific history and organization of *Blossom*. This contextual chapter provides the institutional and social background necessary for understanding the empirical findings. A subsequent chapter then explains how the field materials were interpreted, detailing the analytic process through which themes and patterns were developed.

The heart of this thesis lies in the two empirical chapters. The first examines how *ibasho* emerges and is sustained at *Blossom* through everyday practices, relationships, and spatial arrangements. It elucidates both macro and micro practices that shape the dynamics of the space. The second empirical chapter centers on the children's own narratives, tracing their experiences of disconnection from conventional school, their interpretations of *Blossom*, and the personal transformations they describe over time. The final chapter draws these threads together by synthesizing the main findings, reflecting on the theoretical and empirical contributions of this thesis, and outlining directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. What is Education? Anthropological, Critical, and Care Perspectives

Education is often taken for granted as a universal good, yet its meaning and purpose are deeply contested. Asking “what is education?” is not neutral: dominant definitions—often equating education with formal schooling—shape policy and practice while marginalizing other forms of learning. Through this section, I argue that education cannot be reduced to standardized instruction or instrumental outcomes; it is a plural, contested process embedded in social relations. Drawing on anthropological, critical, and care perspectives, it explores how education extends beyond formal schooling into diverse social contexts, how it can

operate as both a liberating force and a mechanism of control, and how relational practices such as dialogue and care challenge hierarchical models. By situating these debates within broader historical and theoretical frameworks, the discussion provides a foundation for rethinking education as a plural, contested, and deeply relational phenomenon.

2.1.1. Anthropology of Education

One way to approach this plurality is through the anthropology of education, which interrogates narrow, school-centered definitions by situating learning within diverse social and cultural contexts. According to Anderson-Levitt, the anthropology of education broadly views education as “all deliberate and systematic interventions in learning, whether the intervention takes place in schools, at home, or in other settings” (2011, 14). While it is often associated with schooling, its scope is far broader, including formal, informal, and non-formal contexts (Levinson and Pollock 2011, 4; Bartlett and Triana 2020, 3–4). This subsection places the anthropology of education within its historical context, explores its central debates, and highlights alternative education as a key concept.

The anthropology of education emerged as a distinct subfield in the 1950s, primarily in the United States, with early research focused on enculturation, how children acquire cultural norms (González 2010, 249–51; Levinson and Pollock 2011, 1; Anderson-Levitt 2012, 1). González emphasizes that the field began by asking “how and why do human beings *educate* the way they do?” and these early studies were shaped by the “culture and personality” paradigm, which stressed cultural continuity and discontinuity within formal and informal processes (González 2010, 249, 251). By the 1970s, the field launched a journal, *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*. Comparable schools of thought emerged globally: pedagogical anthropology in Germany, ethnography of education in the UK, and similar approaches in Latin America, Asia, and other parts of Europe (Anderson-Levitt 2012, 1). Thereby, approaches to the anthropology of education have developed in diverse contexts,

shaped by different intellectual histories and priorities. Such multiplicity underscores the field's openness and complexity, as Wulf observes, "educational anthropology constitutes an important field in education today, one that is characterised by pluralism and diversity" (2002, 2).

At the same time, the anthropology of education has long been rooted in social critiques of schools and schooling (González 2010, 249). One central concern is the distinction between education and schooling. While many assume that education is synonymous with schooling, anthropologists of education emphasize that "schooling is just a subset of the education that occurs throughout everyday life" (Levinson and Pollock 2011, 4). Therefore, many anthropologists explored how nondominant communities organize educational practices within homes and local settings, and how these approaches differ from or come into conflict with those of formal schooling (González 2010, 249). This expansive view has also shaped the discipline's critical stance toward schooling. Scholars have questioned the efficacy and presumed superiority of schools as primary sites of learning while engaging in efforts to improve or transform them. At the same time, they seek to dismantle the theoretical and practical boundaries that separate schools from other sites and modalities of learning (Levinson and Pollock 2011, 4). These debates underscore the need to understand education not solely within the institutional framework of schooling, but as a socially and culturally embedded process that takes place across diverse contexts.

Another enduring discussion concerns whether education serves as a liberating force or as a mechanism of control. Levinson and Pollock note that policymakers may reform schooling "to prepare young people as docile, conforming workers for a global economy, or as 'citizens' for robust democratic participation" (2011, 6). This critical perspective is closely tied to the field's commitment to young people and the inequalities affecting their lives. Many use ethnography to advocate for improvements in children's well-being or to support

participants in critically examining their circumstances. While committed to social critique, their work remains grounded in rigorous, empirical analysis, aiming to understand educational forces and everyday conditions and, at times, propose remedies for harmful experiences (Levinson and Pollock 2011, 7).

This tension between education as liberation or control serves as an important framework for analyzing alternative education. These settings often prioritize autonomy and relationality, contrasting sharply with standardized, exam-driven systems. Starnawski and Gawlicz's research (2021) on increasing "free" or "democratic" schools in Poland illustrates how parents and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) establish learning communities at the margins of the state system. These schools are built on "the belief in the child's autonomy, competence and natural development of self-responsibility and responsibility for others," which "rejects any form of directed or coerced learning" and achieves intrinsic motivation "without grades or reward-punishment systems" (Starnawski and Gawlicz 2021, 1183). Across these schools, daily life often reflects flexibility, with arrangements ranging from no formal lessons to structured plans, and collective decision-making is widely valued, but its implementation varies, with some schools requiring everyone's participation and others adopting more flexible principles (Starnawski and Gawlicz 2021, 1183). However, while these initiatives are framed as inclusive, they often cater to families with economic capacity, reproducing inequalities they aim to dismantle (Starnawski and Gawlicz 2021, 1174, 1185). They note, "fees and potential economic barriers are another difficult issue," and access is "certainly not equal," underscoring the persistent tension between ideals of inclusivity and the realities of socioeconomic inequality (Starnawski and Gawlicz 2021, 1185).

Ethnographic studies of alternative education in the United States highlight the importance of relational environments for marginalized youths. Loutzenheiser (2002)

documents how young women who felt alienated in large, impersonal high schools found connectedness in smaller, alternative programs. These schools fostered “visibility, care, and community,” countering the anonymity and rigid hierarchies of mainstream institutions (Loutzenheiser 2002, 454–55). Students valued being “seen” as individuals rather than as “numbers,” and teachers’ efforts to build personal relationships—learning students’ names, engaging in dialogue, and acknowledging life experiences—were central to re-engaging learners (Loutzenheiser 2002, 448–57). One student remarked, “Everybody knows each other. You can tell... Why does everyone know my name?” (Loutzenheiser 2002, 454). Similarly, Hantzopoulos (2015) describes a small public high school in New York City committed to democratic education for students who had previously found schooling unresponsive to their needs. The school sought to create “a space for students to ‘find their voices’ and ‘speak knowledgeably and thoughtfully on issues that concern their school, their world’” (Hantzopoulos 2015, 351). Students underscored the value of strong intergenerational bonds and informal spaces, such as a shared student-teacher lounge that facilitated dialogue and mutual respect: “There is no other high school in the city that has that [...] there’s no real interaction between students and teachers” (Hantzopoulos 2015, 352). Yet, Hantzopoulos complicates this narrative by noting that while students praised the school’s democratic ethos, they also encountered “possibilities, contradictions, and struggles” in enacting such ideals, and some alumni later described the environment as “overly utopic and removed from real world contexts” (2015, 346, 358). Overall, these studies demonstrate central themes—autonomy, care, and recognition—in non-conventional educational spaces, while exposing the paradoxes inherent in efforts to create alternative educational spaces.

Building on these debates, I draw on Wulf’s claim that a central task of anthropologists of education is “to analyse, organise, re-evaluate and produce knowledge issued by the sciences of education, and to *deconstruct* educational concepts from an

anthropological perspective” (2002, 4). Addressing the global asymmetries in knowledge production—where scholarship beyond the English-speaking world remains underrepresented (Anderson-Levitt 2011, 14)—this thesis situates *furīsupēsu* in Japan within a broader movement to reimagine education beyond standardized schooling. By doing so, it challenges dominant educational assumptions and contributes to the pluralization of educational discourse from an anthropological perspective.

2.1.2. Critical Pedagogies

While anthropological perspectives highlight the plurality of education and its embeddedness in social contexts, critical pedagogies provide frameworks for interrogating the power relations operating within schools for envisioning education as a site of liberation. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, and bell hooks, an American feminist theorist and educator, are widely recognized as foundational thinkers in critical pedagogies. Both conceptualize education not as a neutral process but as a deeply political and relational practice that either reproduces domination or fosters liberation. Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005) presents a radical critique of conventional schooling, articulating a dialogical, praxis-oriented pedagogy that aims at humanizing teacher-student relations. hooks, in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) and *Teaching Community* (2003), builds on Freire’s framework while extending it through feminist, anticolonial, and multicultural perspectives. Together, their works offer not only critiques of the hierarchies embedded in schooling but also imagine education as a transformative practice grounded in dialogue, equality, and love.

Central to Freire’s vision of education as the practice of freedom is the concept of *conscientização* (critical consciousness), which refers to the process by which learners perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and act to transform oppressive realities (Freire 2005, 35). This awakening is inseparable from “praxis,” which he defines as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire 2005, 79). For Freire,

authentic education cannot be reduced to verbalism or passive reception; it must engage learners as subjects capable of interpreting and transforming their reality.

His critique of what he terms the “banking” concept of education remains central to critical pedagogies (Freire 2005). In banking education, knowledge is treated as a fixed possession held by teachers and deposited into students, who are positioned as passive recipients rather than active subjects. Freire writes, “the teacher teaches and the students are taught” and “the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing” (2005, 73). Such arrangements do more than structure classroom interaction. They establish rigid hierarchies between those who are authorized to know and those who are expected to receive, reinforcing broader relations of domination. Within this model, learning becomes a process of adaptation and compliance rather than inquiry, foreclosing the possibility of critical engagement with reality. Students are discouraged from questioning the conditions that shape their lives, and education is reduced to an instrument of the reproduction of inequality rather than the practice of freedom (Freire 2005, 72–76).

As a counterpoint, Freire proposes a “problem-posing” education grounded in dialogue and “acts of cognition, not transferrals of information” (2005, 79–81). This approach reconceptualizes the classroom as a place of co-investigation, where teachers and learners reflect together on concrete situations drawn from lived experience (Freire 2005, 79–83). Education, in this view, is not the passive absorption of facts but a shared process of inquiry into the world. Dialogue here is not simply a method but an ethical relationship premised on humility, love, trust, and faith in others as knowing subjects (Freire 2005, 89–92). Such dialogical engagement dismantles hierarchical notions of authority and repositions knowledge as something collectively constructed rather than unilaterally transmitted. In this model, reflection and action are inseparable, forming what Freire calls “praxis” that enables transformative engagement with reality (Freire 2005, 51–52, 65–66).

Crucially, Freire attends to the internal dimensions of oppression, emphasizing that domination is not only external but often becomes internalized. He argues that dehumanizing conditions often lead students to absorb negative judgments about themselves, producing what he calls “self-depreciation.” As he writes, the oppressed hear so often that they are “good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness” (Freire 2005, 63). In other words, when learners are repeatedly positioned as deficient or incapable, they may come to accept these assessments as natural or deserved, accepting conventional criteria of knowledge as absolute. Freire contends that breaking this cycle requires more than individual effort—it demands dialogical education that validates learners’ lived knowledge and situates it as a resource for collective transformation. Through dialogue, learners begin to recognize their capacity to interpret and act upon the world, challenging the myth of their own incompetence (Freire 2005, 63–65). As Freire insists, “only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation do they begin to believe in themselves” (2005, 65). In this sense, education becomes a political and ethical project aimed at restoring dignity and fostering empowerment, rather than perpetuating inequality.

Although Freire’s work is grounded in struggles against class oppression, his critique of normalization and forced adaptation has been widely taken up in discussions of schooling. Normalization, which demands that learners align with prevailing standards, frames difference as deficiency, while compliance is positioned as the ultimate goal of education. From this perspective, educational responses that prioritize reintegration or correction without sustained dialogue can be understood as attempts to adjust individuals to existing systems rather than to question the conditions that marginalize them (Freire 2005, 74–75). This concern is particularly relevant in contexts where children had been—and perhaps still

are—framed as problems to be fixed rather than as persons whose experiences reveal contradictions within educational institutions. Recognizing these dynamics shifts the focus from remediation to transformation, affirming educational spaces where learners are engaged as capable subjects whose knowledge and experiences are valued.

hooks writes as both a beneficiary and a critic of Freire, acknowledging his influence while expanding his framework through feminist, anticolonial, and institutional contexts of U.S. schooling (1994, 6–7, 10). She critiques the authoritarian norms and objectivist ideals that dominate academic paradigms, arguing that they detach knowledge from care and perpetuate alienation and hierarchy. Her critique is not merely theoretical; it targets the structural and affective dimensions of schooling that render classrooms sites of domination rather than mutual growth. Against this, hooks advances “engaged pedagogy,” a progressive, holistic practice that requires the teacher’s self-actualization as a precondition for empowering students: “Progressive, holistic education, ‘engaged pedagogy’ [...] emphasizes well-being,” and teachers must be “wholly present in mind, body, and spirit” (hooks 1994, 15–17, 20–21). This insistence on the integration of mind-body-spirit resists institutional logics that reduce individuals to disembodied intellect and undermine the relational and ethical ground of learning (hooks 1994, 16–17). By reframing pedagogy as an embodied, reciprocal process, hooks extends Freire’s notion.

Moreover, hooks insists that pleasure and excitement are integral to meaningful learning, dimensions largely overlooked by both Freire and feminist pedagogy. For her, the classroom should be “an exciting place, never boring,” and this excitement “is generated through collective effort” rather than individual performance (hooks 1994, 7–8). Pleasure is not a distraction but a pedagogical resource that counters apathy, rekindles curiosity, and fosters active participation (hooks 1994, 10–11). Joy, in this sense, does not dilute seriousness; it supports it, creating conditions where autonomy and responsibility emerge

relationally rather than through coercive norms. hooks frames excitement as a radical intervention against the “atmosphere of seriousness” presumed essential to learning, often strengthening hierarchical and exclusionary classroom dynamics (1994, 7–8). By insisting that intellectual rigor and emotional vitality are mutually reinforcing, hooks reconsiders the binary between discipline and delight, positioning pleasure as a catalyst for critical engagement.

Another hallmark is hooks’ insistence on community and mutual participation. Classrooms must be organized as democratic spaces where “everyone’s presence is acknowledged,” not as a superficial gesture but through practices that make recognition tangible and prevent invisibility while respecting voluntariness (hooks 1994, 8–9, 40–41). Community is not a sentimental ideal; it is a structural intervention that redistributes responsibility for classroom dynamics, challenging the traditional assumption that authority rests solely with the teacher. hooks emphasizes voice, vulnerability, and reciprocity: teachers should not demand student confessions while remaining opaque themselves. Instead, they model risk-taking by linking lived experience to academic inquiry, demonstrating that academic knowledge is relational and situated rather than abstract and detached (hooks 1994, 20–21). This stance reframes authority as dialogic and relational rather than hierarchical, dismantling the fiction of the “all-knowing” teacher and challenging the notion that intellectual work can or should be detached from the emotional and ethical dimensions of life.

Finally, hooks foregrounds “love” as a central to her engaged pedagogy, defining it as a practice composed of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust (hooks 2003, 131–34). Love, for hooks, is not peripheral, but it is a transformative force that redefines what rigor means. Against authoritarian pedagogy, which “takes the ‘fun out of study’ and makes it repressive and oppressive” (hooks 2003, 43–44), she insists on creating

an atmosphere where “teaching, learning, and studying are serious acts, but also ones that generate happiness” (hooks 2003, 44). This approach deconstructs what hooks calls the “culture of fear,” where students are taught to fear failure, distrust their own capacities, and compete for dominance rather than pursue knowledge. When educators refuse to acknowledge these emotional realities, students either cling defensively to the status quo or retreat into apathy and depression (hooks 2003, 130–33). Teaching with love, by contrast, affirms emotional well-being as integral to intellectual engagement. It requires reading the emotional climate of the classroom and responding with love—not as sentiment, but as pedagogy—so that students can confront inner conflicts and reclaim trust in their ability to learn (hooks 2003, 132–34).

Collectively, Freire (2005) and hooks (1994, 2003) converge on the claim that education is never neutral: it either reproduces domination or becomes the practice of freedom. Rejecting authoritarian models grounded in coercion, normalization, and hierarchical control, they illuminate how schooling can be reimaged through trust-based, dialogical practices that humanize teacher-student relationships, offering a way of thinking about *furīsupēsu* as relational spaces that respond to experiences of exclusion and devaluation in conventional schooling. Meanwhile, while Freire and hooks offer powerful critiques of conventional schooling, their frameworks often presuppose education as a form of schooling and classroom-based. This raises questions about their applicability to educational spaces such as *furīsupēsu*, which operate outside conventional structures. This thesis draws on the insights provided above to examine how *furīsupēsu* enact relational and dialogical practices that challenge normalization and cultivate spaces where recognition and autonomy are lived rather than prescribed.

2.1.3. An Ethic of Care and Moral Education

Building on this discussion, Nel Noddings (1988, 2005, 2010, 2013) further offers viewpoints of an ethic of care and the institutional conditions that nourishes it. As an influential American feminist philosopher of education, Noddings grounded her ethic of care in her early work as a teacher and school administrator and in her later academic career at Stanford (Rosenberg 2016). At the heart of her theory lies the ontological claim that a relation is fundamental to human life: “human beings are born from and into relation” (Noddings 2010, 390). This premise shifts ethical focus from abstract principles to lived encounters, where the carer’s attentiveness is characterized by engrossment (nonselective, total presence) and motivational displacement (directing energy toward the cared-for’s expressed needs) (Noddings 1988, 219–20). Such responsiveness is not merely behavioral but affective, colored by sympathy, consisting of an attitude of solicitude and a willingness to be moved. Crucially, the caring relation is not one-sided; it is completed only when the cared-for recognizes the caring. This act of recognition constitutes a form of reciprocity that sustains carers and prevents exhaustion of sympathy, a common phenomenon in caring professions (Noddings 2010, 391–92). She further distinguishes between caring for—a reciprocal, person-to-person engagement—and caring about, which denotes concern at a distance. While institutions cannot themselves “care-for,” they bear responsibility for creating conditions under which authentic caring relations can flourish (Noddings 2010, 392–93).

Noddings’ ethic of care is needs-based, requiring attentiveness first to expressed needs (voiced in words or manifested in behavior) before defaulting to inferred needs (formulated by carers or imposed by policy and curriculum) (2005, 147–49). This receptivity is future-oriented: even when carers cannot meet the expressed need by the cared-for, they respond in ways that preserve and uphold the relation over time. As Noddings puts it, “its work begins where an ethic of justice often ends” (2005, 147)—meaning that care does not

stop at making a fair or justified decision; it continues by considering how the person will feel and how the relationship can endure beyond the immediate act. Overreliance on inferred needs, especially under standardization, risks subordinating meaning to compliance, depressing intrinsic motivation, creativity, and initiative, and cultivating a “just tell me what to do” stance that alienates learners from learning itself (Noddings 2005, 152–53). By contrast, her ethic of care emphasizes dialogic engagement in assessing needs: attending to the student’s question “Why do we gotta study this stuff?” as a genuine expression of the need for meaning, and engaging in aims-talk that connects tasks to lived purposes and larger educational aims (Noddings 2005, 154–55).

This tension between expressed and inferred needs becomes even more pronounced when students face urgent social and biological challenges. Where social and biological needs—safety, health, housing—are acute, these needs appropriately eclipse academic objectives; in such cases, energy is consumed by endurance and worry rather than study. Balancing expressed and inferred needs is a matter of critical dialogue and careful judgment: sometimes educators should revise or discard trivial or poorly connected curricular demands; at other times, they should affirm defensible aims while demonstrating that the person matters more than the task (Noddings 2005, 151–56).

Furthermore, Noddings highlights moral education as a central aim of schooling, arguing that it should be pursued through caring relationships rather than abstract rule-based instruction (1988, 216). In her opinion, moral education is a relational process embedded in everyday school life, in which teachers and students co-construct an ethical ideal—an evolving image of oneself as a good and caring person—through persistent, caring interactions rather than rule enforcement. To achieve this, Noddings identifies four interrelated components: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation (1988, 222–24). Among these, modeling is how teachers make care visible: they not only display intellectual

virtues but also “desirable ways of interacting with people” in everyday encounters (Noddings 1988, 222–23). She adds that the caring teacher refers rules to their ground in caring and may decline merely punitive enforcement; in her cheating vignette, the teacher begins by a worthy motive (“I know you want to do well” or “I know you want to help your friend”) and then explains why cheating cannot be allowed, prioritizing the student over the subject (Noddings 2013, 178–79). Modeling also governs responses to harm: in cases such as bullying, the teacher must be on both sides, caring for the victim’s safety and the perpetrator’s moral development (Noddings 2010, 394–95). Overall, she is explicit that this ethic must be lived rather than merely talked: the teacher establishes a relation with the student and engages in cooperative practice with them (Noddings 2013, 179).

Dialogue is open and mutual: teachers and students explore justification, consequences, and personal histories together, and conclusions are not prefixed; importantly, this is not relativism—if a teacher judges an act to be wrong, they do not debate its wrongness but can still inquire with the student into the reasons (Noddings 1988, 223). It affirms the student whose perspective matters, even when disagreement persists, and invites both parties into a shared search for understanding rather than unilateral correction. Dialogue is inseparable from care because it enacts attentiveness: listening not only to words but to the lived experience behind them. It also cultivates ethical judgment, helping learners distinguish rules that encode moral principles from those that are mere conventions (Noddings 2010, 395). In this sense, dialogue is formative—it grows the capacity to hear and understand others’ expressed needs. Yet such dialogue presupposes structural conditions: time, continuity, and trust. Fragmented schedules and performance-driven routines corrode the possibility of genuine dialogue, reducing it to scripted compliance. This is why Noddings advocates extended teacher-student contact, enabling teachers to act as “counselors and advisors” rather than just transmitters of knowledge (2013, 186–87).

For Noddings, care has to be practiced, not merely professed; students need structured opportunities to do care so that receptivity and responsibility become habitual rather than rhetorical (1988, 223; 2013, 187). Practice is essential because caring is not a set of abstract principles but a relational competence that grows through doing. Within classrooms, this means organizing cooperation so that the purpose is mutual support in completing a common task; when “group work” is turned into team competition, the caring motive is corrupted, and students learn rivalry rather than solidarity (Noddings 2010, 395). Beyond the classroom, she proposes apprenticeships in caring: structured opportunities to care for humans and animals directly and to care indirectly through maintaining environments (kitchen, grounds, custodial work, offices), with adult volunteers as relational models. These activities have equal status with academic tasks and are not reducible to paid work or remediation; the aim is not vocational training but the cultivation of competence in caring as an ethical ideal. She also calls for deliberate mixing across comfort zones—so the mathematically adept student grapples with mechanical tasks, and the math-anxious student cares for younger children—flattening status hierarchies and fostering recognition of diverse abilities. This alternation between success and struggle induces dialectical growth: students learn humility and respect for others’ efforts, moving beyond pride in their own strengths and fear of unfamiliar tasks toward a deeper appreciation of human interdependence (Noddings 2013, 187–90).

According to Noddings, confirmation is “the loveliest of human functions”: the carer attributes the best possible motive consonant with reality, revealing to the cared-for an attainable image of a better self (1988, 223–24; 2013, 193–96). It is neither fantasy nor generic “high expectations”; rather, it constitutes an interpretive, relational act that depends on sustained knowledge of the person—continuity, dialogue, and attentiveness to aspirations, fears, and context—so that what is affirmed is both accurate and reachable (Noddings 1988, 224; 2013, 196). She underscores that confirmation is not a strategy of praise or product

control; the carer must see and receive the other's actual conduct and feelings, then choose the most generous and accurate motive to reflect back, thereby guarding the ethical ideal from distortion while inviting growth (Noddings 2013, 193–96). Confirmation also applies to carers: they require the cared-for's responsiveness—questions, effort, cooperation—to continue caring, and they need institutional acknowledgment to uphold their ethical ideals without cynicism; when reception is absent, the one caring risks empathic exhaustion and burnout (Noddings 2010, 391–92; 2013, 196–97).

Her ethic of care cannot rely on individual goodwill alone; it requires structural affordances. Noddings criticizes the prevailing school model as hierarchical, standardized, and objectifying, a system driven by relentless assessment and hierarchical sorting that detaches learners from meaningful human connections and undermines an ethic of care (1988, 221; 2013, 196, 200). Instead, she recommends smaller organizational units and extended contact between specific adults and children—teachers staying with the same group for multiple years by mutual consent—so that trust, knowledge of persons, and confirmation can take root (Noddings 1988, 224–26). She favors mixed-age participation and cooperative organization over sharp age segregation, arguing that junior high segmentation undermines the development of the ethical ideal “just as social consciousness is developing” (Noddings 2013, 190). Time and curriculum should allow open dialogue on matters at “the heart of human existence,” and include experiences offered freely with no demand for specific achievement or systematic evaluation, so learners can occasionally encounter subject matter as a dialogical partner rather than a mere performance target (Noddings 2013, 183–87, 192). In the same vein, rules should function as guidelines, not triggers for penalties; punitive grading and detentions corrode subjective responsibility and relations (Noddings 2013, 200–201).

Noddings' ethic of care adds another perspective to rethink education not as the transmission of knowledge but as the cultivation of caring relationships, ethical ideals, and the holistic development of persons. Grounded in the claim that human life is constituted through relation, her framework shifts ethical attention from abstract principles to lived encounters where attentiveness to need becomes central. Care, in this view, is enacted through modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation, and she insists, "a teacher cannot 'talk' this ethic; she must live it" (Noddings 2013, 179). While institutions cannot themselves "care-for," they shape the conditions—time, continuity, trust—under which caring relations can grow. This framework directs my analysis of the *furīsupēsu* as a site, asking how care is enacted in staff-child interactions.

2.2. Anthropology of Childhood

The critical rethinking of education as a plural, relational process resonates with an interrelated transformation in the anthropology of childhood. Both challenge universalist and hierarchical approaches that position learners, whether students or children, as mere passive recipients, opening space for more plural and relational approaches. For much of its history, anthropology treated childhood as peripheral, focusing on adults and viewing children as "appendages to adult society" rather than as subjects of interest (Hirschfeld 2002, 613–14). Hardman's 1970s call for the anthropology of children marked an early challenge to this neglect, but systematic attention only gained momentum in the late 20th century (James 2007, 263). Levine attributes this shift to ethnographic studies that documented children's lives in specific contexts, countering universalist developmental models rooted in psychology (2007, 247–48). Lancy further argues that anthropology's comparative lens exposed the ethnocentric ideal of the child as an innocent "cherub," dismantling biased assumptions (2022, 1–3). The emergence of childhood studies and the UN Convention on the Rights of the

Child further institutionalized this turn, aligning with anthropology's commitment to emic perspectives and multivocality (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007, 241–42).

One of the key shifts in the anthropology of childhood is to move beyond adult-centric socialization models and recognize children as competent members of their own society, rather than treating them chiefly as “adults-in-the-making” (Hirschfeld 2002, 613). Hirschfeld argues that anthropology has “put the cart before the horse” by treating “children as vessels into which adult culture is poured” (2002, 612). In fact, children not only acquire adult cultures but are “adept at creating their own cultures” with their own standards, power relations, and cultural forms (Hirschfeld 2002, 611–12, 615). In Hirschfeld's account, children's cultures can be partially independent of adult oversight, with games, songs, and status practices circulating “from child to child” and reproducing peer hierarchies and solidarities on their own terms (2002, 615, 619). This perspective rejects the view of children as “incompetent creatures” or mere appendages to adult society and insists that the goal of children is not to become successful adults but to be successful children within the sphere they co-constitute (Hirschfeld 2002, 613–16).

Another central anthropological contribution in childhood studies is revealing informal, embedded learning that unfolds in families and communities. Paradise and Rogoff (2009) conceptualize this form of learning by “observing and pitching in.” They argue that this is not a simplistic or “natural” counterpart to schooling, but rather a culturally organized system in which children take initiative and engage actively in meaningful activities. Observation here is purposeful and anticipatory, oriented toward contribution as opposed to passive looking. Learners often structure their own learning, remain engaged, and progress with minimal direct feedback because participation itself provides motivation and guidance (Paradise and Rogoff 2009, 104, 124–25; Gaskins and Paradise 2011, 85–97). This contrasts with school-based learning, which typically removes knowledge from immediate,

consequential contexts and relies on extrinsic motivators to maintain engagement (Paradise and Rogoff 2009, 105, 124–25). Unlike a formal apprenticeship, which prescribes roles and situations, learning through observing and pitching in occurs within flexible, collective arrangements where responsibilities circulate, and roles may interchange (Paradise and Rogoff 2009, 104–05). Ethnographic studies show this type of learning occurs in diverse settings—even those centered on formal education—whenever children participate and stay involved in ongoing everyday practices (Paradise and Rogoff 2009, 103; Gaskins and Paradise 2011, 90). Because “observing and pitching in” is embedded in ordinary routines and rarely explicitly marked as instruction, it often remains invisible to researchers and undervalued by school-centric views (Paradise and Rogoff 2009, 102–03; Gaskins and Paradise 2011, 87).

This emphasis on learning through participation and observation also extends beyond adult-child interactions to peer dynamics, where children learn from one another in ways that are equally embedded and collaborative. In mixed-age groups, siblings and peers contribute to cognitive, social, and emotional development through everyday work and play: older children practice leadership, caregiving, and instructing in culturally appropriate ways, while younger children develop cooperation, persuasion, and group participation, yielding bidirectional learning rather than fixed expert-novice roles (Maynard and Tovote 2011, 182–83, 189–91). Maynard and Tovote point out that although unstructured, adult-free interactions have declined in many Western contexts, such encounters remain foundational for perspective-taking, empathy, communication, and teamwork, skills strongly valued in adult life (2011, 199). Complementing these interactional dynamics, Kyratzis (2004) demonstrates how children co-produce peer groups and peer practices through language, using peer talk to elaborate games and rituals of inclusion, manage conflict, calibrate status, and talk identities into being—often independently of adult oversight. The implication for

ethnography is methodological: to capture children's learning as it unfolds among peers, ethnographers must analyze their everyday conversational practices and peer routines with minimal adult presence, rather than rely on adult accounts or adult-child relations alone (Kyratzis 2004, 626–27).

Lancy and Grove (2011) further extend this perspective by synthesizing cross-cultural findings on adult involvement in children's learning. They show that, contrary to schooling models, formal teaching is rare in many communities; adults typically intervene only when independent learning is deemed insufficient, according to local understandings of readiness and contribution (Lancy and Grove 2011, 145). In this view, the community itself becomes the “classroom,” and the “curriculum” is an open book displayed in everyday life (Lancy and Grove 2011, 164–65). Rather than structured lessons, learning emerges from proactive participation in meaningful activities, with adults stepping in selectively to redirect when necessary. This reinforces an image of learning as distributed, experiential, and situated, where knowledge is embedded in shared practices rather than abstracted into decontextualized instruction. It suggests that learning is negotiated and co-constructed across contexts, with guidance shifting from peer interaction to occasional adult input, challenging models that treat children as passive learners.

While foregrounding children's voices is crucial in childhood studies, James (2007) cautions that “giving voice” is neither straightforward nor politically neutral. She identifies three key challenges: authenticity (quotes are always mediated by adult interpretation), categorical universalism (the rhetorical “voices of children” risk erasing diversity), and the nature of participation (research “with” children may still reproduce power asymmetries) (James 2007, 262–69). James warns against “ethnographic ventriloquism” and “text positivism,” urging scholars to treat children's words as situated standpoints anchored in specific contexts and relations, rather than unimpeachable truths (2007, 263, 269). This calls

for critical awareness of the interpretive work embedded in ethnographic representation, particularly given that children are considered minors.

Building on these debates in the anthropology of childhood, this thesis views the children who were marginalized in conventional schools as competent participants who teach each other and proactively co-create an *ibasho* within the *furīsupēsu*. James reminds us, child-centered studies can uncover what matters to children: “the children tell us about their everyday experiences of the social world and reveal [...] the hidden hurts and humiliations that many children experience and which adults often dismiss as unimportant or regard simply as playground rough-and-tumble” (2007, 264). Although these perspectives are inevitably mediated through the researcher’s (adult) interpretation, they underscore the value of child-centered ethnography in uncovering their lived realities that dominant narratives often overlook.

2.3. *Futōkō* and Alternative Education in Japan

Building on these theoretical perspectives, I now turn to the specific context that anchors this thesis: *furīsupēsu* in Japan. These alternative education spaces emerged as grassroots responses to *futōkō* (school non-attendance), exposing the limits of standardized schooling and the normative assumption that education equals formal school attendance. Examining *futōkō* and related governmental policy shifts provides essential background for understanding why *furīsupēsu* exist, what social and ethical questions they address, and how relational, dialogical, and caring approaches are enacted outside conventional classrooms. Situating *furīsupēsu* within this historical and policy landscape allows us to understand them not as isolated innovations but as part of a broader struggle to reimagine education beyond coercion and normalization—an effort that resonates with the critical, anthropological, and care-based frameworks outlined above.

Futōkō has persisted as a major educational concern in Japan for decades (Shimizu 2011, 165; Minamide 2016, 77; Hou et al. 2023, 1). MEXT defines *futōkō* as children “who are absent from school, or unable to attend even if they wish to, for more than thirty days in an academic year due to psychological, emotional, physical, or social factors or circumstances (excluding those absent due to illness, economic reasons, or to avoid infection with the novel coronavirus)” (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, n.d.b). The number of elementary and junior high school students (ages six to fifteen) classified as *futōkō* has increased for twelve consecutive years, reaching 353,970 in 2024. The same trend is evident in high schools, where the figure increased from 53,156 in 2014 to 67,782 in 2024 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2026). Particularly striking is the surge among early elementary grades (ages six to eight), which is now seven times higher than a decade ago (NHK 2025). According to MEXT’s survey (2026), the cause of *futōkō* during elementary and junior high school varies, such as apathy, disrupted daily routines, anxiety and depression, academic difficulties, and problems in peer, teacher, or family relationships, often occurring in combination. Furthermore, 2024 marked the highest in reported school-related cases of bullying (including those classified as serious incidents), violent behavior, and suicides among children (Children and Families Agency 2025; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2026). Such figures highlight the significance of *futōkō* as a multidimensional phenomenon requiring continued scholarly and policy attention.

While *futōkō* today is generally understood as a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by psychological, social, and structural factors, earlier interpretations were far more polarized. Shimizu notes that historically, interpretations oscillated between two broad ideological poles: unfavorable views that attribute *futōkō* to laziness, parental indulgence, or pathology, and affirmative views that framed it as resistance to schooling or a critique of systemic flaws

(2011, 165–66). Until the late 1980s, the dominant discourse was pathological—terms like “*gakkō kyōfushō*” (school phobia) and “*tōkō kyōhi*” (school refusal) circulated widely, and responses included hospitalization and “corrective” facilities (Fujita 2002, 95–96). These medicalized terms reflected a broader tendency to locate the problem in individual deficits (or the family) rather than structural conditions, normalizing punitive and remedial responses. The stigma of children who cannot or do not attend school through these labels is reinforced by what Yoshii and Fujita call “*gakkō shinkō*” (“faith in schooling”)—a deeply rooted “belief” that attending school is natural and necessary to live, while *futōkō* signals failure (Yoshii 1999, 98; Fujita 2002, 97). Such norms produce secondary harms: shame, guilt, and anxiety among children experiencing *futōkō*, often more damaging than absence itself (Yoshii 1999, 98).

A significant discursive break took shape from the late 1980s into the 1990s. Parent activism—especially, *Tōkō Kyōhi o Kangaeru Kai* (The Association for Considering School Refusal) and their own newspaper—publicly challenged psychiatric pathologization and pressed the government for a neutrality of terms (Shimizu 2011, 181). By the 1990s, the more neutral, umbrella term *futōkō*, replaced earlier labels. This linguistic shift reflected a deeper conceptual change: the causes of *futōkō* began to be framed not as individual or familial failings but as rooted in the school system and broader social structures (Fujita 2002, 96–97; Sagawa 2010, 48; Shimizu 2011, 166–67). This reorientation resonated with a broader social context: the escalation of school-related problems like bullying, classroom disruption, “school collapse,” intensifying examination competition, and critiques of standardized schooling (Fujita 2002, 93–94).

These changes were echoed in the government discourse, following MEXT’s first adoption of the neutral term *futōkō* in its official documents in 1990 (Shimizu 2011, 179). Moreover, in 1992, MEXT issued the report “On the Issue of School Refusal (*Futōkō*):

Ibasho in the Heart of Children.” This report reframed *futōkō* as something that could happen to any child, emphasized that schools should provide psychological security rather than coercion, and introduced the possibility of counting days spent at private facilities such as *furīsupēsu* and *furīshukūru* as official attendance (Ishimoto 2009, 94; Shimizu 2011, 178–79; Tanaka 2021, 5). It also popularized the concept of *ibasho* in educational discourse and opened a path toward recognizing learning beyond the classroom (Tanaka 2021, 5). Another major turn came with the 2016 *Act on Securing Educational Opportunities Equivalent to Ordinary Education at the Stage of Compulsory Education*, which required national and local governments to secure learning opportunities equivalent to compulsory education for children unable to attend regular classes (Morita 2022, 57–59; Saka 2023, 20). While this act strengthened the legitimacy of alternative learning spaces, Morita points out its ambivalence: due to political opposition, *furīsupēsu* and *furīshukūru* remain outside the status of Article 1 schools—officially recognized institutions under Japan’s School Education Act—and thus lack routine public funding and regulatory parity, which the act originally aimed for (2022, 57–58). In recent years, the government has additionally advanced policies to support students facing attendance difficulties. These include establishing in-school education support centers for students who can come to school but have difficulty entering their own classroom, and creating “Diversified Learning Schools (so-called special schools for *futōkō*)” for students who can leave home but cannot attend their enrolled school (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2025a). However, these measures have not led to a decrease in the number of *futōkō*.

Meanwhile, *furīsupēsu/furīshukūru* emerged in the 1980s as grassroots initiatives responding to the rise of *futōkō*. Since then, their number has increased, and according to a survey conducted by MEXT in 2015, 474 *furīsupēsu/furīshukūru* were identified (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2015). While influenced by Euro-

American free school models such as Summerhill School in England, which were founded on progressive educational philosophies, Japanese free schools emerged primarily as practical solutions for the sharp increase in children disconnected from mainstream schooling (Yoshii 1999, 86–87; Minamide 2016, 77–78). This genealogy matters: it ties the Japanese free school field deeply to the politics of *futōkō* and to critiques of standardized education, rather than to a singular educational doctrine (Yoshii 1999, 86–87; Minamide 2016, 77–78).

At the same time, as Minamide (2016) notes, there is no fixed definition of *furīsupēsū/furīsupēsū*; some prefer terms such as *furīsupēsū* and *ibasho* to avoid the connotation of “schooling.” Practices range widely—from learning-support centers with structured timetables to open, child-led spaces where “doing nothing” is recognized as legitimate rest and recovery (Fujita 2002; Inoue 2013; Minamide 2016). This heterogeneity cautions against essentialist definitions and emphasizes the need for localized, institution-specific analysis. Yet, across diverse sites, recurring approaches include flexible scheduling, voluntary participation, and a non-hierarchical relational style (first names/nicknames, casual speech), all meant to counter standardization and the teacher-student asymmetry normalized in conventional schools (Sagawa 2010; Minoura 2012). Spatial arrangements also avoid “school-like” formations and control: no bell, informal atmosphere, and activities ranging from gaming and crafting to excursions and, when requested, academic learning (Sagawa 2010; Morita 2022). Their general goal is not to replicate school content but to slow down and reduce pressure so children can regain confidence and intrinsic motivation.

Most *furīsupēsū/furīsupēsū* are operated by Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs) or voluntary associations (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2015). Thus, limited subsidies and tuition fees generate access barriers, often filtering participation by family resources (Inoue 2013, 21; Morita 2022, 53). Moreover, recognition of activities at *furīsupēsū/furīsupēsū* did not automatically yield funding parity; thus, they

remain semi-recognized yet fiscally precarious. While collaboration with local governments has grown, some *furīsupēsu/furīsukūru* report pressures to align with administrative targets, potentially narrowing the original pluralism of aims and practices (Takei 2016; Morita 2022, 63–65). While alignment can open support channels, it also risks re-instrumentalizing alternative spaces within policy logics they initially sought to counter.

In short, the story of *futōkō* is not a linear march from stigma to acceptance. While terminology and policies have evolved—from school phobia to *futōkō*, from punitive responses to broader attendance recognition—normative expectations around schooling remain strong. The government’s measures have proven inadequate to curb the sharply rising number of *futōkō*, and financial barriers limit access to alternatives. *Furīsupēsu* constitute vital, diverse learning environments born from social activism and practical need, which began to be recognized but are not fully acknowledged.

Besides, English-language literature on *futōkō* and *furīsupēsu/furīsukūru* remains comparatively thin, and much of what exists privileges organizational or staff perspectives; children’s voices remain underrepresented. This thesis contributes by foregrounding children’s lived experiences inside a *furīsupēsu*, situating the ethnography within the historical and policy shifts outlined above. Furthermore, as the increasing number of “*futōkō*” seen in various countries (Fredriksson et al. 2023), creating an “*ibasho*” for such children is not only a matter for Japan. While the concept of *ibasho* is central in *furīsupēsu*, a dedicated discussion follows in the following section.

2.4. *Ibasho* and Place-Making

Here, I will extend the discussion of *futōkō* and alternative education in Japan by foregrounding the Japanese concept of *ibasho*. It is literally translated as “a place to be,” and used to refer to a place of comfort and acceptance as well as a relational environment in which being recognized and affirmed fosters resilience and self-confidence, enabling

individuals to envision future possibilities (Tsutsumi 2002; Bamba and Haight 2007; Ishimoto 2010; Sagawa 2010; Tanaka 2021; Saka 2023). I will situate the concept within anthropological debates on place-making, particularly “spatializing culture” by Setha Low (2017). The focus here is conceptual: how *ibasho* has been theorized as spatial, relational, and temporal; how it is produced and experienced through everyday practice; and why ethnographic frameworks of space/place, embodiment, and affect are especially beneficial for analyzing children’s lived experiences in the context of *ibasho* at a *furīsupēsu*. While “belonging” is conceptually similar, this thesis centers on *ibasho* as a culturally embedded term that offers a more contextually grounded lens for analyzing the Japanese setting.

Since *Tokyo Shure*, widely described as a pioneering *furīsukūru*, began using *ibasho* in its contemporary sense in the mid-1980s, the concept has proliferated beyond *furīsupēsu/furīsukūru* and *futōkō* discourse to become a general term. Ishimoto underscores the importance of *ibasho* by citing a family-court ruling that judged the absence of *ibasho*, or threats to it, could affect matters of life and death (2009, 93–95). To illustrate the extent of the concept, Tanaka identified 4,245 academic papers and articles on *ibasho* (2021, 3), and scholarship now spans diverse fields—from expatriate spouses (Herleman et al. 2008) to cyberspace (Suzuki et al. 2022). Thus, the term’s meaning has expanded beyond physical sites to encompass psychological and social dimensions, yet its definition remains under-specified, as scholars stress that defining *ibasho* continues to pose a significant challenge (Ishimoto 2009, 93; Saka 2023, 21). Nevertheless, recent *ibasho* scholarship tends to frame the concept from three broad dimensions: spatiality, temporality, and relationality (Ishimoto 2009; Tanaka 2021; Saka 2023).

Although the term *ibasho* includes the notion of *basho* (place), it cannot be understood simply as providing an empty room or facility (Ishimoto 2009, 93). Instead, its spatial dimension refers to a sense of comfort, security, and ease rather than a fixed physical

location (Tanaka 2021, 7). As Sagawa notes in the context of *furīasukūru*, these environments deliberately avoid classroom-like order and favor flexible, multi-purpose arrangements because “a school-like atmosphere is disliked” and “students cannot relax in a place that feels like school” (2010, 54–55). MEXT’s 1992 initiative urging schools to become a “*kokoro no ibasho*” (a place of emotional comfort) further underscores that physical provision alone is insufficient without fostering emotional comfort (Ishimoto 2009, 94). Moreover, Suzuki et al. (2022) explore *ibasho* in cyberspace and find similar psychological effects, underlining that it is not confined to physical settings. Thus, *ibasho* is defined primarily by emotional and psychological qualities rather than structural form.

Temporality has been comparatively underexamined in *ibasho* research (Saka 2023), yet ethnography in *furīasukūru* casts the present as central. Saka frames “*ima, koko*” (now, here) as a counterweight to future-oriented pressures such as “If you don’t go to school, what about your future?” prioritizing the establishment of security and acceptance in the present from which future orientations can be reimagined (2023, 29). Contrasting conventional schools, Sagawa highlights the relaxed atmosphere of a *furīasukūru*, marked by de-structured timetables and individualized pacing that affirm everyday presence rather than channeling it toward future academic credentials (2010, 55). Tanaka cautions, however, that future perspectives still matter: *ibasho* confined to short-term refuge risks becoming a static holding environment. Reconceived instead as a platform for empowerment, it helps children recompose continuity, connecting present ease to possible futures without instrumentalizing the present (2021, 7–9). Establishing safety in the present provides the precondition for imagining futures that are not narrowly defined by academic achievement, where everyday routines nurture emerging directions instead of enforcing predetermined goals.

Perhaps the relational dimension is the most central aspect of *ibasho*. Across the literature, *ibasho* is described as inseparable from everyday interactions in which a person’s

existence is recognized and accepted, not judged or threatened (Tsutsumi 2002; Bamba and Haight 2007; Ishimoto 2010; Tanaka 2021; Saka 2023). Ota, who conducted a study on *ibasho* support for *hikikomori* (people experiencing social withdrawal), explains that *ibasho* functions as a highly inclusive relational place that affirms those who have been excluded and acknowledges their individuality and personalities (Ota 2021, 103, as cited in Saka 2023, 22). In the *futōkō* context, many children attending *furīsupēsu* became disconnected from school through troubled family, teacher-student, or peer relationships (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2026). Therefore, the importance of human relationships in which a child feels embraced is crucial in forming *ibasho* for these children (Tanaka 2021). Empirically, Sagawa demonstrates how recognition is enacted through a consciously de-hierarchized stance: staff seek to be on the same footing with children, open their hearts, and employ nicknames and casual speech to flatten asymmetries and seed trust (Sagawa 2010, 53–54).

Children's active contribution within *ibasho*—whether through proposing activities, expressing choices, or participating in collective decision-making—has an affirmative effect on their individuality and confidence. As Bamba and Haight emphasize, *ibasho* “cannot be ‘given’ or provided by others” because it emerges through reciprocal relationships and opportunities for children to exercise initiative and feel that their presence matters (2007, 406). Practices observed in *furīsupēsu*, such as child-led meetings or informal conversations where “what I want to do” is voiced and acted upon, exemplify this dynamic (Saka 2023). These contributions foster self-recognition and mutual acknowledgment, which research identifies as core conditions for *ibasho* (Tanaka 2021; Ishimoto 2009). Moreover, when children perceive that their ideas shape the shared environment, they experience a sense of role and efficacy—elements linked to restoring self-esteem and generating hope for the future (Ishimoto 2009, 98). Thus, *ibasho* is not merely a place of comfort and acceptance, but a

relational place where recognition and affirmation of one's existence cultivate resilience and confidence, creating conditions for imagining futures.

Anthropology's "spatial turn" reframed space and place as a meaningful, processual domain rather than a neutral container (Wieczorek 2019, 1–2), a perspective that aligns closely with *ibasho*'s social and experiential texture. Setha Low's framework of "spatializing culture" (2017) is particularly insightful for *ibasho*, integrating multiple lenses—social production, social construction, embodied space, language/discourse, and emotion/affect—to analyze how spaces and places are made and felt from micro to macro contexts. I set aside translocality here to focus on co-present and site-bound practices.

Beginning with social production, this perspective situates place and space within the historical and political-economic context, asking how broader social forces shape the formation of environments. It highlights the material and ideological processes through which spaces are created while refusing to reduce space to architecture alone (Low 2017, 7, 10, 34–67). In turn, the social construction approach views space and place as socially produced meanings rather than fixed physical entities. It emphasizes how interactions, memories, and everyday practices transform environments into places imbued with significance, often contested and negotiated among different actors. This perspective elucidates that meanings are not static but shift with changing social relations, local narratives, and interpretations, making space a dynamic and relational phenomenon rather than a neutral backdrop (Low 2017, 7, 68–93). Embodied space provides a framework that brings together body, space, and social life, emphasizing the body as both a physical presence and a lived, experiential site. It connects micro-level analyses of bodily practices and place-making with macro-level social, economic, and political forces, showing how movement, sensory engagement, and trajectories produce and contest spatial arrangements (Low 2017, 6–7, 94–118). As Low explains, embodied space "underscores the importance of the body as

a physical and biological entity, as lived experience and as a center of agency – a location for speaking and acting on the world” (2017, 94). Viewing space as always embodied draws attention to the dynamic interplay between material environments and the bodily practices, positioning the body as an active actor in the production of space.

Extending this, language and discourse provide another standpoint for understanding how spatial meanings are produced through communication. This approach examines how everyday talk, narratives, and interpretive practices shape perceptions of space, while also considering naming and other representational acts that signal characters and locate places socially. By focusing on the discursive processes that organize experience, this perspective demonstrates that space is continually constructed and transformed through language (Low 2017, 8, 119–44). Lastly, emotion and affect frames show how feelings shape the experience of space and place. This perspective emphasizes that emotions are socially constructed and central to meaning-making, while affect refers to pre-conscious intensities and atmospheres that circulate among people and influence how places feel. Concepts such as affective atmosphere and affective climate extend analysis beyond individual emotion to the collective and material dimensions of space, revealing how environments generate moods and mediate social power (Low 2017, 8, 145–73).

In sum, Low’s spatializing culture (2017) frames place-making as an ongoing, co-creative process rather than a static backdrop, highlighting its dynamic, relational character continually produced and contested through social, sensory, and emotional engagements. In this sense, it reinforces the view that *ibasho* emerges not as a given but as the outcome of various practices that sustain, negotiate, or unsettle its meaning at multiple levels. Thereby, ethnography is well-suited to capture these nuanced dynamics at a *furīsupēsu*: how bodies arrange themselves, how gestures of inclusion spread, how material and sensory cues generate affective atmospheres of welcome. In addition, conceptualizing *ibasho* at a

furīsupēsu as place-making in practice foregrounds its processual nature—a co-produced place where spatial arrangements, relational styles, embodied routines, and affective climates converge to uphold children’s dignity, autonomy, and horizons of possibility. This framing not only illuminates *ibasho* as a culturally embedded response to *futōkō* but also situates it within broader anthropological debates on space and place. It prepares the ground for the empirical chapters by shifting the analytic question from whether the *furīsupēsu* “has” an *ibasho* to how an *ibasho* is actively made, maintained, and contested through everyday practices by children, youths, and staff, uncovering the tensions and negotiations that shape its durability and transformative potential.

2.5. The Otherwise

Whereas the earlier critical perspectives on education focused on transforming it from within, this section turns to a concept that asks how anthropology engages with possibilities for living that unsettle dominant social arrangements. The concept of the otherwise offers a conceptual tool for exploring these possibilities, transcending critique toward spaces where alternative ways of being take shape.

Anthropology has long asked what it means to live, think, and act differently across the world, but recent debates have shifted from representing otherness to exploring how alternative ways of existence can be realized (Kehr 2020, 27–28). Kehr argues that this transformation reflects a growing commitment to demonstrating that “another world is possible,” moving beyond critique toward actively imagining and creating spaces for change (2020, 28). This perspective forms the basis of what she refers to as “anthropologies of the otherwise” (Kehr 2020, 28).

Linguistically, “otherwise” means “differently, in another way, in different circumstances” (Kehr 2020, 28). In contemporary anthropological discourse, it increasingly functions as a noun, signaling an alternative or another way of being. Drawing on Povinelli’s

definition of the otherwise (Povinelli 2014), Kehr describes the otherwise as a disturbance of social, political, or economic orders that perpetuate hegemonic conditions of life. These arrangements are marked by inequalities and exclusions; the otherwise signals a crack in these structures, opening the potential for change (2020, 28). Crucially, Kehr emphasizes that the otherwise is not a pure utopia outside power but a fragile space of struggle between the existent and its alternative, crafted through relations, labor, and time (2020, 40).

Kehr situates this concept within broader debates on alterity and the ontological turn, while highlighting its distinct orientation toward social and political alternatives rather than solely critique (2020, 28). This orientation gains urgency amid contemporary crises such as global inequalities, xenophobia, and ecological crisis, where anthropology's political critique extends beyond exposing domination to exploring the heuristic and transformative potential of alternatives (Kehr 2020, 28; 42). Ethnographically, this means attending to small, often invisible sites where dominant arrangements begin to crack—spaces that may appear marginal yet carry political potential—and engaging them not only descriptively but contributively, documenting and participating in fragile endeavors that help actualize different ways of living (Kehr 2020, 29, 31–32, 41). Thus, doing ethnography in spaces of the otherwise becomes a political engagement aimed at understanding and altering powerful arrangements (Kehr 2020, 42). Kehr emphasizes this engaged stance rooted in feminist ethics, encouraging anthropologists to move beyond neutrality. Rather than remaining distant, she advocates for allowing oneself to be affected by the otherwise and writing from a position of relational involvement (2020, 40).

In this thesis, the concept of the otherwise offers an orientation to interpret *furīsupēsu* not merely as substitutes for schooling but as spaces where different ways of living and learning are imagined and actualized. Like the health initiative Kehr (2020) describes, *furīsupēsu* do not abolish the dominant system but imagine and enact alternative forms of

care and learning, unsettling hierarchical norms and standardized rhythms. They also emerged at moments when taken-for-granted commons, such as compulsory schooling, are under strain, and they remain partial, precarious, and contested. In this sense, *furīsupēsu* can be viewed as the otherwise that arose from the crisis of compulsory education in Japan—a crisis signaled by the relentlessly increasing number of *futōkō*. Imagining an otherwise together entails neither simple solutions nor pure hope but ongoing negotiation between utopian aspiration and everyday labor (Kehr 2020, 40). By tracing how children and staff co-create these spaces within structural constraints, this thesis seeks to make perceptible the minor realities that signal cracks in hegemonic orders and to shed light on how possibilities for living and learning otherwise are crafted in practice.

2.6. Theoretical Implications for this Thesis

In sum, this literature review reframes “education” as a plural, contested, and relational practice unfolding within diverse social contexts rather than a standardized program. It challenges the assumption that learning is confined to classrooms or measured by benchmarks, showing how dominant systems normalize academic-oriented goals and hierarchies, and cast children who deviate as deficient, thereby masking structural shortcomings that produce disconnection. Within this landscape, *furīsupēsu* appeared as alternative sites of learning that interrupt these inequalities.

The anthropology of education, critical pedagogies, and an ethic of care unsettle the equation of education with formal schooling, emphasizing learning as embedded in everyday relations and critiquing coercive, normalizing practices. Freire’s critique of “banking” education and hooks’ engaged pedagogy reposition recognition, dialogue, and joy as foundational to humanizing education, not optional extras; Noddings’ ethic of care and moral education further shifts focus from abstract principles and future-oriented achievement toward committed attentiveness to expressed needs in the present and ethical ideal.

Collectively, these perspectives urge us not to reintegrate children who have disconnected from conventional schooling back into dominant institutional norms and instead emphasize the creation of environments where dignity, trust, and intrinsic motivation can be restored by authority that is enacted dialogically rather than hierarchically.

The anthropology of childhood further positions children as competent participants who actively organize their own practices and circulate knowledge through everyday collaboration in mixed-age groups, rather than viewing children as passive adults-in-waiting. This perspective is vital for understanding *ibasho* at *furīsupēsu* as emergent rather than bestowed—produced through not only adults’ but also children’s participation, peer relations, and everyday practices. Scholarship on *ibasho* reinforces this relational view, framing it as a process of place-making grounded in recognition, emotional security, and temporal openness rather than mere physical infrastructure. Low’s “spatializing culture” offers a complementary lens: *ibasho* is embodied, affective, and socially constructed through everyday interactions, and therefore ethnographically graspable through attention to bodily arrangements, micro-gestures of inclusion, and the atmospheres that sustain or unsettle comfort.

In Japan’s *futōkō* context, *furīsupēsu* emerged as the “otherwise,” responding to the crisis of the Japanese education system, represented by the rapidly increasing number of *futōkō*. *Futōkō* is now generally understood not as individual failure but as a multidimensional phenomenon produced at the intersection of standardized schooling, assessment regimes, and strained peer/teacher/family relations. The shift from pathologizing labels to the more neutral *futōkō* reframed the phenomenon that could be experienced by “any child,” opening conceptual and policy space for learning beyond classrooms while leaving powerful normative expectations of schooling and material inequalities in access to alternatives. As grassroots and plural responses, *furīsupēsu* refuse to equate education with school attendance or academic achievement by prioritizing safety in the present, voluntary

participation, and relational recognition, without treating reintegration into conventional schooling as the only meaningful goal. At the same time, this literature review points out that the need for ethnographic attention to how children narrate their lived experiences at *furīsupēsu*, the viewpoint largely overlooked by previous scholarship. Considered together, these perspectives provide the conceptual ground for the empirical chapters to answer the research questions that will be explained in the following chapter.

3. Research Questions

This thesis asks: How do *furīsupēsu* foster a sense of *ibasho* for children who have disconnected from the conventional school system? And in what ways do these children experience and interpret life within the space? These questions are not only descriptive but respond to a critical gap in existing scholarship: while research on *furīsikūru* and *furīsupēsu* has revealed institutional and adult perspectives, children’s voices remain largely absent. This absence is striking given that these spaces are designed for children, yet their viewpoints are often rendered invisible—a contradiction that echoes broader critiques in the anthropology of childhood regarding the marginalization of children’s voices in academic discourse.

The first research question is “How does a *furīsupēsu* foster a sense of *ibasho* for children who have disconnected from conventional schooling?” It draws on the literature that frames *ibasho* as more than a physical site. Rather than assuming *ibasho* as a given, this question examines how it is actively created and maintained through everyday routines, interactions, and relational approaches that counter hierarchical norms and standardization.

The second question follows: “What are the lived experiences, perspectives, and voices of children attending the *furīsupēsu*?” It centers children’s narratives to elucidate how they contrast their experiences in conventional schooling and at the *furīsupēsu*, how they negotiate relationships, and in what manner they make sense of their everyday lives. At the same time, as James (2007) cautions, “giving voice” is never neutral; it requires reflexivity

about the interpretive work embedded in ethnographic representation. This question, therefore, requires sensitivity and reflexivity to capture children's perspectives, ensuring they are not overshadowed by adult assumptions and interpreting their accounts in relation to the everyday contexts in which they are formed.

To address these questions, the first empirical chapter primarily focuses on how the *furīsupēsu* fosters a sense of *ibasho*, while the second mainly examines children's lived experiences and interpretations within the space. This structure enables each chapter to explore one question in depth while highlighting their interconnections in the conclusion. Based on the long-term ethnographic fieldwork, this thesis seeks to offer a more nuanced understanding of everyday choices, struggles, and moments of growth experienced by both staff and children at the *furīsupēsu*, which complicates common misconceptions of activities in these places as "just playing instead of studying." Therefore, this thesis contributes not only to scholarship on alternative education but also to wider anthropological debates in education, childhood, place-making, and the otherwise.

4. Methodological Considerations

This research adopts an ethnographic approach to explore how *ibasho* is created and sustained by participants at *Blossom*, and how children experience *ibasho* within the *furīsupēsu*. Ethnography is particularly suited to this research because it emphasizes immersion in their everyday life, enabling me to capture nuanced social interactions, meanings, and, more importantly, children's voices and experiences that cannot be fully understood through quantitative methods. Ethnography's strength lies in weaving together three strands of information: detailed observation, insider perspectives, and the researcher's own interpretive stance (Lancy 2022, 4). This combination is essential for grasping *ibasho* as a fluid and co-created place rather than a static institutional arrangement. Moreover, ethnography's capacity to "interrogate the obvious" and "illuminate the unknown" makes it

especially relevant for studying a place that resists conventional schooling norms (Fassin 2013, 642).

The research design combines participant observation and semi-structured interviews to reveal both everyday practices and participants' perspectives. Volunteering at *Blossom* allowed me to engage directly in daily activities, positioning myself within the community rather than observing from the margins. This involvement fostered trust and opened space for informal exchanges, offering a nuanced understanding of both organizational routines and the social relationships among staff and children.

The fieldwork spanned approximately three months, from 7 July 2025 to 25 September 2025, during which I visited the space three times a week and participated not only in daily activities but also in a two-day camp trip. This extended duration was intentional, as it allowed time for building relationships, particularly with children and youths who might initially be hesitant to share their experiences and thoughts. This methodological approach reflects a commitment to relational and interpretive depth, aiming to understand not only what happens at *Blossom* but also how children experience and co-create the space.

4.1. Participant Observation

Participant observation is the primary method employed during fieldwork. Typically, I arrived at *Blossom* at its opening time of 10:30 a.m., had lunch with children and staff, and remained there until its closing at 6:00 p.m. At the invitation of the deputy director, I also often participated in Leaf, a learning support program operated by the same NPO on the same premises and occasionally attended by some of the children from *Blossom*. On those occasions, my day was divided: I spent the afternoon at *Blossom* from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., then moved to Leaf, where activities and reflections continued until 9:00 p.m. My engagement at the field site mirrored the dynamic and participatory rhythm of the children and staff, who determine daily activities in an open-ended manner. I joined a range of

activities mostly initiated by the children, including sports, plays, games, music, casual conversations, study, and occasionally assisting with event preparations.

Through participant observation, I mainly focused on two key dimensions. The first was the children's perspectives, focusing on how they think, act, and interact with peers and staff in a space where their autonomy is respected, what emotions they express, and what words they choose in those interactions. In addition, I explored how patterns varied by age, ensuring that the broad category of "children" was not treated as homogeneous. This involved observing whether younger and older children engage differently in activities, express autonomy in distinct ways, or form relationships along age lines. Secondly, institutional and staff perspectives were examined, focusing on how staff provide care for children with diverse and complex circumstances, create and maintain *ibasho*, and how they negotiate the balance between supporting children's autonomy and managing the space. This included observing micro-decisions—such as when to intervene in disturbances or the hidden negotiations when and how to engage with a child who is spending time alone—which reveal the ethical and relational labor embedded in everyday practice. Overall, I paid particular attention to subtle, nuanced aspects that interviews alone could not fully capture. More importantly, through these engagements, I sought to experience the space not only intellectually but bodily, moving, playing, and conversing alongside the children and staff, enabling my understanding to emerge through shared practices and lived experience.

Field notes were recorded daily, capturing descriptive details of interactions, spatial arrangements, and emotional atmospheres. These notes captured not only what occurred and what was said but also the emotion and tone in which it was expressed and the situational contexts—what had happened beforehand, where the interaction took place, and who was present at the time. Such contextualization was essential for interpreting meanings beyond the literal content of speech or action. Reflexive notes were also maintained to document my own

reactions, reflections, and positionality, noting how my presence as a researcher and prior experiences as a former *futōkō* shaped both the interactions and my interpretations. This dual approach allowed for a layered understanding of social life at *Blossom*.

4.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to participant observation, I conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with five children, two youths in their early twenties who continue to visit even after completing compulsory education, the NPO director, and three staff members, including the deputy director of *Blossom*. For each broad category of participants—children and youths attending *Blossom*, the NPO director, and staff members—I prepared approximately thirty to forty open-ended questions tailored to their roles. They served as a guiding structure, which I adapted through follow-up questions to obtain richer and more in-depth insights. I opted for semi-structured interviews because it keeps conversations within key themes while allowing the flexibility for participants, particularly children, to articulate their thoughts and experiences freely, in their own words and on their own terms. The interviews ranged in length from twenty-six minutes for the shortest to one hour and forty-one minutes for the longest. During the interviews, I intentionally refrained from taking notes in order to avoid creating a formal atmosphere that might induce tension or self-consciousness, especially among children. Instead, immediately after each interview, when alone, I wrote detailed memos capturing what had occurred, the participant's emotions, tone of voice, gestures, and words they emphasized and how. This approach aimed to minimize any perception that responses were being judged for correctness, preventing unnecessary speculation that could arise from visible note-taking during the conversation.

The children I interviewed were between fourteen and sixteen years old. I asked only those with whom trust had been carefully cultivated over an extended period of interaction in which they had already shared fragments of past experiences and present struggles beyond

the formal interview setting. Participation was entirely voluntary, and I approached these conversations with sensitivity to the ethical responsibility of not imposing on their comfort. For this reason, interviews were scheduled toward the end of the fieldwork, when familiarity and rapport had deepened enough to allow openness. The interviews unfolded in a casual tone, and I made a deliberate effort to privilege the children's narratives, minimizing interruptions except for back-channel feedback. This approach reflects my commitment to listening rather than directing, letting their stories emerge on their own terms. Interviews with children aimed to elicit their interpretations of experiences at *Blossom*, their sense of *ibasho*, and comparisons with conventional schooling.

In addition to children, I interviewed two youths in their early twenties who continue to regularly visit *Blossom* even after the compulsory education period, which I had not initially anticipated during the planning stage of the research. Their participation offered valuable perspectives, including reflections on their past experiences, insights into the continuity of *ibasho*, and their contributions to the place. Moreover, their presence highlighted a distinctive feature of *Blossom*: the absence of age restrictions, which sets it apart from other alternative educational institutions not only at the policy level but also in practice, as youths and adults often visit the place.

For the interviews with the NPO director and *Blossom* staff, my approach was not limited to posing general questions concerning overarching concepts such as organizational philosophy or care practices. Rather, I sought to explore the significance and recurring patterns of practices that are absent from *Blossom*'s official website and documents and become discernible only through prolonged participant observation. This strategy aimed to extract deeper insights into their underlying intentions and meanings.

4.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical responsibilities in this research were approached on three interconnected levels: institutional, professional, and personal. Special attention was given to working with children, balancing compliance with protocols and attentiveness to care, autonomy, and vulnerability in the field.

4.3.1. *Institutional/Professional-Level Ethics*

This thesis adheres to the ethical standards of the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna, particularly its ethics questionnaire (Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, n.d.), and follows the American Anthropological Association's Code of Ethics (American Anthropological Association, 2012), which emphasizes principles such as no harm, transparency, responsibility, and respect to research participants.

Participants were aged fourteen and above, in accordance with Austrian legal aspects regarding research involving minors. To inform children and their guardians of my presence as a researcher, I employed a written opt-out approach—distributing information forms to children and their guardians that explain the research purpose, data usage, and their right to refuse participation. In addition, I made a conscious effort, especially with the children, to remind them regularly during interactions that I was there for research purposes, thereby upholding transparency.

Written informed consent from children and their guardians was obtained for interviews, and consent was treated as an ongoing process rather than a one-time administrative step. Thus, participants and their guardians were also informed of their right to withdraw at any point, without consequences. I always sought their agreement for participation in the interview in advance and provided sufficient time, usually more than a couple of days, for them to consider whether they truly wished to participate. In cases where

participants found it difficult to communicate their decision to discontinue participation directly, I informed them that they could instead convey this to the staff.

The informed consent forms were designed to be accessible: Japanese characters that might be difficult for younger readers were supplemented with *furigana* (phonetic guides), and academic terminology was avoided to ensure clarity. Before commencing each interview, I reviewed the consent form together with the child to confirm their understanding and answer their questions if there were any. During interviews, particularly when addressing sensitive topics, I consciously reminded participants that they were under no obligation to answer questions they did not wish to, while continuously monitoring their facial expressions, voice tone, and body language. Furthermore, both before and after each interview, I carefully reconfirmed the participant's comfort and willingness to take part in the research.

At the field site, after the children had left, I engaged in reflective discussions with a staff member each day to review the day's events and share observations and feelings. These conversations included, for example, how to maintain appropriate boundaries when a child appeared particularly fond of me, or how to respond when I noticed signs of worsening relationships between certain children. Through these meetings, I aimed to align my actions with the ethical principles and approaches upheld by the staff at *Blossom*, while ensuring transparency regarding my activities at the field site.

4.3.2. Personal-Level Ethics

On the personal level, I draw from “the principle of care” outlined by Boellstorff et al. (2012) and the concept of “micro-ethics” developed by Spiel et al. (2020) to guide my ethical conduct in the field. Both frameworks reject the idea that ethics occur only during formal stages of research design or review.

Boellstorff et al. emphasize “No set of a priori rules of ethics can predict the range of situations to which ethnographers must be prepared to respond with tact, sensitivity, and caution” (2012, 129). Thus, the principle of care must be embedded in the researcher’s conduct, demanding vigilance and commitment, and extends beyond merely avoiding harm. In practice, this involves remaining attentive to opportunities to offer support or benefits within the field and fostering relationships grounded in trust and mutual respect, which leaves “a substantial positive residue of good feeling and the satisfaction of genuine human exchange” (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 130).

Spiel et al. take a similar view on ethics and advocate for “micro-ethics.” Rather than relying solely on prescriptive principles, micro-ethics centers on the nuances of everyday interactions between individuals (2020, 47) and acknowledges that ethical conduct emerges through situated judgements rather than fixed rules. Ethics is “produced through ‘doing ethics’” (Spiel et al. 2020, 48), meaning that it is enacted through the practical work of making context-sensitive decisions in the moment, rather than following general guidelines.

These ethical perspectives guided my everyday interactions. For instance, when a child mentioned a painful past experience in a setting where many people were present, I deliberately refrained from probing further. Even if that environment was considered a safe place for the child, asking questions and prioritizing my research objectives over their comfort would have been ethically problematic. Conversely, when children shared current concerns, such as high school entrance exams or future aspirations, I engaged in reciprocal dialogue, drawing on my own experiences as a former *futōkō* to offer insights that might support their decision-making and contribute to their well-being. In doing so, I aimed to foster relationships rooted in openness and respectfulness, leaving what Boellstorff et al. describe as “a substantial positive residue of good feeling” (2012, 130).

4.4. Reflexivity

Foremost, I acknowledge my positionality as a Japanese researcher and a former *futōkō* in this research. At the same time, although my *futōkō* experience might place me in a seemingly similar “position” to the children, I remained consistently mindful during our interactions to avoid conflating their experiences with my own, recognizing that the reasons and triggers into experiencing *futōkō* are diverse. To critically engage with these dynamics, I documented reflective notes that traced the development of relationships, moments of ethical ambiguity, and the implications of my dual position as both a former *futōkō* and an adult researcher.

At the very beginning of fieldwork, some children approached me out of curiosity, while I often spent time outside their circles writing fieldnotes alone. Even when I greeted them upon coming or leaving, my greetings were often left unanswered by the children. Over time, however, the children increasingly invited me to join various activities and initiated conversations, to the point where I could hardly find time to write notes at the field site. This shift indicated that the children had begun to accept and allow me to integrate into their circles. Some revealed their struggles to me and even requested me to stay as a staff member at *Blossom* after the fieldwork period. These developments, while enriching, occasionally blurred the boundaries between my roles as researcher and volunteer, necessitating repeated clarification of my research purpose to uphold ethical transparency.

Regarding my relationships with the staff, on the second day of my fieldwork, the deputy director casually informed me that my interactions with the children were being “evaluated.” However, by the middle of the fieldwork period, I was granted permission to participate in a two-day camp trip—an activity generally inaccessible to interns and newly appointed staff due to the trust relationships required for such participation. By the final day

of fieldwork, I had established a level of trust that culminated in an agreement to continue contact and ongoing concrete exchanges beyond the fieldwork period.

Nevertheless, this thesis entails certain challenges and limitations. One of its major objectives is to foreground the “voices” of children, aiming not to rely primarily on interviews but to capture what children expressed in their everyday lives. This approach aligns with James, who emphasizes that documenting conversations among children, rather than interviews between researchers (adults) and children, allows for the compilation of more authentic voices (2007, 268). In practice, however, opportunities to be alone with a child were scarce at *Blossom*, and as noted earlier, even when glimpses of past difficult experiences emerged, I refrained from asking further questions if others were present. While this decision prioritized the children’s well-being, it inevitably resulted in a limitation: the inability to fully capture their struggles in the context of everyday interaction.

Bluebond-Langner and Korbin highlight the importance of considering “selectivity of representation,” “polyphony of voices,” and “whose point is being made” in quoting children’s voices (2007, 243). These are particularly relevant to my research, which focuses on children who keep coming to the *furīsupēsu* during a defined timeframe, excluding those who discontinued participation or were present before or after. Given that the space is dynamic and continually reshaped by its participants, this temporal limitation influences the narratives constructed. Consequently, my methodology seeks not only to present children’s statements but to situate them within the specific social and temporal conditions that shaped their expressions, while acknowledging the absences and changes inherent in this setting.

5. Contexts: Japanese Education and *Furīsupēsu Blossom*

5.1. Systemic Features and Issues in Japanese Education

Before introducing the *furīsupēsu* where I conducted fieldwork, I will briefly explain the Japanese education system and two relevant issues within it that are relevant to this thesis:

credentialism and teachers' overwork. In Japan, compulsory education consists of six years of elementary school (ages six to twelve) and three years of junior high school (ages twelve to fifteen), totaling nine years. Although high school is not part of compulsory education, the high school advance rate (including correspondence high schools) reached 98.6% according to a survey by MEXT in 2025 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2025b). During the compulsory education stage, an automatic grade progression system is essentially in place. Although grade retention measures do exist within the educational system, as MEXT notes, such measures are rarely implemented (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, n.d.c). Consequently, even in cases of *futōkō*, students are typically advanced to the next grade. Furthermore, neither attendance nor academic performance at elementary or junior high school is a prerequisite for graduation (Maeda 2022, 62).

It is also important to note that compulsory education in Japan is not an obligation imposed on the child, but rather a legal duty assigned to the parents or guardian. Japanese law (Constitution Article 26; School Education Law Article 144) obliges parents to ensure their children's education and allows fines for noncompliance. However, enforcement is extremely rare—only two cases have occurred since 1959. Schools must report students who have been absent for seven consecutive days to local education boards, which then urge parents to secure attendance. However, imposing legal sanctions is practically unenforceable because school non-attendance is broadly interpreted as “authorized reasons” for absence; if a child expresses intention not to attend school for any reason, parents are exempt from liability (Maeda 2022, 69). In the following, I outline the two educational concerns in Japan that are relevant to this thesis.

Credentialism in Japan, often described as a *gakureki shakai* (credential society), refers to the pervasive role of educational qualifications in determining social status, career

prospects, and life trajectories (Kariya 2010, 88–89; Smith 2025, 227–28). Postwar reforms established an egalitarian foundation in compulsory schooling, yet the transition to high school and university entrenched hierarchical competition through entrance examinations, creating what Cave calls a “path dependent legacy” of early 20th-century credentialism (2023, 162–67). Admission to prestigious institutions became a powerful sorting mechanism, reinforcing meritocratic ideals while privileging those with resources (Kariya 2010, 88–91). Over time, this system evolved into a neoliberal framework, where credentials function not only as economic capital but as markers of self-optimization and moral responsibility, shaping individuals into entrepreneurial projects (Smith 2025, 227–30). Despite demographic shifts and labor market flexibilization reducing the predictive power of degrees, educational credentials remain central to Japan’s social sphere—operating as both a safeguard against precarity and a cultural norm that structures aspirations, inequality, and identity (Cave 2023, 170–73; Kariya 2010, 94–95). This credentialism is not separated from the pressure *futōkō* experience, often expressed in parents’ concerns such as “If you don’t go to school, what about your future?” (Saka, 2023). It also intersects with what Yoshii (1999) and Fujita (2002) call “*gakkō shinkō*,” an entrenched “belief” that attending school is natural and necessary for living.

Teachers in Japan endure some of the longest working hours worldwide, largely because their responsibilities extend far beyond classroom instruction. In addition to teaching in the classroom, they shoulder extensive administrative duties and supervise extracurricular club activities—commitments that frequently spill over into evenings, weekends, and even holidays (Arakawa 2025; Matsumoto et al. 2026, 2). An OECD survey conducted in 2024 revealed that while the average teacher in OECD countries works around 40 hours per week, Japanese elementary teachers average approximately 52.1 hours and junior high teachers about 55.1 hours per week (OECD 2025). Complementing these findings, a nationwide study

by Matsushita and Yamamura uncovered that nearly 60% of junior high school teachers work more than 11 hours daily, while vice-principals often exceed 13 hours, putting them at risk of high stress and severe health risks, including cardiovascular disease, mental health disorders, and even *karoshi* (death from overwork) (2022, 4–6).

This chronic overwork not only impacts teachers' well-being but also constrains their capacity to address *futōkō*. As Kihara (2025) reports, the insufficient teacher capacity for individualized support is a key factor in this trend. When teachers are overwhelmed by paperwork and extracurricular obligations, they have little time or mental resources to engage with students struggling with anxiety, bullying, or other underlying causes of *futōkō*. Consequently, systemic overwork among teachers indirectly perpetuates *futōkō*, creating a feedback loop where both students and teachers suffer from an overstretched educational system.

5.2. Field Site: Institutional and Historical Contexts

The fieldwork took place at a *furīsupēsu*, called *Furīsupēsu Blossom*, located within *Sky Park* in City A, Japan. City A enacted the Ordinance on the Rights of the Child in the early 2000s, following the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. This was one of Japan's earliest comprehensive ordinances concerning children's rights, and the founder of *Blossom* was involved in its formulation. Building on this ordinance, *Blossom* was established in the early 2000s as a collaborative initiative between the municipal government and the NPO, making it a distinctive example of *furīsupēsu*.

According to their website, the NPO began its activities in the early 1990s with the aim of creating an *ibasho* for children and youths who cannot find an *ibasho* anywhere else. Today, in addition to managing *Blossom*, it collaborates with City A on operation and maintenance for *Sky Park* and initiatives such as employment and independent living support for young people from households supported through public aid programs, as well as

managing community spaces open to anyone, not only children and youths, thus creating *ibasho* across generations and forms. The NPO's financial resources primarily come from municipal and government subsidies as well as donations from corporations and other entities. Furthermore, regarding the management and operation of *Sky Park*, where *Blossom* is located, the city commissions these responsibilities jointly to a public interest incorporated foundation and the NPO. Every five years, the city conducts a selection process; if selected, the NPO can maintain access to the park's buildings, including the building where *Blossom* is currently located and extensive grounds, and receive operational funding from the city. While this offers significant advantages for such an NPO, it also entails a degree of uncertainty, as the infrastructure is not permanently guaranteed.

Like other *furīsupēsu/furīsukūru*, *Blossom* was created in response to the growing number of *futōkō* who struggle to adapt to the conventional educational system and seek an *ibasho*. On their website, the NPO director describes *Blossom* as a place where “children who can no longer find an *ibasho* within the school due to various environments and circumstances come together to create the time, space, and companions (bonds) that allow them to face their true selves and gradually accept who they are.” Furthermore, it is noteworthy that their pamphlet emphasizes the active roles of children and youths in shaping the space, stating: “This is an *ibasho* freely designed and created by the children and youths who come here. Each individual who gathers here is a co-creator of this space.”

Blossom distinguishes itself from other *furīsupēsu* by being entirely tuition-free, with the sole exception of lunch (available for only a few hundred Yen per meal), which is prepared daily primarily by volunteers, with assistance from staff, youths, and children. *Blossom* adopts an open-door policy, welcoming individuals of all ages and backgrounds. While the absence of age restriction is not entirely unique, as some other *furīsupēsu* do have the same stance, it is notable that youths and adults beyond the compulsory education period

regularly visit the place. Although the number is small, typically just a few youths and adults each day, their ongoing participation, along with parents who occasionally visit, demonstrates the space's commitment to eliminating boundaries. Moreover, *Blossom* is situated within *Sky Park*, an expansive 10,000 m² public playpark, equipped with an all-weather sports area, water slide, craft space, vegetable gardens, multipurpose rooms, a music studio, and sports equipment. While *Sky Park* staff maintain the playpark and ensure safety without directing activities, this whole environment is free from restrictive rules, allowing children to act according to their own interests. For *furīsupēsu*, which are mostly operated by NPOs or voluntary associations, the integration of such an extraordinary play environment represents a defining feature of *Blossom*.

Blossom operates on weekdays from 10:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., with shortened hours on Tuesdays. Unlike conventional schools, which typically implement extended breaks lasting over a month, the *furīsupēsu* does not have such long-term holidays; for instance, the summer break is limited to one week in August. This continuity allows the place to be a constant and reliable space for children. Including staff primarily responsible for administrative tasks, approximately ten people work at *Blossom* each day. The staff composition is diverse: while some hold teaching or counseling qualifications, the team also includes individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, including those with personal experiences of *futōkō*. Unless assigned to specific duties or events, they move freely throughout the space and interact with children in an informal, flexible manner. In addition, while *Sky Park* staff are primarily tasked with managing the park, they frequently engage with children alongside *Blossom* staff when the children are outside the *Blossom* building.

To attend *Blossom*, registration is required. This registration takes place after an initial trial period, which allows the child to experience the space and determine whether they would like to continue coming. As of March 2025, there were approximately 150 registered

members. Among them, ninety were elementary and junior high school students (compulsory education stage), twenty-five were of high school age, and thirty-six were aged nineteen or older. The NPO director noted that *Blossom*'s age distribution changed significantly in parallel with the nationwide rise in *futōkō* among elementary school students following COVID-19 (Maeda, interview by author, 2025). Because the system enables children to come whenever they wish, it is difficult to specify the exact number of children who actually visit *Blossom* daily. However, during the fieldwork, my impression was that at least thirty children visited the space on any given day.

While attendance at *Blossom* can be counted as official school attendance and student commuting passes can be issued like conventional schooling, this is subject to the discretion of the principals of the schools the children are enrolled in. According to *Blossom*'s deputy director, however, he has never encountered a case where a principal refused such recognition. Reflecting on this, the deputy director remarked:

It seems that [treating attendance at *furīsupēsu* as equivalent to school attendance] has, in a sense, become the norm. [...] Essentially, they acknowledge us as a part of education. [...] They began interpreting it in that way. [...] In fact, there are many instances where the conversation turns into something like, “Could you take care of this child?” “That would probably be better for them.” [...] So, there are plenty of cases where children come here through introductions from principals (Takumi, interview by author, 2025).

This statement conveys a growing sense of recognition and respect for *furīsupēsu* from the perspective of public education.

5.3. Daily Practices and Activities

While *Sky Park* is quite large, *Blossom* is a relatively modest space with a rectangular shape. Inside, furniture is densely arranged and somewhat cluttered; in certain spots, one must turn sideways to pass by others. Immediately upon entering, there is a shoe rack and a corner for storing personal belongings. The area surrounding a large table features shelves on one side filled with manga and books from various time periods, as well as board games, while the

opposite shelf holds textbooks and reference materials—though these are typically obscured by a mobile whiteboard placed in front. At the heart of *Blossom*, a poster displaying children’s rights based on City A’s Ordinance on the Rights of the Child is affixed to the wall. This central zone also contains three small low tables, a television with video games, and musical instruments such as a piano, guitars, African percussion instruments, and South American string instruments. Nearby, there is a single PC with a monitor available for same-day reservation, which is usually fully booked. At the end of the room, there is a section that combines a low table with a typically unused *irori* (sunken hearth) and the adjacent kitchen and cooking space, where lunch for more than thirty people is prepared daily. Additionally, within this main space, there is a small meeting room—available for children’s use when not scheduled for appointments—and a staff office designated for administrative work. This office, located near the entrance, is never fully closed off; its door remains open, ensuring that it is not completely separated from the main space.

Overall, *Blossom* is equipped with a wide range of materials and resources that enable children to engage in almost any indoor activity they might wish to pursue—sewing, drawing, studying, reading, gaming, playing music, cooking, board games, computer use, and card games, among others. Within the space, children simultaneously engage in activities of their own choice and interest, creating an environment saturated with visual stimuli, sounds, and smells—a highly chaotic yet vibrant setting that constantly stimulates the senses. The following fieldnote captures a moment from *Blossom*’s everyday life:

While Asahi was playing the piano intensely, next to him, Junichi and Yūki were competing on an old *Winning Eleven* game on PS2. At another table, Masashi and Oto were playing *Super Smash Bros* on the Nintendo Switch. Further away, adults and youths were preparing lunch, while nearby others were battling in a card game. At the edge of the room, four children of different ages—junior high school and elementary school—were gathered around with Switches, occasionally shouting at in-game events. A chaotic, noisy space, yet somehow harmonious (Fieldnotes, September 11, 2025).

Shū, who has been attending *Blossom* since childhood and says he has spent nearly half his life there, recalls his first day vividly. Reflecting on his initial impression of the space, he remarked, “This place was something else. It was kind of cluttered and chaotic. [...] I came here instead of going to school, but I was like, ‘Am I even okay here?’ [laughs]” (Shū, interview by author, 2025).

As stated in their pamphlet, “the defining feature here is a ‘program you decide yourself’.” Without a fixed curriculum, children are free to choose how they spend their day—deciding not only which activities to join, but also when to arrive and leave. Another distinctive aspect of *Blossom* is the “join-in-if-you-want” approach: when a child wants to try something, they call out for others to join, and often this leads to large group activities involving twenty or thirty participants. In addition, there are pre-arranged workshops facilitated by a diverse group of volunteers, such as a chef, a tea master, a hairdresser, academics, and musicians. These workshops are announced in monthly schedules and at weekly meetings, but even then, participation is entirely up to the children; they join only if they are interested. Minato, who graduated from junior high school and now works part-time while visiting *Blossom* about three times a week, described his routine at the *furīsupēsu* as “I just kind of do something with whoever happens to be here that day. Yeah, that hasn’t really changed since the first time I came. Like, if everyone is playing soccer or something and I feel like playing, I’ll join. If I don’t feel like it, I won’t. Yeah, like that. [...] I just go along with the flow of *Blossom*, or the flow of the day” (Minato, interview by author, 2025). In this unique, non-hierarchical space, children are not pressured to perform or conform—they are simply invited to be themselves.

I selected *Blossom* as my field site because it represents a distinctive approach to creating an *ibasho* for children and youths who experience *futōkō* and other forms of social marginalization. Unlike most *furīsupēsu*, *Blossom* combines a tuition-free, open-door policy

with its location inside *Sky Park*, offering access to an unusually rich play environment alongside a non-hierarchical, self-directed structure. These features make *Blossom* an ideal environment for examining how autonomy and *ibasho* are negotiated in everyday practices. Furthermore, *Blossom*'s historical connection to City A's Ordinance on the Rights of the Child and its collaborative governance in *Sky Park* with the NPO, positions it at the intersection of grassroots initiatives and municipal policy, providing a unique lens on how rights-based frameworks translate into lived experience. Conducting ethnographic fieldwork at *Blossom*, therefore, allows an exploration of how institutional ideals of children's rights are enacted, contested, and reinterpreted in the micro-social dynamics of the space.

6. Approaching Analysis

This chapter outlines the analytic process through which the ethnographic data, namely, fieldnotes, interviews, written and visual materials, were transformed into interpretive findings. To explore how the *furīsupēsu* fosters an *ibasho* and how children experience the space, I employed a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), complemented by narrative analysis (Riessman 2005) for the interviews. I chose these approaches for their flexibility and capacity to center participants' voices while allowing theoretical insights to develop gradually rather than being predetermined.

Thematic analysis enables patterns to be generated from the data rather than imposed by pre-existing theoretical categories. This approach fits an ethnographic study that prioritizes lived experience and relational dynamics. Braun and Clarke define thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data," arguing that thematic analysis is a "foundational method" for qualitative research, offering flexibility and accessibility while requiring rigor and transparency (2006, 78–79). Unlike grounded theory, which aims to systematically build theory, thematic analysis does not require adherence to a single epistemological position, making it suitable for studies that

integrate multiple perspectives (Braun and Clarke 2006, 84–85). This adaptability was crucial for my research questions, which explore how children and staff co-create *ibasho* and negotiate autonomy within *furīsupēsu*. Braun and Clarke also underline that themes do not simply “emerge” from data but are actively constructed by the researcher through interpretative engagement (2006, 80), a point that aligns with my intention to foreground participants’ voices while acknowledging the analytic decisions and positionality shaping interpretation.

My analytic process broadly followed Braun and Clarke’s six-phase guide: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting (2006, 87). Familiarization involved repeated readings of fieldnotes and transcripts with highlighting key remarks and observations, an essential step that provides the “bedrock” for subsequent analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 87–88). I chose to manually conduct initial coding in a coding spreadsheet, identifying features of the data that appeared meaningful such as “peer-led conflict resolution” and “peer support rooted in shared struggles,” consistent with their definition of codes as “the most basic segment of the raw data that can be assessed in a meaningful way” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 88–89). I then collated these codes into potential themes, like “the cycle of peer-supported transformation,” bringing together related ideas and beginning to map how they formed broader patterns across the dataset (Braun and Clarke 2006, 89–90). The identified themes were refined through an iterative process to ascertain they were coherent internally and clearly distinguished from one another (Braun and Clarke 2006, 91–92). After refining the overall thematic structure, I further defined and named each theme by clarifying its core meanings and boundaries, ensuring that each contributed a distinct and analytically meaningful element to the developing narrative (Braun and Clarke 2006, 92–93). This recursive process underscores their point that thematic analysis is not linear but involves constant movement between data, codes, and themes (Braun and Clarke

2006, 86). In the final reporting phase, I selected compelling extracts and developed an analytic narrative that linked the themes back to the research questions, reflecting their emphasis on writing as integral to producing a coherent and persuasive account (Braun and Clarke 2006, 93).

In addition to thematic analysis, I employed narrative analysis as a complementary lens to deepen the interpretation of children's accounts. Rather than treating narratives as transparent accounts, this approach views them as interpretive acts that organize events into a meaningful sequence for an audience (Riessman 2005). Narratives do not simply mirror reality; they refract it—storytellers select, connect, and evaluate experiences to make sense of their lives and, at times, to create moral tales about how the world should be (Riessman 2005, 1, 6). This interpretive nature makes narrative analysis particularly suited to exploring children's accounts of conventional schooling and life at the *furīsupēsu*, where experiences of exclusion and *ibasho* are negotiated through language.

While thematic analysis focuses on what is said, narrative analysis extends attention to how stories are told and the contexts in which they emerge (Riessman 2005, 2–5). Interactional and performative perspectives further situate storytelling as co-constructed and embodied, highlighting tone and gestures (Riessman 2005, 4–5). Applying narrative analysis enables interpretation beyond surface content, asking how children position themselves, claim identities, and link past struggles with conventional school to present feelings of security and imagined futures. In this sense, narrative analysis complements thematic coding by bringing attention to the interpretive work done in narratives, underscoring the ways children present their experiences.

Theoretical frameworks were also integrated throughout the whole analysis process to deepen my interpretation of data. Freire and hooks guided my critical understanding of teacher-student relations, while Noddings' ethic of care illuminated the moral dimensions of

interactions. Low's spatializing culture concept deeply shaped my interpretation of *ibasho* as fluid and a form of place-making, and the anthropology of education and childhood literature guided interpretations of children's competence, peer dynamics, and growth. Finally, the concept of the otherwise offered a lens for viewing the *furīsupēsu* opening spaces for alternative ways of educating, learning, and living—possibilities that resist dominant school-centered narratives of normality and success. These frameworks enriched my analysis without constraining the inductive process, allowing themes to remain grounded in participants' lived experiences.

In sum, these analytical approaches—thematic analysis, narrative analysis, and theoretically informed engagement—formed an iterative and reflexive process through which I sought to grasp how an *ibasho* is cultivated and experienced within the *furīsupēsu*. Throughout the analysis process, I remained attentive to my positionality, how some patterns echoed with my own histories or assumptions, while others were identified only through close attention to subtle tensions. This reflexive stance aligns with anthropological commitments to the situatedness of knowledge production. The themes and narratives presented in the following empirical chapters are therefore neither neutral nor exhaustive accounts, but interpretations shaped by my standpoint as a former *futōkō*, and the ethnographic data collected in particular relationships and timeframes.

7. From Seeds to Flourish: How Staff and Children Shape *Ibasho* Together

In early July, the weather was intensely sunny, with temperatures well above 30 degrees Celsius and high humidity that made the heat feel oppressive; even without physical movement, perspiration emerged almost immediately. Returning to Japan after two years, I was struck by this almost tropical climate—so unlike what I had experienced in Europe—and by the loud, continuous chorus of cicadas, which bordered on noise. While this evoked a sense of familiarity with Japanese summers, I was considering my clothing choice. Since my

field site was an “educational institution,” casual attire seemed inappropriate. Reluctantly, I put on a long-sleeved, collared shirt over my short-sleeved T-shirt on the ten-minute walk from the nearest station to the *furīsupēsu*, the place my three-month fieldwork was about to begin.

About two months earlier, I had already met the deputy director of the *furīsupēsu* online, obtained permission for the fieldwork, and scheduled an appointment for 1:30 p.m. on this day. Arriving at the public playpark, *Sky Park*, where *Blossom* is located, about twenty minutes ahead of schedule, I decided to walk around the playpark. I knew *Sky Park* was large, but seeing it in person, it felt even bigger than I had imagined. Various signs were posted throughout the playpark. Unlike the typical aluminum-printed signs in public parks that read “No ball games” or “No climbing trees,” many here were handwritten on wood or fabric, giving a handmade impression. One sign near the entrance slope read, “Isn’t your speed too fast? Let’s go down slowly,” aimed at cyclists and phrased as an encouragement rather than a strict prohibition. Other signs explained children’s rights and the concept of *ibasho*. A notice beginning with “To all adults” stated that the space aims to avoid making prohibitions that limit children’s play and instead respect children’s curiosity and autonomy in play. These observations reinforced my impression that this playpark differs significantly from conventional public parks.

Because it was just before the summer break, children who attend conventional schools would still be in class during this time of day, yet I observed many children and several parents inside *Sky Park*, which strengthened my understanding that this is indeed a space particularly used by children who cannot or do not attend school. As the scheduled time approached and I was about to enter *Blossom*, located toward one corner of the playpark, I encountered the deputy director exiting the building and greeted him. During our prior online meeting, the combination of his formal title, “deputy director,” and the interview-like

atmosphere had led me to perceive him as somewhat authoritative and strict, which made me feel anxious about meeting him in person. Contrary to this expectation, he appeared approachable and smiled frequently. While we spoke outside the entrance, I noticed that children moving in and out of *Blossom* addressed him by his first name, “Takumi,” without any honorifics. At one point, a girl who appeared to be of junior high school age suddenly called out to him, “Pig head!” in a joking manner—yet a moment that struck me as particularly surprising. Shortly thereafter, he offered to guide me around *Sky Park*. As we walked, he explained in a casual tone that people often quickly get muddy, so wearing comfortable clothing is preferable, and that age and formality are not emphasized in this space, reassuring me that I need not worry about dressing and speaking formally.

Upon entering *Blossom* for the weekly meeting held with all children and staff, I immediately noticed the entrance area: the shoe rack was full, and numerous pairs of children’s shoes were scattered around. The space inside is relatively small, and various objects were placed haphazardly throughout the space, creating an impression that could hardly be described as orderly. This sense of disarray was intensified by the presence of nearly thirty to forty children—many of them in elementary school age—engaged in different activities according to their own interests. Although the meeting was scheduled for 2:30 p.m., it did not begin on time. When it eventually started, a young girl who had volunteered took on the role of facilitator, raising her hand to do so. Holding a sheet prepared by the staff, the child announced information such as details about an upcoming concert by an artist who comes to the *furīsupēsu* to teach music and reminders regarding *Blossom*’s rules. Sitting on the floor, I observed a young boy who had volunteered to serve as the note-taker and was working on the minutes, sometimes asking others how to write certain letters. During the meeting, participants were expected to remain quiet so that everyone could hear. At one point, the director of *Blossom* reminded a group of boys playing around at the edge of the

room, “Calm down over there; the meeting isn’t finished yet.” Toward the end, prompted by the deputy director, I introduced myself to the children. Using simple language so that even the youngest could understand, I explained that I had come from Austria and would be conducting research as a volunteer over the next three months. This announcement seemed to excite some of the children, who began asking questions about Austria.

After the meeting, while speaking with the deputy director outside *Blossom*, several children invited me to join a game of dodgeball, and I decided to participate. In the all-weather sports area within *Sky Park*, approximately twenty to thirty individuals were engaged in activities: children from *Blossom* playing dodgeball and, alongside them, what appeared to be junior high school students in their own school athletic uniforms playing basketball. Although both groups occupied overlapping spaces, they managed to avoid physical contact and continued their respective games. At one point, in the absence of staff, the children from *Blossom* proposed limiting the side from which the ball could be thrown to prevent it from hitting the basketball players. This adjustment demonstrated their efforts to coexist and negotiate shared use of a space that was not sufficiently large to accommodate two simultaneous sports without some degree of coordination.

After the dodgeball game ended, the children sat in a circle. To avoid intruding on their space, I hesitated to join in the circle and listened from just outside the group. One child began speaking about another child who was not present and with whom he had a strained relationship. What caught my attention was that the conversation did not take the form of criticism or gossip. Instead, the other children asked questions to understand the situation and offered advice, collectively attempting to resolve the issue among themselves. Later, shortly before *Blossom* closed at 6:00 p.m., there was a time for tidying up, during which children took the lead in washing dishes, putting things back to where they belonged, and cleaning the tables. I noticed an older child named Minato who was washing dishes alone. When I offered

to help, he declined, saying confidently, “I’ve been doing this for seven years, so don’t worry,” and continued working efficiently. During the end-of-day reflection with the deputy director after the children had left, he explained that Minato had once required close supervision and frequent intervention to manage his behavior, but now had become calm and capable of building trust through conversation, indicating a significant transformation over time.

This vignette from the first day of my fieldwork at *Blossom* captures its essential elements for creating and sustaining *ibasho*: respecting and valuing children’s autonomy, fostering non-hierarchical relationships between adults and children as well as children’s competence and contribution to maintaining the space. This chapter explores the practices at *Blossom* that actively nurture a sense of *ibasho* for children who have disconnected from the conventional school system. As Low reminds us, space and place should not be understood as static containers for cultures. Instead, they are dynamic, socially produced processes influenced by movement, interaction, and history (2017, 5–6). By focusing on how the space is organized and used, the everyday routines, the staff’s interactions with children, and the ways children actively shape the environment, this chapter shows how *ibasho* is not a given but a socially and materially constructed environment. As a *Blossom* staff member put it, “After all, the space is like a living thing” (Rin, interview by author, 2025). I argue that an *ibasho* at *Blossom* emerges through ongoing practices by staff, children, and youths rather than being an inherent quality of the space.

7.1. Beyond Banking Education: Learning Through Everyday Choices and Actions

At *Blossom*, there is no fixed curriculum, no specified arrival or departure times, and no set timetable, and participation in volunteer-led workshops is entirely optional. Children come and leave as they please, visiting the space at their own choosing and spending each day freely. While there is no designated arrival time, many children tend to arrive before noon.

This pattern seems to be linked to the daily lunch, named *Blossom-meshi* (*Blossom* meal), prepared in the kitchen by a volunteer, assisted by staff, youths, and children, and offered to those who choose to eat. Orders for *Blossom-meshi* close at 11:30 a.m., which shapes the rhythm of the morning. Each meal costs only a few hundred Yen and follows a self-registration system: in principle, a child writes their name on the page for that day in the *Blossom-meshi* notebook, thereby “ordering,” and later hands cash to a staff member. After payment, the child circles their name to signal “payment complete.” However, this rule is not strictly enforced; some children have names left uncircled for weeks, indicating unpaid meals.

Children’s activities at *Blossom* are highly diverse. Indoors, these include casual conversations with staff or peers, viewing YouTube on smartphones or tablets, and playing video games either on personal devices such as smartphones and Nintendo Switch consoles or on the PlayStation 2 provided by *Blossom*. Musical engagement is also common, with children playing instruments such as the piano, guitars, South American wind and string instruments, or African drums. Other activities include preparing snacks, browsing the internet on the communal PC, playing board and card games, drawing, and reading manga. Outdoor activities encompass tag, dodgeball, basketball, soccer, relay races, baseball, crafting, tending the vegetable garden, mud play, and riding so-called Brave Boards. In addition to these established forms of play, children frequently invent new games, reflecting a strong emphasis on self-directed activity. Except when assistance is requested for communal work such as cleaning and event preparation, staff do not issue instructions or direct children toward specific tasks. Even prolonged engagement in video games does not usually prompt intervention.

If children wish, they can receive individual learning support from staff. In addition, on the second floor of the building where *Blossom* is located, the NPO operates an

individualized learning program called Leaf. Adults from outside *Blossom*, primarily university students, visit twice a week to support children's learning. However, unless children actively seek such opportunities, subject-based learning using textbooks or reference materials does not take place within *Blossom*. Furthermore, *Blossom* designates a specific time for studying twice a week in the morning. During this period, activities that produce loud noise, such as playing video games, are prohibited inside the room. Staff, who are generally tolerant of noise, become noticeably more attentive during this time; if a child shouts or makes loud sounds with objects, they are encouraged to go outside. Nevertheless, even during this period, studying does not take the form of formal, textbook-based instruction. Instead, activities may include, for example, using an insect encyclopedia to pose quiz questions about insect names.

Most volunteer workshops are conducted inside *Blossom*. For example, a quena player who visits as a volunteer organizes an improvised folklore music session about once a month. Through repeated workshops of this kind, many staff members have learned to play by following musical scores, albeit with some effort. At the same time, children who cannot read sheet music participate by playing instruments such as maracas or tambourine-like percussion, or by dancing, creating a strong sense of unity within *Blossom*. This atmosphere of collective engagement carries a distinctive appeal. Even those who initially hesitate, such as myself, find themselves standing and joining in, shaking maracas and dancing alongside the children. Moreover, the music often draws in others unexpectedly: a boy who had been sitting alone at a table on the opposite side of the room, absorbed in playing on his Nintendo Switch, eventually picks up a maraca and joins the session, as if invited by the sound itself.

At *Blossom*, a practice referred to as “join-in-if-you-want,” where children gather peers to realize something they themselves wish to try, is a daily occurrence. One day, during lunch, Aoto, who is athletic and seems to be admired by other children, casually remarked,

almost as if to himself, “I wonder if we could rent a baseball field and play.” His comment expressed a modest desire to move beyond the improvised baseball games that had recently become popular at *Blossom*, played at *Sky Park*’s all-weather sports area with a very soft ball and wooden stick, and instead experience the game in a proper baseball field. Gaku, who shares an interest in baseball and was eating lunch nearby, immediately agreed with enthusiasm, as did Kengo, a staff member. Soon after, Aoto and Gaku began searching for a rentable baseball field on their smartphones, while Kengo later confirmed the feasibility of the plan during a staff meeting. With this, the project to rent a baseball field began to take shape. A casual remark during lunch in a small circle gradually developed into a collective endeavor. Initially involving only Aoto, Gaku, and Kengo, the plan gained momentum as children invited others to join. This process of peer-to-peer recruitment transformed the project from an informal idea into a large-scale activity. Within two weeks, the initiative culminated in a baseball game at a rented field, with two teams of more than ten players each and additional spectators. In total, participation easily exceeded twenty-five individuals, illustrating how a single, modest suggestion evolved into a significant group event through voluntary collaboration.

These observations suggest that the everyday practices at *Blossom*, where children’s autonomy is foregrounded, may appear problematic to adults accustomed to conventional schooling. When discussing persistent prejudice against *furīsupēsu*, the NPO director noted that if the concept of *furīsupēsu* is not properly understood, such practices are often misinterpreted as children “just playing around,” leading to the perception that the institution is fostering irresponsibility and raising children who will be “unable to work or function in the society” (Maeda, interview by author, 2025). The deputy director of *Blossom* suggested parents’ feelings toward the *furīsupēsu*, based on interactions with them:

I think there are basically two types—though of course, there’s a whole gradient in between. One type is what I would call, in a good way, “letting go.” Like, “My kid

doesn't want to go to school, and that's fine. Studying isn't the priority—if they're happy at *Blossom*, that's enough." The other type understands what we're doing here, but still holds onto the idea that, in the end, their child needs to study, or go back to school, or at least learn properly somewhere, saying, "Otherwise, what are they going to do?" [...] In reality, even though this is a place like *Blossom*, I feel like the majority fall into the second group. You can sense it—like, "Maybe next year they'll go back to school and start studying again soon" (Takumi, interview by author, 2025).

Yet, Fujita's ethnography of a *furīasukūru* shows that children themselves understand autonomy as complex and demanding, with them noting that it is "surprisingly difficult" (Fujita 2002, 101). At *Blossom*, this notion is evident in the way children navigate their daily lives: rather than following a predetermined schedule, they must continually decide what to do, moment by moment. Even when such deliberation is not explicit, the absence of imposed structure requires them to consider both what they want and what they ought to do, making each action a matter of responsibility (Fujita 2002, 101). The deputy director of *Blossom* takes a similar view and explained that what appears to outsiders as "free time" is far from unstructured idleness. While children initially struggle with the unfamiliar openness of a day without schedules, they gradually begin to explore interests, make choices, and reflect on what they truly want to do. Each decision, however small, involves judgment and responsibility, and over time these choices accumulate into larger questions—whether to reconnect to school, continue at *Blossom*, or pursue other paths. This process, he noted, contrasts sharply with the predetermined educational tracks most adults experienced, including himself (Takumi, interview by author, 2025), making children's ongoing negotiation of autonomy both demanding and profoundly significant.

Similarly, Hiroto, a staff member, described how his perception of *futōkō* changed after working there:

I came to think they're incredibly thoughtful. [...] These kids have so much time to think. And that's exactly why children who don't go to school end up thinking deeply. I mean, just choosing not to go to school in itself involves a lot of reflection and decision-making. So I really admire that. Of course, the future is uncertain whether you go to school or not, but the "orthodox" path is to go, right? And to reject that, and

to be able to say, “I’m doing this because it is what I want”—to arrive at that point is really impressive (Hiroto, interview by author, 2025).

The NPO director emphasized that although children’s time at *Blossom* is not structured or optimized like a school day, it holds significant educational value. Rather than viewing unstructured hours as wasted, the organization sees them as opportunities for children to discover what genuinely interests them. The goal, as the director explained, is to create an environment that sparks curiosity and motivates children to explore, research, and challenge themselves—an approach he defines as “education” (Maeda, interview by author, 2025).

This child-centered educational stance of *Blossom*, which does not set academic learning objectives, tests, grades, or a formal curriculum, stands in stark contrast to what Freire metaphorically described as the “banking concept of education,” where conventional schooling treats children as empty “containers” to be “filled” with knowledge by teachers (2005, 71–72). At *Blossom*, rather than advancing subject learning uniformly through designated textbooks aligned with goals set by staff or institutions, the environment is designed to support whatever interests the children themselves develop. In this approach, the staff at *Blossom* “‘make space’ for the child to continue making meaning through their learning, but this only happens if the child actively pursues the activity. The child is, in this sense, in the driving seat” (Baker, Le Courtois, and Eberhart 2023, 374).

While Freire (2005) critiques the passivity imposed by conventional schooling, Noddings (2005) adds another layer: the neglect of children’s real needs. She discusses two types of needs in education: “inferred needs,” derived from curricula and policies, and “expressed needs,” revealed through children’s voices and actions (Noddings 2005, 147–49). Based on this discussion, Noddings criticizes conventional schooling for relying too heavily on inferred needs under the pressure of standardization, noting that this reliance can undermine children’s intrinsic motivation and lead to discontinuity in learning (2005, 152).

Blossom's approaches embody a commitment to prioritizing “expressed needs” above all else.

In this context, it is essential to remind that many children who come to *Blossom* have already experienced various struggles in school or at home. For this reason, the right to “do nothing” and simply rest is respected. Noddings observes, “All kinds of real, pressing needs overwhelm the academic ones we so easily infer for schoolchildren. Homelessness, poverty, toothaches, faulty vision, violence, fear of rebuke or mockery, sick or missing parents, and feelings of worthlessness all get in the way of the learning deemed important by school people” (2005, 151). In other words, unless biological and social basic needs are satisfied, the priority should not be curriculum or academic objectives, but rather addressing the children’s immediate needs (Noddings 2005, 151–54). Given these circumstances, how can we justify requiring children—who have faced such hardships, lost confidence in themselves, and become disconnected from schooling and study—to engage in subject learning that does not necessarily relate directly to their present realities or experiences? First and foremost, restoring physical and mental health must take priority, along with recovering the intrinsic motivation that has been lost toward academics and other pursuits. This perspective should not be dismissed; rather, it offers an alternative to the superficial view that children in *furīsupēsu* are “just playing.”

That said, it would also be inaccurate to claim that children at *Blossom* do not study at all. While I observed that elementary-aged children (ages six to twelve) rarely request individualized study or engage in self-directed academic work, a different pattern emerges among junior high school-aged children (ages twelve to fifteen) as they approach the end of compulsory education. Gradually, these children begin requesting individualized study and participate seriously in subject learning at Leaf after *Blossom* closes. This leads about 90 % of children at *Blossom* to eventually advance to high school after completing compulsory

education, according to the NPO director. Furthermore, children who attend correspondence high schools while continuing to come to *Blossom* frequently seek staff support for assignments or join Leaf for study sessions.⁹ As the staff members noted, through their daily experiences at *Blossom*, the children reflect on what they would like to pursue after compulsory education and what is necessary to achieve those goals. Acting on these reflections, they ultimately carve out their own paths, perhaps not in an entirely “orthodox” way, but in a way that is distinctly their own.

On the other hand, an environment that is monotonous and devoid of stimulation may fail to spark children’s curiosity. However, as the previous illustrations have shown, *Blossom* and the surrounding playpark offer a wide range of resources and activities, both indoors and outdoors. Moreover, by sharing the same space where children of different ages and adults engage in diverse activities, opportunities arise for children to develop interests in things they had not previously considered. Children move freely throughout the space and, if they wish to join an ongoing activity, they can do so. Guided by one of *Blossom*’s few rules, “no exclusion,” their attempts to participate are welcomed. Among these opportunities, workshops by diverse volunteers often serve as catalysts. The earlier description in which a child who had been playing a video game was drawn by the music and lively atmosphere, picked up a maraca, and joined the performance is just one of the examples. The NPO director described learning at *Blossom* as follows:

It’s about finding a theme, formulating and deepening a question—discovering what you want to try. When you find that “I want to try,” it’s nice if someone’s nearby to ask, “What should I do?” To reach what you want to know or try, you start searching: What should I research? Who should I talk to? This is the kind of place. In schools, learning is subject-based: “By this month of this grade, you should do this from the textbook.” Our approach is learning from life. Humans just want to live happily—eat, sleep, and find joy. Whether that joy is music, painting, or something else, it’s about encountering something you love and want to know more about. Through whole-life

⁹ In correspondence high schools in Japan, students can usually choose among a range of programs, such as those requiring no in-person attendance at all or those involving attendance three to five days per week (The Nippon Foundation 2025). At *Blossom*, some children are enrolled in such correspondence high schools and keep coming to *Blossom* on days when they have no classes or after school.

living, you find your own “likes.” That’s the learning we value. People might say, “If you don’t follow the curriculum, kids won’t develop basic skills.” But children do acquire them—like math and reading—somehow, somewhere. They don’t need the same textbook at the same time in the same way. If they feel, “I want to know this,” they’ll find a way. So the idea that everyone must use the same textbook and get the same test scores doesn’t fit today’s world (Maeda, interview by author, 2025).

This perspective corresponds to an educational view that treats the entire community as a “classroom” and the curriculum as an “open book” (Lancy and Grove 2011, 164–65). In this sense, *Blossom* challenges the conventional assumption that structured curricula and standardized assessments are prerequisites for meaningful learning. Instead, it demonstrates that curiosity-driven engagement, supported by a rich social and material environment, can foster knowledge acquisition. Such an approach encourages us to reconsider what counts as “learning” and to recognize that education is not merely preparation for life through textbooks, but it is a lived experience embedded in everyday life.

While *Blossom* illustrates how alternative educational spaces can prioritize children’s autonomy and well-being, similar efforts in other contexts face systemic challenges. In Poland, for instance, free schools that, like *Blossom*, respect children’s initiative and well-being in learning encounter barriers imposed by the broader educational system (Starnawski and Gawlicz 2021). Since 2013, schools described as “free” or “democratic,” established by parents and NGOs to break away from the conventional school system, have rapidly increased in number. However, these schools are not legally recognized, and children must remain registered with an “official school.” Like homeschooled students, they are required to take annual examinations based on the national curriculum set by the Ministry of Education. As a result, tensions arise between the educational system and the autonomy of learning in “free” or “democratic” schools, revealing the difficulty of prioritizing only what children truly want to learn (Starnawski and Gawlicz 2021, 1173, 1184).

In contrast to Poland’s situation, Japan’s legal framework creates a very different context for *furīsupēsu*. As mentioned earlier, in Japan, even when children attend *furīsupēsu*,

the system essentially operates on automatic promotion: during the compulsory education stage, elementary and junior high school students can graduate regardless of grades or attendance records (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, n.d.c; Maeda 2022, 62). For those aiming to enter high school or pursue higher education, surely most entrance examinations require academic skills, but this marks a significant difference compared to countries where progression during compulsory education is conditional. In terms of this temporality, staff member Rin emphasized that *Blossom*'s educational stance is grounded in viewing children's growth over a longer time span, rather than within the short six-year elementary and three-year junior high school periods that define compulsory education. Rin explained:

When you only have that short time, you have to make children learn within it. That's why schoolteachers have a hard time. For a child's growth, we don't need benchmarks like "by this time, they should be here." That's one of the great things about this place—we aren't bound by that thinking. If we said, "By the time you graduate from *Blossom*, you should do this and that," we would start working backwards: "At this age, maybe it's time to do this." But because there is no goal or fixed purpose, that's what makes it good. Children do what interests them at the time, or choose based on how they feel. It's not like, "I am playing the charango now to prepare for my future." Adults are not asked to produce results either, so they can just be present. You can say "That's great!" without adding "But how about this too?" You don't have to push them. That's the beauty of it. You aren't being chased by anything (Rin, interview by author, 2025).

Because there are no institutional restrictions, *Blossom* can fully prioritize children's expressed needs, which is an important distinction from the systemic limitations faced by such schools in Poland. This flexibility allows *Blossom* to adopt a long-term perspective on growth rather than compressing learning into short compulsory education spans and examinations. Without rigid benchmarks or timelines, children explore interests at their own pace, and staff support this process without pressure to produce results. Therefore, this comparison shows how the absence of such a constraint enables *furīsupēsu* to wholeheartedly realize their curiosity-driven learning, something far harder to achieve under Poland's legal framework.

Another common prejudice toward institutions like *furīsupēsu* is the assumption that granting children autonomy will lead them to become self-centered and disregard rules. I do not intend to claim that *Blossom* is an entirely calm environment devoid of conflict or harsh language among children, especially among younger ones such as elementary-school-aged children. As one long-term attendee, Gaku reflected when describing how he had “grown accustomed” to the chaotic atmosphere after about a month of coming to *Blossom*—“Ahhh! You—what the hell are you doing—! I got used to hearing things like that. I’d think, well, today is peaceful too [laughs]” (Gaku, interview by author, 2025). In reality, I often observed some younger children using disrespectful language and handling objects roughly or failing to put things back where they belong. Even among children and youths themselves at *Blossom*, there were comments pointing out that some children were “misinterpreting autonomy” and acting irresponsibly.

On my first day at *Blossom*, for example, while playing catch with a boy, he occasionally pretended to throw the ball to me but deliberately tossed it into a metal storage, creating loud noises. Normally, I would have corrected this behavior, but I hesitated—should I intervene in a place like *Blossom*, and if so, how? In the end, I left the situation unresolved with soft caution. During the reflection session with the deputy director that day, I consulted him about where adults should draw the line between respecting children’s “autonomy” and deciding to intervene. He clarified that, although such decisions inevitably involve subjective judgment, he relies on moral considerations—such as whether an action would feel unpleasant if directed at oneself or whether it involves damaging property—and intervenes when necessary. He acknowledged that such intervention may temporarily strain relationships with children but expressed hope that these moments could serve as opportunities for future awareness and growth.

This perspective can be seen in the NPO director's definition of "autonomy," which he describes as grounded in the principle that one's autonomy should not interfere with that of others. When someone attempts to control or limit others, their own autonomy inevitably becomes constrained. True autonomy, therefore, means allowing each person to exist as they are, sustained by reciprocal respect: respecting others' autonomy as one expects theirs to be respected. Building on this, the director emphasized that children raised at *Blossom* do not grow into irresponsible adults:

There are areas where it is okay to break the "rules," and areas where it is not okay to say or do certain things. These boundaries grow from within the children themselves. It is not "Don't do that because the teacher will get mad," but "If you do that, it doesn't feel good, right?" Staff express their own discomfort: "You keep saying 'die, die'—it's really unpleasant. Can you stop?" We don't say, "You must not use the word 'die.'" It's more like: "I want to be in this space with you. But when you say things like that, it makes me sad. So, I would like you to stop." That's the kind of place this is (Maeda, interview by author, 2025).

In other words, rather than relying on scolding or punishment, the approach centers on—borrowing Noddings' terms (2013)—modeling and dialogue to foster awareness. These strategies do not produce immediate transformation, nor are they intended to; rather, they aim to create conditions for gradual, internalized change. As the deputy director reflected on his experience with children who had previously acted out at *Blossom*, he noted that he had not done anything extraordinary except one thing: "persistently, persistently continuing to engage with them" (Takumi, interview by author, 2025). He believes that this persistent engagement has been key to their growth, suggesting that consistency and relational presence, rather than coercion, form the foundation of trust and moral development in this setting. This emphasis on ongoing, caring relationships reflects Noddings' moral education (2010), where education is understood not as the transmission of rules but as the cultivation of mutual respect and moral awareness through lived interaction. This belief is supported by my observation during the early phase of fieldwork, when the youths consistently used honorific language and

displayed politeness when interacting with outsiders like me in the beginning, suggesting that they do acquire respectful attitudes toward others.

While children's autonomy is a central ideal in *furīsupēsu*, including *Blossom*, its practical realization in collective decision-making often proves complex. At *Blossom*, efforts are made to prioritize children's views not only in everyday interactions but also in the operation of the space, yet children's engagement with weekly meetings, which staff values, frequently appears passive. For example, on one occasion, ten minutes before a scheduled meeting, some children proposed playing dodgeball. Aware of the necessity to attend the meeting, they agreed to finish the game beforehand. Yet, when the game did not conclude within ten minutes, they continued playing even as Rin repeatedly and gently reminded them, "The meeting is starting soon." Eventually, they joined the meeting, but only after finishing the game, delaying the meeting.

Furthermore, during meetings, although children occasionally volunteered to facilitate the session, their participation in discussions was generally minimal when agenda items were raised. Minato, who has attended *Blossom* for many years and actively voices his opinions, expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of meetings compared to the past: "In recent meetings, no one listens, no one says anything. I really hate that" (Minato, interview by author, 2025). Staff member Rin also acknowledged the long-standing challenge of fostering children's autonomy at the collective level: "Lately, children don't really express their opinions. It's mostly adults talking. Deep conversations, like 'What do we really think about this?' don't happen. Children's autonomy has always been a challenge, not something that suddenly changed. In thirty years, I can count on one hand the meetings that felt truly good. It also depends on the members. Right now, with many younger children, it's especially hard to convey 'this is your space,' that 'you can shape it yourselves.' It's not completely missing, but it's not getting through fully" (Rin, interview by author, 2025). Thus, while autonomy is a

guiding principle, the centrality of children's voices in decision-making remains an ongoing challenge, influenced by factors such as age composition and group dynamics. These observations suggest that even in environments designed to empower children, maintaining consistent engagement in governance requires continuous effort and adaptation.

Overall, *Blossom* demonstrates that learning can emerge from living rather than from rigid curricula. By prioritizing children's autonomy and expressed needs, the space challenges conventional assumptions about education as standardized instruction. What outsiders may dismiss as "just playing" is, in fact, a process of negotiation, reflection, and responsibility, where choices—whether to join a game, attend a workshop, or study—carry educational weight. Through curiosity-driven engagement and relational support, children gradually rediscover motivation and carve out their own paths, often returning to academic learning on their terms. This approach aligns with Freire's critique of the banking model (2005) and Noddings' call to value expressed needs (2005), illustrating that education is not just the accumulation of knowledge that is separated from life but lived experiences embedded in everyday life. At the same time, autonomy at *Blossom* is a relational practice rather than an unrestrained choice: it must coexist with the autonomy of others, while younger children often misinterpret autonomy as unlimited freedom, producing occasional tensions. Thereby, the next section further turns to these relational dimensions, how joy and sincerity transform authority into partnership, making *Blossom* not only an alternative education space but also a community.

7.2. Humanizing Adult-Child Relations: Joy and the Protection of Dignity

In late July, during the height of midsummer, the annual Sky Park Festival was held on a scorching day when even sunscreen could not prevent my skin from turning red by evening. This large-scale event takes place within *Sky Park* and brings together local children and adults, while staff and children from *Blossom* also participate in running stalls and activities.

The wide grounds of *Sky Park* feature playful attractions such as a water slide that splashes into a pond, another handmade water slide descending from the peak of a mud hill into a large water bucket, steaming baths in metal drums, a stage for free-spirited singing and dancing, and a vast muddy area created by sprinklers, complete with a “mud pool.” The festival’s central theme is “mud,” inviting both children and adults to engage in sensory-rich, full-body play. The highlight of the day is the “Mud Festival,” held during the final hour. Participants of all ages—adults, children, and youths—enter the mud zone to wrestle spontaneously and simultaneously or throw mud at one another. For first-time observers like me, the sight of adults and children grappling without restraint, joyfully wrestling in the mud, appears almost transgressive—indeed, “mad” seems the only fitting description. Among the adults were the sixty-year-old NPO director and Kengo, a *Blossom* staff member who had injured his leg a few months earlier and had not fully recovered at the time, yet was lifting and tossing children with evident enthusiasm. Witnessing this, I wrote the following in my fieldnotes that night, with a little mud still in my ears:

While it is natural to want to avoid becoming covered in mud when considering the aftermath—laundry and cleaning—the sight of adults and children delightfully throwing mud balls and wrestling evoked in me an unexpected desire to join in. The festival possessed a peculiar allure. [...] As a child, I surely longed to immerse myself in mud, yet I never did, probably constrained by concerns about parental and social judgment. What I observed at this festival, however, was children—regardless of age, and even adults—playing freely in the mud, guided by instinct. This scene seems to embody the very image of children that *Blossom* aims for: acting and thinking on their own without restrictions from parents or society (Fieldnotes, July 21, 2025).

In many educational institutions, authoritarian practices premised on teacher-student hierarchies are frequently employed, which hooks termed “the culture of fear” (2003, 132). In contrast, fieldwork at *Blossom* revealed a distinctive relational dynamic: staff and children interact in ways that minimize hierarchical distance and foreground mutual respect. Children’s remarks reinforce this contrast with conventional schooling. Gaku described

schoolteachers as “one step above” him, whereas *Blossom* staff were “0.2 steps above” (Gaku, interview by author, 2025), signaling a perceived flattening of hierarchy.

Underlying this is a principle deeply embedded in *Blossom*: “If adults are not happy, children cannot be happy.” Staff member Hiroto explained, “If the adults around children seem to be living joyfully, then the kids will definitely be able to be happy too,” adding that if staff themselves are not enjoying the space, “there is no point in keeping it open” (Hiroto, interview by author, 2025). This ethos manifests in practice: whether playing sports, video games, board games, or even wrestling in the mud, *Blossom* staff often engage with children wholeheartedly, without holding back. Rin reflected on the emotional dimension of this approach, acknowledging its potential risks: “Our attitude and awareness—what we have been saying all along—always show through. That’s what this place is about. I feel like the atmosphere here, the children’s interactions, they’re like a mirror reflecting us. So whenever I feel this space isn’t cool, it is because I’m doing something that is not cool myself” (Rin, interview by author, 2025). These staff stances resonate strongly with hooks’ concept of “engaged pedagogy,” which emphasizes that empowering students requires teachers to strive for self-actualization and happiness, because their state of being profoundly shapes how students learn (1994, 15–16). This principle is vividly enacted at *Blossom*, where staff see their own joy and vitality as inseparable from creating an environment that empowers children.

Children are highly attuned to the emotional presence of staff, often describing them as “lively” or “relaxed,” and some even express a desire to become *Blossom* staff themselves. Minato emphasized this difference by comparing his impressions of *Blossom* staff with his elementary schoolteachers:

I think the biggest difference is that the adults here actually look like they’re having fun. Back in elementary school, none of the teachers looked like they were enjoying themselves. Now that I think about it, I don’t even remember seeing them smile. But here, even though I’m sure there are hard times and tough days, the adults still look

like they're having fun, like they're really smiling from the heart. I think I was drawn to that from a young age. That's probably the biggest reason I've been able to keep coming here. So yeah, the biggest difference is whether the adults themselves are enjoying it or not—whether they're smiling or not. That's the biggest thing, I think. [...] I mean, fake smiles or pretending to have fun—I don't think that ever came across to me back then. But the adults here were genuinely having fun, creating that joy themselves. I think I picked up on that (Minato, interview by author, 2025).

This recognition highlights a key dynamic at *Blossom*: the genuine joy of the staff members is not a peripheral feature, but an essential part of the setting. Their visible joy influences how children perceive trust and connection. In this sense, emotional presence acts as a pedagogical practice, softening hierarchical boundaries and prioritizing mutual well-being.

While simply “having fun” does not mean that hierarchies between adults and children disappear, the staff at *Blossom* also engage with children as individual “persons,” regardless of their age. A moment during my fieldwork that offers a glimpse of this approach occurred in relation to the annual summer camp held on a remote island, in which the majority of *Blossom*'s children and youths participate each year. This camp attracted more applicants than its capacity allowed, and in the weeks leading up to departure, the children eagerly recounted how enjoyable past camps had been. As the dates approached, they even prayed that they would not catch a cold, their excitement becoming increasingly intense. Having gained the trust of *Blossom* and received permission to accompany the group, I found myself waiting at home with excitement on the day of departure, scheduled for 10:30 p.m. from the port by ship. In the early evening, however, I received a call from a *Blossom* staff member informing me that, due to an approaching typhoon, the island camp had been cancelled. I was also told that an emergency meeting, including the children, would be held at *Blossom* the following day to discuss plan B.

The next day, on my way from the station to *Blossom*, I encountered some children who were visibly disappointed about missing the ferry trip and the island camp they had been looking forward to. Encouraging them as we walked together, we headed to *Blossom*'s

multipurpose room for the meeting. At the meeting, where children, staff, and a few parents gathered and the room filled with restless murmurs, a staff member, Hiroto, spoke first. Looking deeply regretful and apologetic toward the children, he again informed them of the cancellation of the island camp. Afterward, the NPO director took the microphone. Speaking in a way that even the youngest children could understand, he explained clearly and with evident sympathy that the cancellation was not a decision *Blossom* had wanted to make, but one that had been unavoidable for their safety. He then began to recount, almost in the form of a story, two major incidents that had occurred during past island camps. One such example involved spending ten hours traveling by ferry to the island, only to be unable to dock due to rough seas and having to spend another ten hours returning to the original port. As he spoke, the children, who had initially been restless, became visibly absorbed and listened intently. Most importantly, the explanation did not end with adults one-sidedly informing the decision. Instead, the director invited the children to share their questions and opinions, demonstrating a genuine willingness to listen to their expressions of frustration and disappointment. As a result, one child actively voiced what seemed to be a shared sentiment, asking why the camp could not have been postponed rather than cancelled. In response, the director carefully explained that the staff had spent a long time on the previous day discussing various possibilities, but that rescheduling had proven difficult due to coordination issues with island stakeholders, such as the campsite and local residents who had prepared food. The child appeared to accept this explanation fully. Ultimately, the camp was carried out successfully according to the hastily arranged plan B. What stood out was that, instead of simply conveying the cancellation and alternative plan in a procedural or one-sided manner, the staff demonstrated a clear commitment to acknowledging and engaging with the children's emotions.

This stance is evident in Rin's reflections on her approach to interacting with children: "What I value most in how I interact with children is... I want to be sincere. Respect—I don't just try not to forget it, I believe it's absolutely essential. It's not about whether the other person is a child or how old I am. It's about their dignity. I don't want to diminish that. I believe this space must be one where dignity is protected. That's how I want to be with everyone, no matter who they are" (Rin, interview by author, 2025). Both the summer camp cancellation episode and Rin's firm insistence illustrate how *Blossom* staff value attentively listening and respecting children. When the typhoon forced the camp's cancellation, the authority positioned children as partners in meaning-making, listening empathetically and explaining the constraints behind the decision, rather than treating children as passive recipients of information as the "banking model" (Freire 2005). Rin's commitment to sincerity and respect for children's dignity further underscores this attitude: by rejecting hierarchical assumptions based on age, she affirms that every interaction must protect dignity, modeling "desirable ways of interacting" (Noddings 1988, 223). This approach also reflects Freire's contention that authentic dialogue is grounded in love, humility, and faith in others, producing trust through congruence between words and actions (2005, 89–91). In this sense, both the meeting and Rin's stance exemplify a horizontal relationship where authority does not undermine equality (Freire 2005, 91).

This stance of engaging with children while preserving their dignity remains consistent even in situations that would call for disciplinary action in a typical school setting. For instance, two boys once fought over *Minecraft*, prompting staff intervention, which was a rare occurrence during my fieldwork. The boy who struck the other after repeated mockery of his *Minecraft* buildings was cared for by the deputy director and a staff member, Kaori. They not only listened sympathetically to the cause of the fight, Kaori saying, "I would be angry too if that happened to me," and calmed him down, but also stayed by his side, the deputy

director watching him play *Minecraft* and affirming the structures he built. A different case occurred when several children reported missing money, and staff gathered them to raise awareness. Here, rather than pressuring the person involved with statements such as “stealing is wrong” or “confess immediately,” the staff emphasized that in the world, there are people who sometimes take others’ belongings without ill intent, and that such actions may happen unintentionally. They noted that the person might even be suffering internally, showing consideration for the person. They added that if anyone wanted to talk, they could introduce a specialist and encouraged the person to reach out.

These examples illustrate Noddings’ concept of confirmation, a central element of her ethic of care. Confirmation, as she explains, “the loveliest of human functions, depends upon and interacts with dialogue and practice” and requires educators to “see and receive the other—see clearly what he has actually done, and receive the feelings with which it was done” (Noddings 2013, 196). This is not just tolerance or passive acceptance; it involves an active, relational process of understanding the child’s motives and responding in ways that affirm their potential for goodness. In the *Minecraft* conflict, staff attention extended beyond the “victim” to include the “perpetrator,” who was not reduced to his act of aggression. By soothing him and affirming his creative work, the staff demonstrated “the best possible motive consonant with reality” and revealed “an attainable image of himself that is lovelier than that manifested in his present acts” (Noddings 2013, 193). This approach reframes the child not as a problem to be corrected but as a person capable of growth, thereby sustaining his ethical ideal rather than undermining it.

Similarly, in the possible theft case, staff resisted moral absolutism and punitive logic. Instead of demanding confession or labeling the act as inherently wrong, they acknowledged the complexity of human behavior, recognizing that such actions may stem from distress rather than malice. By offering support and even access to professional help, they created

space for dialogue and restoration rather than blame. This stance is parallel to Noddings' insistence that care involves both receptivity and responsiveness, nurturing the child's sense of worth and possibility (1988, 223–24). These interactions point to a care-based approach that places dignity, relational understanding, and moral growth at its center, not simple compliance or control. In these moments, children are approached as whole persons with complex motives and capacities for goodness, rather than as rule-breakers to be disciplined. This shift transforms the educational space into one where dialogue and trust become the foundation for ethical development, making care not an accessory to education but its very core.

Furthermore, this tendency to avoid the dehumanization of teacher-student relations is closely tied to staff practices that actively recognize each child's presence. Before *Blossom* opens at 10:30 each morning, it is common to see more than ten children waiting at the door. When the door finally opens, the children enter all at once, and the staff greet each one individually by calling their name—“[Name], good morning!” This practice is noteworthy because staff consistently remember and address each child by name. This emphasis on naming is not limited to mornings; overall, staff at *Blossom* frequently or even routinely call children by their names or nicknames, a pattern that also appears in their discourse. The deputy director explained that when meeting a child for the first time, he avoids referencing prior information but makes sure to say the child's name—“[Name], we are glad you came. We have been waiting for you” (Takumi, interview by author, 2025), as a way to ease anxiety and create a sense of welcome. Other staff members also emphasized the significance of addressing children by name, noting that greetings such as “Good morning, [Name]!” or “Welcome back, [Name]!” are common. Rin believes that for newcomers, being called by name helps them feel acknowledged and less isolated, especially after their second or third visit. Remembering names was described as a deliberate effort, not only for the children but

also for staff themselves, as being referred to simply as “staff” felt impersonal and diminished their sense of connection (Rin, interview by author, 2025). They reflected that knowing and using names conveys recognition, “I see you,” and fosters mutual connection. Indeed, Minato shares that after returning from a long absence due to travel, staff greet him with phrases like “Welcome back!” or “It has been a while!” which contributes to his sense of comfort and inclusion in the space (Minato, interview by author, 2025).

Noticeably, this practice of recognizing children’s presence and addressing them by name contributes to fostering a sense of community among them. This custom resonates with hooks’ argument that creating an exciting and meaningful learning environment requires recognizing each participant’s presence and viewing the classroom as a communal space shaped by collective effort (1994, 7–9; 2003). Morris and Perry, citing comments from parents who send their children to free schools in England, note that large schools often fall into seeing children as “just another child or even a ‘number,’” whereas free schools adopt a personalized approach in which teachers remember each child’s name (2019, 547). This personalization signals that the child matters as an individual, not merely as part of an undifferentiated group. Loutzenheiser offers a similar perspective, arguing that the failure to acknowledge students’ existence contributes to disconnection among high school students in the U.S., describing “‘being seen’ as a sign of respect, or lack thereof” (2002, 448). Conversely, in alternative schools where young people have reconnected, teachers and students routinely learn and use each other’s names—a practice that, as Loutzenheiser observes, represents an effort to notice and validate a student’s presence, laying the groundwork for building connections among staff and students (2002, 454–55). These seemingly simple acts of recognition are not insignificant; for children who have experienced anonymity or a lack of affirmation in conventional schools—often leading to disconnection—

being recognized by name becomes a powerful source of validation, connection, and self-worth.

In addition, when dismantling hierarchies and building relationships with children, it is essential not to overlook the role of everyday language. As observed in other *furisukūru* (Sagawa 2010; Minoura 2012), interactions between children and staff at *Blossom* are carried out in casual speech rather than honorific language, regardless of age. Likewise, I did not observe children use formal titles such as “*sensei*” (teacher) or honorifics like “*san*” (Ms. or Mr.) when addressing staff; instead, they call them by their first names or nicknames. Particularly remarkable is that greetings at *Blossom* are always “*ohayō*” (good morning), regardless of the time of day. This choice is meaningful because *ohayō* is considered more casual than “*konnichiwa*” (hello) or “*konbanwa*” (good evening); family members typically do not use *konnichiwa* or *konbanwa* with each other, but they do say *ohayō* when they see each other in the morning. Through this linguistic practice, greetings help maintain closeness and avoid creating barriers between adults and children.

The everyday language does not simply reflect informality; it actively reshapes relationships and space. Drawing from Low’s framework (2017, 119–43), which gives emphasis to language and discourse as performative forces in spatial production, these practices can be seen as demolishing the hierarchical norms common in Japanese schools. Using nicknames and casual speech positions staff and children as equals, not as authority and subordinate. Even the habit of saying *ohayō* all day carries meaning: it evokes the warmth of family life, making the space feel less institutional. These small linguistic acts accumulate into something meaningful—they assist in nourishing an atmosphere where children and staff feel seen and welcomed every day. At *Blossom*, language is not just a means of communication but also a way of reducing social distance, fostering closeness, and

affirming a sense of *ibasho*. Through these everyday exchanges, the space becomes more than a physical setting; it turns into a community built on recognition and equality.

These practices at *Blossom* demonstrate how humanizing, non-hierarchical relationships between adults and children are actively produced in everyday interactions. Through staff members' sincere emotional presence, their visible enjoyment of being in the space, dialogical stance, care-based responses to conflict, and routine linguistic practices, children are engaged as full persons rather than as objects of control. As a result, the forms of dehumanization that Noddings (2013), hooks (1994), and Freire (2005) commonly identify as pervasive in conventional schools—where children are often positioned as passive recipients of authority—were not something I observed during my time at *Blossom*. Instead, children's dignity is consistently protected, and trust is cultivated through relationships grounded in recognition, respect, and mutual well-being. In the following section, children and youths, supported by staff, actively co-create and maintain *Blossom* as an *ibasho*, practicing care and circulating what I call a “cycle of peer-supported transformation” among peers.

7.3. From Being Helped to Helping: the Cycle of Peer-Supported Transformation

In late September, on the final day of my fieldwork, I engaged in a baseball game with the children at *Sky Park*'s all-weather sports area, following the usual routine, except for being aware that this would be my last time. Each team consisted of approximately six players. During the game, a girl who had first played baseball earlier in the summer—and whose improvement had been evident day by day—hit a home run. She ran around the handmade bases with visible joy, while her teammates, including me, gathered around the home base to welcome her. We expressed our excitement by jumping together and celebrating her achievement in a manner reminiscent of professional baseball players. As the closely contested game extended into extra innings, Naoto, who usually does not join baseball games, arrived and began watching alone. Observing this, I encouraged him to participate

despite his apparent reluctance, reasoning that it would be my final game at *Blossom*. When the other children noticed his lack of enthusiasm, they responded by saying, “If he doesn’t want to, we cannot force him—it’s okay.” At that moment, I realized that I had been attempting to compel a child to do something against his will. This prompted self-reflection and reinforced my understanding that the children at *Blossom* have deeply internalized the ethos of respecting individual autonomy—a core principle of the space.

Daily life at *Blossom* is marked by scenes of children and youths who absorb staff’s caring practices, teach and support one another, sometimes stepping into roles that resemble those of staff. These interactions span a wide range of activities: pitching tents, sharing strategies for video games, sending a group message to remind others about heatstroke prevention before a baseball game, and mediating conflicts or calming children causing disturbances. For example, during the camp organized under plan B, Miho, a junior high school student, sat next to an elementary-school-aged girl who was feeling unwell while the staff were away, and spoke to her with concern for her condition. Such instances illustrate how attentiveness and responsibility are circulated among participants, extending beyond formal staff roles and fostering a sense of mutual support within the space. This atmosphere of support was evident in Gaku’s response when I asked what he values most about *Blossom*. He replied that it is the warmth of the people. I clarified whether this referred to staff or friends, and Gaku answered, “Everyone.” He further explained that this sense of warmth is felt when people help each other, recalling moments like someone assisting another who has fallen while carrying something (Gaku, interview by author, 2025).

Children learn this spirit of mutual assistance not only from staff but also from older peers. Minato, who many staff members recall as having frequently acted out in the past, now steps into a caring role when an elementary school boy has a disruptive episode—using harsh language, handling objects roughly, and creating noise that disturbs others. At times, Minato

held him back while calmly saying, “Settle down,” encouraging him to calm himself and start cleaning up together. He also actively undertakes tasks such as cooking, carrying used dishes to the sink, and washing them during cleanup time, as seen in one of the earlier vignettes. Reflecting on this change, Minato himself explained: “There were a lot more ‘older brothers’ and ‘sisters’ around. Right now, there are not many of those kinds of older children. So, there are some kids who misunderstand what autonomy means, and honestly, some of them are kind of disrespectful. [...] But even when I totally lost it, those older children would hold me back, and they would say, ‘Minato, that’s not okay,’ or ‘You should say how you feel instead.’ They really helped me. They taught me what was okay and what was not. So now, I feel like it is my turn to pass that on” (Minato, interview by author, 2025). He emphasized that these changes did not occur because staff instructed him to behave differently, but because he himself realized that he could take on a helping role and began acting on that awareness.

Similarly, Asahi—who has been coming to *Blossom* for about five years and is now a student at a correspondence high school while still visiting occasionally—also frequently mentioned by staff as someone who often acted out in the past—prefaced his remark by noting that this is something staff frequently talk about:

At first, the kids who come are in the position of being helped. When they fight a lot, older children step in and mediate. I went through that myself, and as I grew, I became the one who steps in to stop fights. Apparently, that’s a kind of “standard pattern” here. You start off fighting, and as you grow, you naturally become the one who helps others. [...] So now, when younger kids—or kids who are fighting—start acting out, I step in and say “Stop!” [...] I try to calm them down and listen. [...] Of course, I don’t always know the best way to handle it, and sometimes I mess up, but through doing it, I also grow. [...] It just happened naturally (Asahi, interview by author, 2025).

Asahi’s reflection resonates strongly with Minato’s account. Both narratives emphasize that these shifts were not prompted by staff intervention but emerged organically through experience and observation of older peers.

These patterns at *Blossom* exemplify Noddings' (2013) critique of rigid age-based divisions in schooling, which she argues undermine the development of caring relationships and social consciousness. According to her, sharp separations—such as those introduced by junior high schools—occur precisely when children begin to reflect on their natural sympathies and develop as “ones-caring,” risking both their ethical and intellectual potential (Noddings 2013, 189–90). *Blossom*'s mixed-age groups offer a remarkable perspective. Rather than hierarchical norms based on age among students, namely *senpai-kōhai* (senior-junior) relationships commonly found in conventional schools, which sometimes trigger bullying, *Blossom* cultivates sibling-like interactions that transcend rigid boundaries. This structure resonates with Maynard and Tovote's observation that mixed-age groups afford diverse learning opportunities, enabling older children to guide younger peers while developing sympathy and perspective-taking skills. Younger children, in turn, learn to follow guidance and participate as cooperative group members, eventually assuming leadership roles as they become the oldest available (Maynard and Tovote 2011, 189–90, 198).

Gaskins and Paradise (2011) offer a comparable view with the concept of “observational learning,” which they define as something that “typically occurs in familiar contexts in which one person performs an activity while another person, who knows less, watches them do it.” Importantly, they stress that this learning often occurs incidentally within everyday social interactions rather than through formal instruction (Gaskins and Paradise 2011, 85). This dynamic is evident at *Blossom*, which many children and youths describe as feeling “like home”: by spending time with “siblings,” children learn by watching and interacting with one another in everyday activities. These interactions not only support cognitive growth but also nurture ethical ideals central to Noddings' moral education (2010): children learn to respond to others' needs, assume responsibility, and uphold relationships. Over time, this creates what I define as a “cycle of peer-supported transformation” in which

children who used to be supported by older peers gradually take on caring roles, reinforcing a community grounded in mutual care rather than competition or hierarchy. Thus, *Blossom* demonstrates how educational arrangements can promote social development while simultaneously challenging assumptions underlying age-segregated schooling.

Regarding this cycle of peer-supported transformation, Hirschfeld (2002) reminds us that children do more than simply absorb adult cultures—they actively create and sustain their own cultures. He argues that mainstream anthropology has often overlooked two children’s key capacities: “children are strikingly adept at acquiring adult culture and, less obviously, adept at creating their own cultures” (Hirschfeld 2002, 611–12). Children not only reproduce adults’ models but also generate cultural practices that they transmit among peers without adult intervention (Hirschfeld 2002, 611–15). Applied to *Blossom*, this dynamic becomes clear. According to the NPO director, it is not incidental but reflects the organization’s guiding principle of valuing existence over ability, expressed in the phrase “Thank you for being born” (Maeda, interview by author, 2025). On this foundation, children, treated with dignity and respect by staff, acquire caring practices and circulate them among themselves. Thereby, even without adult directives, they preserve and transmit this community of care in their peer relationships, demonstrating how organizational values and staff who embody them can seed and support children’s growth.

Within this community of care, attentiveness also extends to relationships among peers who share similar experiences or circumstances. During the camp, for instance, after the younger children had gone to sleep, high school-age children, youths, and I gathered around the fire in a quiet, dimly lit space that encouraged openness. In this intimate setting, conversations unfolded about experiences related to *futōkō*, revealing moments of mutual sympathy and solidarity. Minato spoke slowly, pausing at times as he recalled the pressures he felt while attending school, such as the constant sense of obligation to “go to school” and

“study,” and described the circumstances that led to his disconnection from conventional schooling. His reflections were met with nods and verbal affirmations from others, signaling recognition and shared understanding. Responding to this atmosphere, Asahi disclosed his own struggles with interpersonal relationships in his current high school class and openly questioned whether he should transfer. This prompted others to share their own concerns, creating a collective space where vulnerability was met with attentiveness. Through these interactions, caring relations among peers emerged organically, grounded in shared experiences and deepened by mutual support.

This moment aligns with Noddings’ argument that caring must be practiced by students, not merely professed. For her, students need opportunities to engage in caring relationships so that responsiveness and responsibility become ingrained habits, not abstract ideals (Noddings 1988, 223; 2013, 187). The campfire interaction reflects her core concept: children and youths actively practice care by attentively listening to one another’s experiences, responding with sympathy, and offering advice. These exchanges are not incidental; they represent caring occasions where participants actively rehearse the skills of attentiveness and mutual responsibility. Unlike structured service programs, such practice is relational and dialogical, fostering competence in caring through alternating vulnerability and support. In this way, *Blossom* provides the kind of environment Noddings envisions—where caring ideal is cultivated through lived practice (2013, 187–90).

Furthermore, the growth of children supported by staff and peers, and their later acts of giving back, demonstrate what Noddings (2013) identifies as the essential responsiveness of the cared-for in a caring relationship. She explains, “The cared-for is essential to the relation. What the cared-for contributes to the relation is a responsiveness that completes the caring. This responsiveness need not take the form of gratitude or even direct acknowledgment. Rather, the cared-for shows, either in direct response to the one-caring or

in spontaneous delight and happy growth before her eyes, that the caring has been received. The caring is completed when the cared-for receives it” (Noddings 2013, 181). At *Blossom*, this responsiveness is evident when children, once recipients of care, begin to enact caring roles themselves by mediating conflicts, comforting younger peers, and modeling respectful behavior. These actions do not occur because staff impose expectations but emerge organically as children internalize the relational ethic of care and autonomy that characterizes the space. In passing on these practices to younger participants, they show that care has not only been received but transformed into a relational habit, completing the caring relation and sustaining what I have called a cycle of peer-supported transformation.

However, as the spatial turn in anthropology has emphasized the dynamic nature of place and space (Low 2017; Wieczorek 2019), it is important to note that this cycle of peer-supported transformation and the community of care at *Blossom* are never static; they are highly dynamic. Children and youths who have attended *Blossom* for many years articulate differences between the present and the past. For example, Shū—who has been coming to *Blossom* for nearly a decade and continues to visit several times a week even after completing compulsory education while currently working part-time—explained that since the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of older peers who once acted as “older siblings” has dramatically decreased. As a result, he has observed an increase in children who “misinterpret the autonomy,” with aggressive remarks toward staff and peers and a tendency to avoid helping with tasks such as cleanup. Shū expressed a sense of crisis about the possible disappearance of this cycle and, at the same time, a strong feeling of responsibility to take on the role of upholding it himself (Shū, interview by author, 2025).

Staff narratives not only confirm this shift caused by the sudden demographic change inside *Blossom* but also reveal an understanding that the space is not something created solely by staff but is co-constructed with children and youth and constantly changing. Hiroto

explained: “It’s not like someone is creating the place—it’s something everyone creates together. The place exists and is upheld because everyone is there. And that’s why when the people change, the place changes too.” He further described the staff role as “balancer,” stating:

Creating the space—making the space function. [...] If there are not enough staff inside *Blossom*, then I need to be present inside. [...] If I hear a weird rumor going around, I will casually stay near that kid. It’s about being someone who keeps things from falling apart—a kind of balancer. Maybe that’s what “creating the space” really means. After all, it was already functioning before I got here. So it’s not about building from scratch, but about not breaking it—and helping it grow. Like, thinking together with the kids about how to make what they want to do possible. And if they are doing something that’s not okay, then I will tell them, “That is not right” (Hiroto, interview by author, 2025).

His account suggests that staff see their role less as authoritative creators and more as facilitators who maintain equilibrium, support children’s initiatives, and intervene only when necessary to safeguard shared values. This framing conceptualizes creating the place not as a singular act but as an ongoing process of sustaining and negotiating the space with children.

Rin, another staff member, expressed that parents often hold a common misconception, viewing *Blossom* as a “prepared space” or a “service to be used.” She counters this by emphasizing that *Blossom* is a place of mutual support:

Like, you are you, right? You should live your own life. Personally, I really feel strongly that I don’t want this place to become somewhere where people just say, “Can I help with something?” or “Let me know if you need anything.” Of course, if we are in trouble, I would want help, and if there is something I can do, I will help. But I don’t want it to become a place that’s just about doing everything for someone. In that sense, [...] when you run a place like this, people often start to expect, “You will take care of my child for us, right?” (Rin, interview by author, 2025).

Her comment highlights a tension between parental expectations of care and the staff’s vision of *Blossom* as a collaborative environment rather than a service provider. She also pointed to recent instances of children displaying more aggressive behavior as an example and concluded: “After all, the space is like a living thing” (Rin, interview by author, 2025). This metaphor underscores the dynamic and unpredictable nature of *Blossom*, framing it as an

organism that responds to shifts in relationships and behaviors. In other words, *Blossom* is never a uniform or static environment, continually and actively shaped by not only staff but also youths and children.

Concluding this section, the cycle of peer-supported transformation at *Blossom* reveals a critical dimension often disregarded in prior academic discussions of *ibasho*: the active roles and contributions of children and youths in shaping the space. Rather than positioning them as passive recipients of care, this section shows how they become co-creators of the community through everyday acts by mediating conflicts, comforting peers, and maintaining shared values. It is through mixed-age interactions and observational learning (Gaskins and Paradise 2011) that they acquire habits of attentiveness and responsibility, embodying Noddings' ethic of care (2013) in practice. This process also affirms Hirschfeld's (2002) insight that children actively create their own cultural practices rather than merely absorb adult models. Yet, as the spatial turn reminds us (Low 2017; Wieczorek 2019), this cycle and space are dynamic, shaped by shifting relationships and contexts.

7.4. Discussion

This chapter has traced how an *ibasho* at *Blossom* is generated through seemingly mundane yet consequential practices—children's self-directed activity, staff's emotional presence and dialogical stance, and mixed-age peer support—rather than existing as a fixed property of a building or program. Following Low's "spatializing culture" (2017), *ibasho* at *Blossom* emerges through the alignment of material affordances (open layouts, access to diverse indoor/outdoor activities), discursive practices (naming, casual speech, all-day *ohayō*), embodied routines (shared meals, games, music), and affective atmospheres (joy, ease, mutual recognition). Ethnographic scenes—mud festivals, improvised music, morning greetings—illustrate how language and bodily co-presence reduce social distance and

cultivate the “warmth” that children themselves identify as essential (hooks 1994, 2003; Loutzenheiser 2002). These micro-acts accumulate into an atmosphere in which being seen and welcomed is ordinary, aligning with *ibasho* scholarship that characterizes *ibasho* through felt ease, acceptance, and present-tense security rather than mere physical infrastructure (Ishimoto 2009; Tanaka 2021; Saka 2023). Importantly, *ibasho* is not a static state of a place but a fluid, continually negotiated, shifting with the presence, practices, and relationships of those who inhabit the space. As staff member Rin put it, “the space is like a living thing” (Rin, interview by author, 2025), highlighting the dynamic process rather than a fixed container.

hooks’ engaged pedagogy clarifies why staff joy is consequential for fostering a sense of *ibasho*. The staff’s visible enjoyment—playing sports, music, even wrestling in mud—works pedagogically by dissolving fear-based hierarchies and inviting children’s participation. Thereby, joy is not just entertainment, but a pedagogical practice that fosters a community where adults and children collaboratively construct meaning (hooks 1994, 2003). Children are highly attuned to adults’ emotional presence: Minato contrasted joyless elementary classrooms with *Blossom*’s staff “smiling from the heart,” identifying this genuine presence as the reason he could keep coming (Minato, interview by author, 2025). Freire’s critique of the “banking model” (2005) further sharpens the analysis of adult-child relations. *Blossom* refuses the adult-centered logic that positions adults as owners of knowledge and children as passive recipients; instead, it cultivates problem-posing relations where children’s experiences and questions organize inquiry and action. Where outsiders often expect reintegration into school as the endpoint, *Blossom* prioritizes the humanization of adult-child relationships—ensuring safety, dignity, and voice in the present—allowing future pathways to emerge from children’s own reflections and choices.

A major contribution of this chapter is to show that “autonomy” at *Blossom* is not idleness, but rather demanding work that is often invisible to outsiders. Children continually decide what to do, moment by moment, and negotiate wants and oughts with peers; they negotiate rules to accommodate shared limitations (e.g., limiting ball-throwing angles to coexist with basketball players) and initiate projects (such as “join-in-if-you-want”) that gradually evolve into large-scale group activities. This finding resonates with Fujita’s observation that autonomy in *furisukūru* is “surprisingly difficult” because it requires ongoing reflection and responsibility (2002, 101). *Blossom*’s stance reflects Noddings’ ethic of care (2005), which prioritizes expressed needs over inferred needs in contexts where standardized demands diminish intrinsic motivation or where social and biological challenges take precedence over academic concerns. Staff model care through sincerity, dialogue, and confirmation, intervening when actions harm others or property but grounding judgment in relational understanding rather than rule-first discipline (Noddings 2010, 2013). These modes of interaction cultivate moral discernment and trust without collapsing authority into coercion.

Children are not passive recipients but co-producers of *ibasho*. Children often start off causing disturbances and being helped by older peers. Over time, they become the ones who help others by mediating conflicts, calming peers, organizing play, and handling shared responsibilities. This “cycle of peer-supported transformation” is illuminated by the anthropology of childhood. Hirschfeld (2002) argues that children do not merely absorb adult models; they create and transmit their own cultures, circulating caring practices among peers. Put differently, at *Blossom*, staff seed a dignity-centered ethos, and children flourish it in peer interactions, often without adult prompting. In this sense, mixed-age groups and observational learning—learning by watching and pitching in within familiar contexts—provide infrastructure for this cycle (Paradise and Rogoff 2009; Gaskins and Paradise 2011;

Noddings 2013). Older peers develop sympathy and leadership while younger peers learn participation and cooperation, aligning with Maynard and Tovote’s findings on bidirectional learning in mixed-age settings (2011). Minato’s and Asahi’s narratives, represented by “now it’s my turn to pass that on” (Minato and Asahi, interviews by author, 2025), show caring becoming an everyday practice, completing the caring relation through the cared-for’s responsiveness (Noddings 2013).

Yet while this “cycle of peer-supported transformation” is crucial to sustaining an *ibasho* over time, this cycle is fragile because it is indeed not something staff order children to pass on, heavily relying on children’s autonomy. The sudden demographic change at *Blossom* following the COVID-19 pandemic—declining older peers and a rapid increase in elementary school-aged children—disrupted this cycle. As long-time participants, Minato and Shū observed, this change has led to more instances of children misinterpreting “autonomy,” making aggressive remarks toward peers and staff, and showing reluctance toward shared responsibilities (Shū and Minato, interviews by author, 2025). Staff narratives also confirm that *ibasho* is never fixed; it depends on the presence and practices of those who inhabit the space. This fragility underscores that maintaining an *ibasho* requires continuous relational work, not only by staff but by children themselves.

These disruptions reveal a broader tension within *Blossom*: although “autonomy” is central to creating an *ibasho*, its meaning is neither uniform nor stable in everyday practice. Staff and children with longer histories at *Blossom* generally interpret autonomy not as unregulated freedom or individual preference without responsibilities, but as a relational and reflexive practice that involves attending to others, negotiating shared use of space, and reflecting on the consequences of one’s actions. Some younger or newer participants, by contrast, often understand autonomy as freedom from constraint, an interpretation that surfaces in dismissive speech, reluctance toward shared responsibilities, and acting without

regard for others, at times generating friction and unsettling others' sense of *ibasho*. This divergence is perhaps shaped in part by language. The relational understanding of autonomy held by staff and longer-time attendees is articulated exclusively through the term “*jiyū*,” literally and usually translated as “freedom,” whereas “*jiritsu*,” which more closely corresponds to “autonomy” or “self-directed” in English, never appears in everyday conversation because of its more formal and technical nature. This may create a subtle paradox: adults and children with more experiences at *Blossom* use the vocabulary of “freedom” to communicate autonomy as relational and reflexive, while younger or inexperienced children, hearing only the lexical form and not its situated meaning, often interpret “*jiyū*” as unrestricted freedom, simply doing as they wish. These varied interpretations—ranging from responsibility to boundaryless self-expression—show that autonomy or “*jiyū*” at *Blossom* is not a stable or uniformly understood principle but a relational concept, continually negotiated and often contested in everyday interaction.

Another challenge appears in children's limited engagement in weekly meetings, occasions that staff value as vehicles for children's voices. Although children are aware and attend the meetings, they speak minimally, mostly leaving adults to carry the discussion. This raises questions about children's contributions in collective decision-making. Perhaps their problem-solving is exercised more strongly through daily informal project-making, negotiations, and resolving conflicts on the spot than through formalized deliberation. In other words, the site of “politics” may be dispersed across everyday practices rather than concentrated in meetings. Yet the difficulty remains: without structures that foster deeper dialogue across mixed ages, the risk is that collective decision-making stays adult-led, undermining children's participation that *Blossom* aspires to uphold.

Overall, these practices are also shaped by broader structural conditions. Japan's legal framework—virtually automatic promotion during compulsory education—reduces pressures

for exam-aligned outcomes, allowing *furīsupēsu*, including *Blossom*, to prioritize present-tense security and curiosity-driven learning. By contrast, Poland’s “free/democratic” schools operate under annual testing tied to the national curriculum, which re-imposes standardized temporality and narrows autonomy (Starnawski and Gawlicz 2021). This contrast underscores that *ibasho* practices at *furīsupēsu* are conditioned by broader policies and temporal arrangements, consistent with Low’s lens of social production (2017).

In sum, this discussion has framed *ibasho* as a process of place-making, sustained through staff’s ethic of care, joy, and dialogical stance, and through children’s and youths’ autonomy and active roles in everyday life—contributions that are powerful yet often negotiated and fragile. Crucially, *ibasho* at *Blossom* is not conceived as a service delivered to children, but as Rin stressed, a collaborative environment that depends on mutual contributions rather than adults “doing everything” for someone (Rin, interview by author, 2025). This collaborative character makes *ibasho* inherently dynamic: it is shaped by relationships, participation, and context, requiring continuous efforts to maintain. Although these dynamics are observable, they do not fully capture how children themselves experience and narrate an *ibasho*—the viewpoint that has been largely overlooked by academic discussions on *furīsupēsu*. Do they feel truly acknowledged in this space? What meanings do they attach to ideas like autonomy, care, and community? How do their stories complicate or affirm the ideals adults articulate? The next chapter takes up these questions by centering children’s own perspectives and voices, examining how an *ibasho* is experienced and interpreted from their point of view.

8. Tracing the Path to *Ibasho*: Children’s Lived Experiences as *Futōkō*

Aoto began attending *Blossom* when he was a junior high school student, at which time he came to *Blossom* daily. Currently, while enrolled in a correspondence high school, he visits *Blossom* a few times a week after classes. During the summer vacation of his high school, he

travels nearly two hours each way from his home in order to come to *Blossom* on a daily basis. He describes himself as shy, explaining, “Well... there were ‘various things’ happened at school, so... I couldn’t really talk to people” (Aoto, interview by author, 2025).

Nevertheless, he can be mostly seen engaging in casual conversations with staff members and peers with whom he has established relationships. In the early phase of my fieldwork, my interactions with Aoto were minimal: he avoided eye contact with me, and conversation rarely extended beyond brief greetings. Over time, however, we gradually accumulated shared moments—playing sports together, having lunch in a big group, or simply spending time in the same space—and our conversations slowly expanded. By the final phase of my fieldwork, he had begun to speak with me more openly, sharing ongoing struggles regarding strained relationships with classmates at his high school, as well as articulating his aspirations, including his desire to work in a playpark like *Sky Park*.

Before the interview with him began, Aoto’s hands appeared to tremble slightly, a small bodily gesture that suggested the nervousness he later articulated explicitly. Immediately after we had finished the interview, he told me that he had been “nervous.” Yet once he started speaking, his narrative unfolded with remarkable depth. After prefacing his story about experiencing *futōkō* with, “If I start talking, it’ll get really long,” he traced his experiences back to his first year of elementary school, offering a deep account of his life shaped by memories of exclusion, marginalization, and an encounter with *Blossom*, where he “finally found an *ibasho*.”

Aoto recalled that, from the first grade, he struggled to keep up with classroom instructions. Classmates then, he said, often labeled him: “How should I put it... they basically treated me like someone who just can’t do anything” (Aoto, interview by author, 2025). Within two months, and after discussions with his parents, he was placed in a

tokubetsu shien gakkyū (“special support class”).¹⁰ At first, the class felt manageable.

However, the initial teacher soon left, and the teacher who replaced them—who remained in charge of the class from the middle of first grade through fifth grade—became the central figure in what Aoto described as an increasingly distressing environment. He characterized this teacher as “really, truly awful,” adding, “Of all the people I’ve met in my life, I think that person was the worst” (Aoto, interview by author, 2025). Under their instruction, he experienced a range of arbitrary and punitive restrictions, including being barred from participating in swimming lessons and being yelled at for not understanding material that had supposedly already been taught. Looking back, he reflected on the normalization of this treatment: “Why did I keep going... Now that I think about it... I guess I convinced myself that this is what elementary school is like. [...] I used to recognize that school is a place—a place everyone goes even though it’s painful” (Aoto, interview by author, 2025).

He remained in the “special support class” until fifth grade, when he finally reached a breaking point and told his parents he could no longer continue. After the teacher’s abusive behavior was acknowledged, he returned to the regular classroom. Yet this shift did not resolve the sense of devaluation he felt. Teachers continued to respond harshly to his efforts, he recalled, for instance, dismissing a craft he had made with a curt, “What is this?” In sixth grade as well, he remembered that “just standing in front of the school gate every morning was already hard, but I somehow forced myself to keep going.” A turning point came during the school trip, where he encountered what he described as a deeply traumatic moment. When a popular classmate paired with him began to cry, the teacher comforted the crying student while ignoring Aoto. As he recounted it: “The teacher looked at the kid who was

¹⁰ *Tokubetsu Shien Gakkyū* (“special support class”) is defined by MEXT as “a class established in elementary schools, junior high schools, and other institutions for pupils with specific disabilities, with the purpose of supporting them in overcoming learning or daily-life difficulties arising from those disabilities: intellectual disabilities; physical disabilities; chronic illness or frailty; visual impairments; hearing impairments; speech and language disorders; and autism or emotional disorders” (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, n.d.d).

crying and told them something like, ‘It’s okay, next time you can be with someone you want.’ And then the student said they were fine, and the rest of the class applauded.” After this incident, he was no longer able to attend school, and from the sixth grade onward, he stopped going to school entirely (Aoto, interview by author, 2025).

After entering junior high school, he never attended even a single day, instead circulating through various alternative spaces, including *furisukūru*, in an attempt to find an environment that felt bearable. Reflecting on that period, he described his emotional state in stark terms: “My first year of junior high school was honestly the hardest time in my life. I’d wake up around eleven in the morning... I just didn’t want to get up. What scared me most back then was the feeling that no matter where I went, I couldn’t fit—that nothing could work out anywhere” (Aoto, interview by author, 2025). Amid this ongoing sense of fear and alienation, he eventually had the opportunity to speak with a teacher from the junior high school’s “special support class.” Through these conversations, he decided to try attending school again, and from the middle of his first year through his promotion into the second year, things went relatively well. However, when a new teacher took charge in his second year, the situation shifted. This teacher dismissed him with remarks such as, “Is your Japanese okay?”—comments that undermined his sense of competence. After the summer vacation of his second year, he again found himself unable to go to school. Describing the feelings that accompanied this disconnection, he told me, “At that point I just felt completely hopeless. I was overwhelmed by anxiety—like, what’s going to happen to me from here on?” (Aoto, interview by author, 2025).

In the midst of this uncertainty, he happened to see a television program that featured *Blossom*. He recalled, “I just honestly thought, ‘This is the only place left for me.’ And I immediately wanted to go.” Aoto told me that even now, nearly three years later, he

remembers vividly the first time he visited *Sky Park*. Looking back, he described that moment in detail:

When I first came, I don't know if it was because I felt so relieved, but on that first day, I just felt like, "This place fits me." It did. And when I got on the train to go home that day, I looked at my hands and saw they were covered in mud. And that made me feel so at ease. [...] It had been so long since I'd gotten that muddy. I actually cried on the train. I cried. I was like, "I'm so glad." [...] When I first came, the staff talked to me, and I finally felt like I'd found an *ibasho*. I was just so relieved. I felt really safe (Aoto, interview by author, 2025).

At the end of the interview, he revealed that "up through my junior high school years, I kept asking myself why I was like this..." reflecting how much he had once blamed himself.

Nonetheless, he continued, it was precisely because he had gone through so many difficult experiences that he is now here, and that they had made him stronger: "When I think about it now, well... it was a good experience after all" (Aoto, interview by author, 2025). Aoto ended telling his life story with these words—delivered with a striking clarity and a forward-looking confidence that felt neither rehearsed nor performative. In that moment, his confident expression and tone conveyed to me the sense that he had truly moved beyond the hardships of his past.

On the one hand, Aoto's narrative of his experiences as *futōkō* and the turning points that shaped him cannot be reduced to a representative case of the children who attend *Blossom*. On the other hand, his story highlights several recurring features that characterize the experiences of the *futōkō* children at *Blossom*, which will be discussed in this chapter: the lowered sense of self-worth shaped by school experiences or by being *futōkō* itself; the tendency to view *Blossom* in ways that exceed a simple school/alternative-education binary; and the resilience and capacity to find and sustain hope even amid ongoing or past difficulties. Building on the previous chapter's examination of the practices through which *Blossom* creates and maintains *ibasho*, this chapter explores how young people, those who have disconnected from conventional schooling and continue to visit *Blossom*—including

some who do so beyond the compulsory education period—articulate their lived experiences within this space.

Through the interviews, it became clear that despite recent governmental discourse that appears more sympathetic toward *futōkō*, most children and youths continue to feel that *futōkō* is still stigmatized with persistent prejudice. Drawing on Freire (2005), this chapter argues that such repeated disapproving evaluations—through teachers’ judgments, credentialist expectations, and Japan’s broader “*gakkō shinkō*” (“faith in schooling”) (Yoshii 1999; Fujita 2002)—are not merely external pressures but become internalized, leading children themselves to take on deficit narratives that erode their sense of worth. At the same time, as I have illustrated in the previous chapter, *Blossom* constitutes a relational environment in which children are not positioned as problems to be managed, but as subjects whose perspectives, knowledge, and emotional worlds matter. In line with Freire’s insight (2005) that humanization begins when the oppressed recognize their own capacity to interpret and act upon the world, the children at *Blossom* gradually reclaim a sense of competence as they experience everyday interactions that affirm their dignity and validate their ways of knowing. This chapter, therefore, illustrates not only how such repeated judgments diminish children’s sense of worth but also how, within *Blossom*, they gradually begin to recover a belief in their own capacities as their dignity is upheld and their lived knowledge recognized. In this way, this chapter portrays how the children at *Blossom* come to re-orient themselves toward the future with growing confidence.

8.1. “I Couldn’t Be ‘Normal’”: When School Becomes Unbearable

The school experiences of children who come to *Blossom*, as well as the circumstances, causes, and timing of their disconnection from school, are diverse. Some children report sensing a fundamental “misalignment” or discomfort with the institutional structure of school almost immediately upon entering elementary school. Others had attended happily for years

with friends, routines, and no major difficulties until they encountered challenges such as bullying by classmates or interactions with authoritarian or even abusive teachers.

Asahi, for example, explained that he enjoyed elementary school up until the second grade, had friends, and felt at ease—experiences he describes as similar to those he now has at *Blossom*. However, after transferring to a new school, he gradually became a target of bullying, which eventually led him to stop attending (Asahi, interview by author, 2025). In Gaku's case, he spoke of having no interpersonal or academic difficulties at school; he got along well with teachers and classmates and had no trouble keeping up with his studies. The most significant challenge for him was a deep disruption to his daily rhythm, especially difficulties waking up in the morning, which gradually resulted in more frequent absences and eventually led to his disconnection from school (Gaku, interview by author, 2025). Mio, who has been coming to *Blossom* for more than a decade and is now in her early twenties, still visits *Blossom* once a week while preparing for an overseas working holiday. She reflected on her own experience with uncertainty, prefacing her account by saying that the precise reasons she became *futōkō* remain unclear even to her. What she does recall is that upon entering junior high school, everyone around her already knew one another from their elementary school days. She alone was the outsider, which left her feeling isolated while struggling academically. Although she continued attending for about six months, she remembers thinking, with growing unease, that “something just didn't feel right” (Mio, interview by author, 2025).

At the same time, one theme that emerges across many narratives of *futōkō* children is the presence of coercive or authoritarian attitudes among teachers, and the resulting erosion of children's trust in the adults responsible for their care. Shū explained that “Until recently, I had never really thought about why I stopped attending school.” At the time, in the third grade, he only told his parents that he “just didn't want to go.” Looking back now, however,

he identifies his homeroom teachers' intimidating behavior as a central factor: "[My first-grade homeroom teacher] would constantly yell, even at first graders, and often threatened to call our parents using the classroom phone. My third-grade teacher was also known among parents for problematic behavior. They taped a student's mouth shut if they forgot the mask used for serving school lunch. They would even drag a student's desk into the hallway and tell them to study out there alone" (Shū, interview by author, 2025). Aoi, who moved from another prefecture with her family specifically so she could attend *Blossom* and now comes several times a week while enrolled in a correspondence high school, recalled similarly oppressive experiences in elementary school. She explained that school lunch was strictly timed: a thirty-minute countdown dictated how quickly students were expected to eat, and anyone who failed to finish in time was compelled to keep eating afterward "until they reached their limit" while being watched by peers and the teacher. This practice left her feeling constantly surveilled and under intense pressure" (Aoi, interview by author, 2025).

Minato recalled sensing, from as early as his first year of elementary school, a strong pressure from teachers to conform—an insistence that "everyone must be the same." One moment that manifested this feeling occurred in second grade, when he saw his homeroom teacher trying to force a child who was already full to continue eating their school lunch. Confronted with this scene, he felt a sharp discrepancy between what he believed to be right and what the adult was doing—a moment that triggered his growing distrust toward adults (Minato, interview by author, 2025). Meanwhile, Asahi still expressed frustration as he recounted an incident in which he approached a teacher for help about being bullied: "Of course, I talked to them [about the bullying]. But... it was useless [laughs]. I thought they might actually help, but instead they told me, like, 'You're the reason you're being bullied. You need to fix yourself.' And even when I tried to do what they told me, nothing changed. The bullying didn't stop. It was obviously wrong [laughs]. And then, because I was being

bullied, they put me in a ‘special support class’” (Asahi, interview by author, 2025).

Although these accounts vary in their specifics, they highlight a shared set of relational dynamics in which institutional authority becomes a source of fear, pressure, or neglect rather than support.

These children’s accounts reveal how everyday disciplinary practices in schools—raised voices, threats, punitive humiliation, forced eating, and the denial of support—constitute what Freire (2005) describes as dehumanizing educational relations. In these encounters, teachers do not appear as partners in learning but as figures who act upon students, reducing them to objects to be managed, corrected, or disciplined. Freire argues that in the “banking model” of schooling, students are positioned as passive recipients of authority, a structure that inevitably produces relations of domination rather than mutual recognition (2005, 71–74). The scenes described by Shū, Aoi, Minato, Asahi, and Aoto—teachers dragging desks into hallways, taping a child’s mouth shut, forcing them to eat beyond their limits, one-sidedly attributing the cause of bullying to the bullied, and harshly dismissing their work—illustrate this logic of objectification, in which students are positioned as “objects” rather than co-participants in learning. Such acts do not simply enforce rules; they assert a hierarchical order in which teachers hold absolute authority and children’s perspectives, comfort, and knowledge carry little weight. These children were not engaged as subjects capable of knowing and acting, but as beings whose only task is to adapt to an oppressive pedagogical order (Freire 2005, 71–76).

hooks offers a complementary perspective by drawing attention not only to overtly punitive acts but also to what she critiques as an objectivist, emotionally distant mode of teaching—a stance that values “neutrality,” detachment, and control over connection and love. When teachers uphold this distance, she argues, they may objectify students to preserve it, approaching them as “empty vessels” rather than as whole persons with emotional

presence and lived experience (hooks 2003, 127–29). The children’s narratives echo this dynamic: several described teachers who appeared uncommunicative, offered little explanation or dialogue, or responded to distress with indifference. Such behaviors align with what hooks calls standing “at a distance,” a posture where authority is asserted without reciprocal engagement or listening (2003, 128–29). For these children, this emotional distance steadily eroded trust; teachers became figures to avoid rather than adults to approach for support. This relational disconnection—accumulating through small, repeated moments—contributed to their sense that school was not a place where they could feel safe, understood, or recognized.

At the same time, the children’s narratives reveal the extent to which many of them continued attending school even under such conditions, until they reached what they describe as their “limit.” After they were no longer able to remain in a regular classroom, many were encouraged by teachers or parents to keep trying through alternative forms of attendance “within the school”: spending time in “special support classrooms,” staying in the school infirmary, or coming only for lunch or after-school hours (Tanaka 2021, 7; Maeda 2022, 63). Aoi, for example, initially attended school through the infirmary. Partway through, however, the local board of education instructed the school that allowing students to rely on the infirmary would make it “impossible for them to return to the classroom,” and she was subsequently placed in a “special support class” instead (Aoi, interview by author, 2025). Minato recalled that, despite telling his parents how painful school had become, he still tried to visit the school after school hours (Minato, interview by author, 2025). Gaku similarly described how his parents repeatedly urged him to at least go for school lunch, which he attempted for a while before eventually finding himself unable to continue (Gaku, interview by author, 2025).

For those reaching that limit meant quite literally being unable to move beyond the threshold of home or the school entrance. They did not consciously “choose” to stop attending; rather, their bodies resisted taking that step. Mio described the turning point after forcing herself to continue through the first half year in junior high school:

I held on until the midterm exams in the second term. After the exams, I just couldn’t go the next day. But every morning for about a week, I still got up, ate breakfast, prepared stuff, put on my uniform, even made it to the point of putting on my shoes at the door. And then my body just wouldn’t move. I didn’t understand why. I tried that every day for about a week because I’m stubborn, but even I had to admit it was impossible (Mio, interview by author, 2025).

Minato shared a similar experience “Even when I tried to go, there were days I would get as far as the school entrance and then realize, ‘No... I really can’t do this today’” (Minato, interview by author, 2025). These accounts illuminate how *futōkō* often emerges not from a moment of choice but from an embodied and relational threshold—one that children reach only after prolonged attempts to maintain their connection to school under increasingly unmanageable conditions, echoing Minamide’s broader observation of children who experience *futōkō* (2016, 85–86).

The emotions the children describe at the moment they finally stopped attending school reveal a further layer of complexity. Aoi reflected on how she felt when she discontinued going to school: “Well... It wasn’t so much negative. It was more like I finally felt ‘freed from school.’ For a long time—almost every day—I kept telling my mother how painful it was. It was really hard. And the only reason I kept going was that I thought my teacher would be happy if I showed up” (Aoi, interview by author, 2025). Asahi described mixed emotions when he ultimately stopped attending: “There was a part of me that felt relieved, but at the same time I worried about what would happen with my studies... I really struggled with it back then.” He continued: “I kept wondering, ‘Why can’t I go to school?’ I assumed going was normal, so I didn’t understand why I couldn’t. Back then, that uncertainty

was much stronger. Now, I find myself asking why we're expected to cling to school so desperately, but at the time, I was just anxious" (Asahi, interview by author, 2025).

This sense of school attendance as an unquestioned norm—and of *futōkō* as a failure to conform to normative expectations—is echoed in Mio's account: "I had dilemmas, like 'Am I running away [from school]?' 'Am I taking the easy way out by escaping to someplace easy and comfortable?' [...] And I felt like... I couldn't go to junior high school... Like I had run away... that I'd given up. I didn't have the endurance everyone else seemed to have. I couldn't become like them. I couldn't become 'normal'" (Mio, interview by author, 2025). These narratives show that *futōkō*, in many cases, is not the result of children simply "not wanting to study" or casually choosing to stop attending school. Instead, it arises from a long and painful accumulation of strain—followed by the emotional turmoil of stepping outside a system that defines attendance as the unquestioned norm.

These distressing feelings children describe upon entering a state of *futōkō* also uncover how deeply they have internalized dominant cultural expectations—particularly the assumption, reinforced by families and the broader public, that attending school and studying are the "normal" and legitimate path. Mio reflected that she herself held prejudices against *futōkō* at the time she stopped attending. When I asked where those ideas came from, she replied, "Well... Japanese people have it planted in them without even realizing it" (Mio, interview by author, 2025). Indeed, many of the children and youths I interviewed recalled moments when their parents or grandparents tried to justify or insist upon the necessity of going to school—sometimes even forcing them to go as far as the school gate by car.

Moreover, when asked how they believed *futōkō* was viewed in general, every interviewee responded that it carried negative connotations. These stigmas are not abstract; they have concrete effects on children's lives and emotions. Many described experiences of being "surveilled" or questioned by peers outside of school, who, even if not intentionally

malicious, would ask: “When are you coming to school?” “Why can you be here if you can’t come to school?” “You are skipping school.” Others spoke of adults’ gaze, “Why is a child out in the middle of a weekday?” or comments like “What are you going to do now?” They also noted strong prejudice against *futōkō* that circulates online. To avoid such scrutiny, many described adjusting their routines to avoid running into classmates or hiding the fact that they were *futōkō* on the internet. In other words, the persistence of stigma constrains not only how children move through public space but also how they picture themselves in relation to others. It makes leaving home burdensome, and it shapes their behavioral choices in profound ways. Asahi expressed this impact clearly and called for a change in the public gaze: “Well... *futōkō* is not a bad thing. Absolutely not. That’s the one thing I want people to understand. It’s not that we ‘don’t go’—it’s that we can’t go. So I really hope people can change the way they see it” (Asahi, interview by author, 2025).

These children’s experiences uncover how “*gakkō shrinkō*” (“faith in school”) and credentialist norms work together to produce powerful expectations about what a “proper” childhood should look like in Japan. “*Gakkō shrinkō*” operates at the level of cultural belief, presenting school attendance as self-evidently natural and universally desirable—so taken for granted that its premise remains largely unexamined (Yoshii 1999, 98; Fujita 2002, 97). Within this view, school is positioned not simply as one domain of childhood and education but as the normative environment for learning and socialization.

Credentialism adds another layer, converting uninterrupted school attendance into a forward-facing investment in imagined futures (Kariya 2010, 88–91; 94–95). Through this logic, school attendance becomes entangled with broader cultural narratives of effort, endurance, and social worth, making deviation from the expected path appear risky or even irresponsible. Such normative expectations construct schooling as not only morally right, as “*gakkō shrinkō*” presumes, but also practically indispensable for securing social legitimacy,

stability, and adulthood itself (Cave 2023, 162–73; Smith 2025, 227–30). Whether from family at home, teachers at school, strangers on the street, peers in a park, or the internet, children often absorb cues that their absence threatens something essential—whether their employability, their future prospects, or their standing in the eyes of others.

What emerges from the children’s narratives is an embodied encounter with these overlapping expectations. Asahi’s relief at finally stopping is shadowed by worry about what it means for “the future.” Mio’s self-questioning—“Am I running away?”—shows how deeply she had internalized the assumption that perseverance in school is the measure of being “normal.” It precisely shows how the stigma to *futōkō* is so persistent due to this powerful cultural and structural assemblage. The stigma does not stem simply from the act of non-attending but from what *futōkō* is imagined to jeopardize: academic progress, future success, and one’s standing within an achievement-oriented social order. Children’s accounts of being surveilled in public, questioned by peers, or judged by adults reflect how closely everyday practices are monitored through a school-centered lens.

Having been repeatedly dismissed or devalued by teachers, by family who view them through a school-first worldview, and by a wider society that equates attendance with success, children who experience *futōkō* inevitably begin to internalize these judgments. Minato explained that the reason he frequently acted out when he first came to *Blossom* was rooted in “anxiety about myself.” He felt “pressure from everyone around me telling me to go to school,” and that during that time, “it was like I genuinely didn’t know who I was anymore. I kept feeling as if whatever I did, people would think it was wrong” (Minato, interview by author, 2025). His words reveal how social expectations can become an internal voice that destabilizes one’s sense of self. Staff member Rin, who has *futōkō* experience herself, described a pattern among *futōkō*, noting that “even kids who go to school don’t know a lot of things, but children who are *futōkō*—including myself in the past—tend to

assume that because they don't go, they must not understand anything" (Rin, interview by author, 2025). Her reflection highlights how children come to equate school attendance with competence itself, interpreting absence not simply as a break in schooling but as evidence of personal deficiency.

This tendency was also evident in my own observations, particularly in relation to academic knowledge, where children often assessed their abilities far below what they demonstrably possessed. One afternoon at Leaf—the program where *Blossom* children can participate mostly for subject-based study—Mari, a first-year junior high school student, joined the session for the first time since I began observing Leaf. As I was assisting as a volunteer, I mentioned that Leaf was not only for studying and that she could also play board games if she preferred. She replied with a slightly shy tone, "Then I'll do the 'playing' one," signaling her sense of difficulty or discomfort with academic study. Yet after playing board games together, she said that she wanted to practice reading and writing kanji. When we worked through a workbook side by side, she was able to solve problems at or even above the expected level for her grade. Still, each time she wrote an answer, she looked at me for confirmation with a visibly uncertain expression, showing a persistent lack of confidence in academic learning.

These experiences mirror what Freire describes as the internalization of "self-depreciation," in which persistent external evaluations solidify into internal truths that children come to believe about themselves (2005, 63–65). The children's recollections make this process strikingly clear: Mio believing she simply lacked the "endurance" that others possessed, or Aoto recalling that teachers and peers viewed him as "a hopeless child." When teachers said things like "Is your Japanese okay?" or dismissed a craft project with "What is this?", the children did not interpret these remarks as isolated acts of adult frustration—they absorbed them as evidence of their own inadequacy.

Even years later, they continued to ask, “Why am I like this?” or assumed that their struggles were due to defects in their personality rather than problems in their circumstances. This dynamic aligns precisely with Freire’s argument that oppressive educational environments lead learners to adopt deficit narratives about themselves, accepting institutional judgments as reflections of their true selves (2005, 63–65, 74). As many remarked, the effects persist long after leaving school: diminished confidence in their abilities, hesitation to speak to adults, or a lingering fear that their perspectives do not matter. Stigma, consequently, does not operate only externally as societal prejudice; it also persists internally as a sedimented structure of feeling shaped by years of evaluative encounters in school. As I will illustrate in the next section, *Blossom* becomes meaningful precisely because it interrupts this cycle—not through academic instruction, but by providing the relational conditions in which children can gradually unlearn self-depreciation and begin to see themselves as capable subjects.

8.2. “*Nantoka Naru*” (It’ll Work Out): Cultivating Hope Amid Hardship

Within such emotional and contextual circumstances—children who have disconnected from school, and some have spent more than a few months shut inside their homes before arriving at *Blossom*—the first visit is especially crucial. *Blossom*’s deputy director, Takumi, explained that he approaches children’s first visit with the recognition that “they come here carrying an enormous amount of anxiety.” For this reason, during their initial visit, he shows them around *Sky Park* and *Blossom*, explaining what they “can” do there while conveying the following message to the child: “There isn’t a single thing here that you have to do. If you don’t want to do something, you don’t have to. And it is a place that if you don’t want to come, you don’t have to come” (Takumi, interview by author, 2025). As discussed in the previous chapter, other staff members similarly emphasized in their interviews the practices they pay special attention to when working with children in their early days at *Blossom*, such as addressing

children by their names as a way of affirming their presence and making hidden efforts to cultivate natural connections with others through shared interests.

When I asked the children and youths to recall their first impressions of *Blossom*, many described the environment as lively to the point of being overwhelming, which also echoes in my first impression: a “noisy,” “busy,” and at times “chaotic” space where different children pursue various activities simultaneously. Yet they also consistently contrasted this initial sensory overload with the staff’s welcoming demeanor because of the earlier-mentioned ways of engaging. Minato reflected: “There was this sense of safety. Even though it was my first time, no one made me feel left out or ignored. Everyone welcomed me in this really warm, almost family-like way. I still remember that” (Minato, interview by author, 2025). Aoto likewise said: “Right from the beginning, I felt the staff were kind. [...] I really wanted someone who understood me—someone who would accept me. And I felt like this was a place where I could be accepted” (Aoto, interview by author, 2025). Moreover, for children who had internalized a sense of “not being able to become ‘normal’” because they could not attend school, being among peers with similar experiences also fostered moments of relief. As Shū explained, “It made me realize I wasn’t the only one. That feeling—that I wasn’t the only person not going to school—was really strong” (Shū, interview by author, 2025).

In this environment—defined not by conformity but by openness—children encounter a mode of relating that differs sharply from the school settings they had disconnected from. Whereas teachers at school were experienced as standing “one step above,” asserting both authority and emotional distance, *Blossom*’s staff was described as “0.2 steps above” (Gaku, interview by author, 2025). Their stance, which emphasizes interacting with children as individuals with dignity and sympathy, is something the children themselves perceive clearly. When I asked Asahi about the difference between school and *Blossom*, he immediately

responded without hesitation: “The people are completely different.” Comparing the staff’s responses to the way the teacher handled when he had been bullied, he explained: “The warmth is just totally different. [...] Staff at *Blossom* really take your feelings into account—they listen, they understand, and they genuinely stay close to you” (Asahi, interview by author, 2025). Shū, who faced serious issues at home and had no place, neither within his family nor anywhere else where he could express his feelings, described how talking to *Blossom* staff made him feel an enormous sense of relief when he was struggling to keep everything inside. He reflected on the urgency of that moment: “I just wanted someone to listen. They didn’t have to understand me at all. They didn’t need to give me answers. I just wanted to be allowed to say what I needed to say” (Shū, interview by author, 2025).

Because *Blossom* is a place where children do not feel the pressure or coercion they experienced from schoolteachers, and instead feel recognized and safe, many describe it as a space where they can genuinely “be themselves.” Aoi, reflecting on her first impressions, contrasted the atmosphere at *Blossom* with the pressure she felt from teachers at school. She noted that the difference was immediately perceptible: “Well... I feel like schoolteachers really had this kind of pressure. But the staff here don’t have that at all, so I can just be myself here” (Aoi, interview by author, 2025). Aoto similarly articulated a similar consequence: “In any case, they accept everyone. That’s the difference. Honestly, from elementary school to junior high school, and now high school too—the school only looked at us in terms of studying. They didn’t see anything beyond that. But here, at *Blossom*, they acknowledge even the parts of me that are ‘bad’ as part of my individuality. That’s really the difference” (Aoto, interview by author, 2025).

Being affirmed for who they really are helps children gain confidence in themselves and supports their growth. Across their narratives, two particular kinds of changes stood out. The first concerns growth in interpersonal relationships. Gaku described his own change by

saying that the “sharp edges” he once had, softened, and that he had become able to understand what others were feeling: “I can now tell when someone is sad, when someone is angry, when someone is happy” (Gaku, interview by author, 2025). Mio self-deprecatingly described her past self as “not even human,” explaining that she could not take an interest in what others said. Over time, however, she realized that what she had thought was a dislike of interacting with others had shifted into the recognition that “I actually do like relating to people” (Mio, interview by author, 2025). Aoi, who disclosed that she experienced an anxiety-related communication condition, explained: “When I was outside and with anyone other than my family, I could hardly get my voice out at all. At first, it was really like that, but as I gradually interacted with people at *Blossom*, I became able to talk more. That was really big for me. I think that might not have happened [if I hadn’t been coming to *Blossom*]” (Aoi, interview by author, 2025).

The second change involves discovering strengths and developing confidence by spending time in an environment where not only academics but a wide range of abilities and qualities are valued. Asahi gave the example of a time when a computer at *Blossom* broke down. After he took the initiative to fix it, he felt, “I realized I could actually turn this kind of thing into a job. I guess I really do have the skills to do it.” He reflected that being part of a community where different abilities are acknowledged helped him recognize his own strengths, indicating that *Blossom*’s value for diverse skills enabled this realization (Asahi, interview by author, 2025). Minato said that the biggest change for him at *Blossom* was that by learning to trust others, he also learned to believe in himself. Having gone through various experiences outside school as *futōkō*, he expressed a strong sense of self-confidence: “Honestly, compared to others at my age, I think I’ve experienced more than anyone, and I feel like I’ve achieved more than anyone, and I feel like I’m stronger than anyone.” With this, he added that he now feels he “can do anything” (Minato, interview by author, 2025).

These transformations were also evident in my fieldwork observations. Aoto, who told me that before coming to *Blossom*, “I really had no confidence in myself, and my mental state was pretty torn apart” (Aoto, interview by author, 2025) now connects different groups of children and creates situations where everyone can play together, takes the initiative to make equipment for sports, and sends messages to remind others about heat-stroke prevention before a baseball game. Minato, who often acted out when he first came to *Blossom* because he felt, “Whatever I did, I felt like people would say it was wrong” (Minato, interview by author, 2025), now checks whether younger children need help such as tent building at the camp trip, and tries to calm children who are having outbursts, just as others once supported him. Asahi, who had experienced bullying in the past, intervened during the staff’s announcement about incidents of stolen money. He sharply added, “Please don’t start making guesses about who stole it,” cutting off any possibility of gossip among the children. Importantly, as described in the previous chapter, these forms of growth are not used solely for their own benefit. By supporting younger children who may now be going through similar struggles, they contribute to carrying forward a “cycle of peer-supported transformation” into the next generation.

As children make sense of their past experiences and grow more confident, they also begin to recover a sense of future direction. Minato, thinking of those who are still struggling as *futōkō*, told me that he wants his own life to serve as an example of what is possible: “I’m on a different track—not the ‘normal’ one—and I want to show people that this track exists” (Minato, interview by author, 2025). He hopes to empower others by embodying a life lived outside conventional trajectories. When I asked Aoto what he wanted to do in the future, he said he wanted to be involved in a playpark like *Sky Park*. Aware of the persistent prejudice against *futōkō*, he said, “I want to help *futōkō* children even just a little, and I want such impressions to go away. I’m doing okay now, but as I grow up, I want there to be more

ibasho outside of school too [for other children].” He added that he aspires to create the same sense of warmth he experienced at *Blossom* and become “someone’s *ibasho*” (Aoto, interview by author, 2025).

The empirical accounts above illustrate how relational safety at *Blossom* becomes the ground on which many children begin to undertake the process Freire calls *conscientização* (critical consciousness), by which learners become aware of social, political, and economic contradictions and take actions to transform oppressive realities (2005, 35). For them, their earlier school experiences had produced precisely the effects of self-depreciation that Freire identifies as a hallmark of oppression (2005, 63–65, 74): they had come to see themselves as deficient, incapable, or “not normal.” What is crucial in their narratives is that this internalized sense of inadequacy does not disappear merely by leaving school. Rather, it is through new relational encounters—staff affirming their presence, attentively listening without judgment, validating their experiences and knowledge—that children gradually realize broader social issues surrounding *futōkō*. These interactions interrupt the sedimented assumptions about themselves, not only through staff’s support but also through “praxis”: the lived, iterative movement between reflection (“Maybe I wasn’t the problem”) and action (“I can empower other *futōkō*,” “I can try something new”) (Freire 2005, 64–65, 79). In this sense, *Blossom* serves as a relational and dialogical space where children engage in praxis that enables them to look at their histories and broader structures differently and to see themselves in new ways.

hooks’ concept of education as the practice of freedom (2003) further illuminates why these relational dynamics matter so profoundly. The relationships children describe at *Blossom* resonate with what hooks identifies as an engaged pedagogy grounded in love—understood not sentimentally, but as a practice comprised of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust (hooks 2003, 131–34). In contrast to the objectivist,

emotionally distant stance children associated with schoolteachers—where they felt validated only through academic abilities or conforming, or treated as if objects—*Blossom* staff engage with children in ways that embody this love: respecting dignity, listening attentively, remembering names, sharing everyday activities, and responding with warmth rather than conformity (hooks 2003, 127–34). These forms of relational presence enact hooks’ insistence that learning begins where individuals feel recognized as whole persons (hooks 1994, 13). The children’s descriptions—“I felt accepted,” “I can be myself here”—demonstrate how loving recognition creates the conditions in which voices can emerge without fear, making possible the kind of self-actualization hooks associates with education as the practice of freedom (hooks 2003, 72).

The transformations children articulate—describing a gradual softening of the “sharp edges” they once felt, a renewed confidence in interpersonal encounters, an increased comfort with presenting themselves authentically, and a clearer recognition of their own capacities—are not sudden changes but the accumulated outcome of many small interactions. They grow through repeated experiences in which children realize that value is not assigned solely to correct answers, academic competence, or easily identifiable strengths. Their mistakes, perceived shortcomings, and non-academic abilities are met without judgment but are affirmatively recognized. This ongoing experience of acceptance enables them to participate in diverse activities and to notice how their contributions matter. Such dynamics closely align with what *ibasho* scholarship identifies as foundational: the assurance that one’s emotions can be expressed openly without fear of dismissal, and the ability to feel one’s own role within a relational environment (Bamba and Haight 2007, 406; Ishimoto 2009, 98). Morita’s ethnographic work in a *furūsukūru* similarly highlights how children experiencing *futōkō* often live with a pervasive sense that “everyday life is hard to navigate,” accompanied by a profound internalized self-negation. Citing staff’s remark, he characterizes the purpose

of the *furīshukūru* as a process of “turning the gears that are rotating in a negative direction into a positive rotation” (2022, 61–62). In this sense, the transformative experiences children describe can be understood as concrete manifestations of this shift: a gradual reorientation from self-doubt toward a stabilized sense of contribution and self-worth.

Importantly, the emergence of future-oriented perspectives among children further demonstrates the depth of this transformation. For children who once felt hopeless, ashamed, or fearful of judgment, the ability to imagine futures—whether Minato’s desire to “show others that this track exists” or Aoto’s aspiration to become “someone’s *ibasho*”—resonates with what hooks describes as a pedagogy of hope (2003). Hope here is not naïve optimism but a relational achievement: the result of experiencing oneself as capable, valued, and connected to a community (hooks 2003, xiv–xv). Freire also notes that liberation from oppression is only possible when individuals perceive their situation as transformable and themselves as agents in that transformation (2005, 49–52). The children’s newfound future-orientation thus reflects precisely the movement from fatalistic self-blame to a sense of possibilities—an affective and epistemic shift nurtured through the everyday relational practices at *Blossom*.

Taken together, these narratives reveal that *Blossom*’s significance lies not in offering a mere refuge but in cultivating the relational, affective, and epistemic conditions for education as the practice of freedom, thereby empowering them to reimagine futures. This aligns with Tanaka’s view of *ibasho*, who emphasizes that future orientations remain important; an *ibasho* that serves only as a temporary refuge risks becoming a stagnant space that no longer supports growth (2021, 7–9). Through the affirmation of dignity, the invitation to participate as capable subjects, and the felt sense of contribution to the community, the children move from internalized stigma toward self-esteem, critical awareness, and self-actualization. In this sense, *Blossom* constitutes this relational environment for children

to reclaim themselves as subjects—beings who can reflect, act, and hope—and thus to move toward futures not prescribed by school-based norms but opened through relational encounters that cultivate new forms of strengths, confidence, and contribution. This gradual reorientation is also evident in how children looked back on their earlier selves and the trajectories that brought them to *Blossom*.

Despite having endured significant challenges in the past—and, for many, continuing to do so—the children’s and youths’ answers to the question, “If you could say something to yourself before you started coming to *Blossom*, what would you tell yourself?” frequently returned to the same expression: “*nantoka naru.*” Translated into English as “It’ll work out,” the expression conveys a forward-looking stance—a sense that, no matter how challenging situations may be, one will eventually find a way through them and things will somehow be resolved. Aoi, who told me that her studies in high school are currently going well, reflected this spirit. “I’d probably tell myself that even if you’re anxious—because you’re not managing your studies or other things—‘it’ll work out,’” she said (Aoi, interview by author, 2025). Her words suggest both recognition of the fear she once carried and a gentle encouragement to the earlier version of herself who could not yet imagine things improving. Mio prefaced her answer by noting that her response would likely have differed depending on when she was asked—a reminder of how her sense of self has shifted over time. But speaking from her current standpoint, she said simply: “Right now... I think I’d say, ‘It’ll work out’” (Mio, interview by author, 2025). Asahi—who now visits occasionally while attending a correspondence high school, for as he put it, “kind of like counseling”—acknowledged that high school remains difficult for him. Yet when asked the question, he took a deep breath and said: “I’d say, ‘It’ll work out’ [laughs]. Well, I can’t say it with full confidence yet, but... probably, it’ll work out [laughs]. I didn’t need to take everything so seriously” (Asahi, interview by author, 2025).

Nantoka naru illuminates how the children have come to reinterpret their own trajectories. This expression does not signal a dismissal of the hardships they endured; rather, it marks a shift in the emotional and epistemic ground from which those hardships are understood. It reflects a movement from alienation toward relational trust, from self-blame toward self-recognition, from foreclosed futures toward the sense that new possibilities can emerge. In this way, the seemingly simple phrase condenses the cumulative effects of their experiences at *Blossom*: the reassurance found in loving recognition, the critical awareness and confidence with small acts of praxis, and the hope sustained through relational practices. In the following chapter, I will argue and explain that the simple dichotomy between conventional school and alternative education does not fully capture *Blossom*'s dynamics.

8.3. *Blossom* as Home, *Ibasho*, and the Otherwise

In observing the everyday interactions and speech of the children and youths, I noticed that *Blossom* was rarely framed through institutional labels such as “school,” “*furīsupēsu*,” or “*furīsukūru*.” Instead, the participants commonly described their movements to and from *Blossom* using terms associated with familial or domestic spaces. Particularly striking was their frequent use of “*kaette-kuru*” (to come back) or “*tadaima*” (I’m home), rather than simply “to go” or “to come.” This linguistic pattern indicates that *Blossom* was integrated into their affective landscape as a place experienced not as an institution but as a home-like, emotionally anchored environment. One illustrative moment occurred when we returned from the two-day camp trip held as plan B. While *Blossom* had conventionally closed during the annual camp, this year it remained open to accommodate children unable to participate due to financial constraints or other circumstances. When the chartered bus arrived outside *Sky Park*, and we began walking toward the building, Miho, junior high school-aged, exclaimed with delight, “I’m home!” Spotting Keiko—who had stayed behind at *Blossom* and had been waiting for them near the entrance—Miho ran toward her. Although they had been separated

for only a few days, Miho grabbed Keiko's hands, bounced with excitement, and greeted her with a heartfelt "Long time no see!" Her reaction expressed the same kind of emotion one might display when reunited with family after an absence—manifesting her joy at "returning home."

Gaku's explanation highlights how *Blossom* is embedded in children's emotional experience rather than understood as an institutional space. When asked how he would describe *Blossom* to someone unfamiliar with it, he immediately answered, "My home." He explained this by saying that being at *Blossom* gives him a kind of warm and fuzzy feeling—a relaxed emotional state that he found difficult to articulate. He suggested that this feeling comes from the presence of peers and staff. Without them, he said, *Blossom* would not evoke the same emotions: if he entered an empty *Blossom*, it would "just become a building," implying how *Blossom*'s meaning is produced through relationships and the everyday social atmosphere rather than the physical space itself. He also mentioned that returning to *Blossom* after being away for a longer trip evokes an "Ah... I'm home" sensation—a small exhale of recognition and comfort (Gaku, interview by author, 2025), echoing the sentiments expressed by Miho. This suggests a shared emotional framing among the children, in which "coming back" to *Blossom* resembles the feeling of returning to a familiar and comforting home.

Mio's reflections further deepen this picture. Having spent more than half her life at *Blossom*, she described it as a place where she had "grown up and lived," drawing on examples of ordinary, practical experiences like doing laundry. She explained her sense of *ibasho* at *Blossom* in this way: "It is unquestionably an *ibasho*. But it's 'too *ibasho*' that I don't even think of it as such. You don't really think, 'Oh, this is my house' when you're at home, right? [...] Because it's just the place where I naturally am, I don't really think of it as an *ibasho*... But, well, if I go somewhere else and someone asks me about it, then yeah, I

guess it is my *ibasho*” (Mio, interview by author, 2025). Her remark underscores that being at *Blossom* feels so natural and integrated into her daily life; it is simply where she is.

This way of seeing *Blossom*, without confining it to the institutional categories of “*furīsupēsu*” or “*furīsukūru*,” also appears in the staff’s discourse. Rin explained that she does not rely on those institutional labels when she talks about *Blossom*. Instead, she emphasized that “there is everyday life here,” describing *Blossom* as “a place of living” (Rin, interview by author, 2025). A similar perspective echoes in an interaction I observed between Hiroto, who once called *Blossom* “family-run,” and several children who said they hoped to work at *Blossom* in the future. In responding to their questions about the difference between the NPO that operates *Blossom* and *Blossom* itself, he first described the NPO as a kind of company. Then, when he spoke about *Blossom*, he did not frame it as a *furīsupēsu* or *furīsukūru*; instead, he referred to it simply as an “*ibasho*.” His smooth choice of words suggested that, for him, *Blossom* is most naturally understood as such rather than as the formal definition. What stood out in this scene was the children’s reaction, or more precisely, their lack of reaction. They listened to his explanation without questioning or commenting on his description of *Blossom* as an *ibasho*. This unquestioning acceptance indicates that the idea of “*Blossom* equals an *ibasho*” aligned with their own views as well.

Furthermore, *Blossom* can be an *ibasho* not only for children who lack a sense of security at school, but also for those who do not feel safe or comfortable at their family’s home. Even after *Blossom* closed at 6 p.m., it was common to see several older children and youths remaining in *Sky Park* until the playpark closed at 9 p.m. Among them were children dealing with difficulties at home, as I came to know, and their tendency to stay in *Sky Park* late into the evening subtly hinted circumstances in which they preferred not to return home. Shū, the youth who faces ongoing issues within his household and continues to come to *Blossom*, expressed this dynamic clearly. He explicitly explained that because he still does

not like being at home, he keeps coming to *Blossom*, and that being here feels emotionally much easier. He added that while many people view *Blossom* as an alternative to school, for him, it is also an “*ibasho*” outside the home where he can be (Shū, interview by author, 2025). His comments underscore how *Blossom* can be an *ibasho* not only by offering an alternative to school, but by providing a stable and emotionally manageable environment for children and youths who lack such stability elsewhere.

The ways children and staff at *Blossom* frame the space as home-like and family-like closely correspond with the dynamics that Loutzenheiser (2002) identifies in an alternative school setting, where a familial sense of connection emerges not from institutional structures but from relational recognition and everyday care. In her ethnography of an alternative education space, students described the space as a “second home” or “family” precisely because teachers noticed them, knew their names, and interacted with them at “a much more personal level” (Loutzenheiser 2002, 454–58). She argues that such recognition creates emotional safety by accepting students “as they are” rather than according to evaluative expectations (Loutzenheiser 2002, 457). Thereby, these relational conditions enabled students to bring their whole lives, including their vulnerabilities, into the school community (Loutzenheiser 2002, 454–58). Viewed through this lens, children’s remarks on everyday warmth, nonjudgmental acceptance, and family-like relationships at *Blossom* can be understood as part of the same broader pattern: alternative spaces provide familial forms of stability and recognition that many children and youths do not reliably find in either school or home.

These home-like and relational framings help explain why *Blossom* does not fit neatly into the binary of “conventional school” versus “alternative school.” Precisely because it is not experienced as an institution, relationships with staff and the place extend beyond compulsory education, allowing youths and adults to “come back” at any age, thereby

creating a distinctive environment. Yet, this very openness can also create certain dilemmas for some youths. Shū—who speaks somewhat self-deprecatingly about himself by saying, “Even now that I’m twenty, I still end up coming back to *Blossom* [laughs]”—has been unable to take the step toward pursuing welfare-related work, a field he became interested in through his experiences at *Blossom*. He currently works part-time and continues to visit *Blossom* frequently. He explained that he thinks of *Blossom* as “a place for children” and that he has “no intention of staying here forever,” but he also described why he still comes: “I end up relying on it. When I come here, the staff smile and tell me that I’m always welcome here. [...] It’s completely my weakness. [...] Takumi asks me what I would like to do with my future and all that, but in the end, I just drift along and stay here like this” (Shū, interview by author, 2025).

Similarly, Mio—also in her early twenties and still regularly visiting *Blossom*—explained that one of her reasons for deciding to go abroad on a working holiday was “because I want to make friends outside of *Blossom*.” She elaborated: “Think about it. I’ve been in the same community for twelve years—twelve years. If I had gone to junior high school, I would have graduated, and the community would have changed, right? But for me, it hasn’t changed. New people come in, but the core generation stays the same, so I’ve just been in the same community the whole time [laughs]. Of course, I want to change it” (Mio, interview by author, 2025). These accounts suggest how *Blossom*’s openness and long-term continuity create a powerful sense of a place where one can always return, but also how that very stability can produce dilemmas for youths navigating transitions toward separation from the familiar.

As discussed in the previous chapter regarding the fluid and shifting nature of *ibasho* as a space, children’s sense of *ibasho* at *Blossom* is also subject to change; they do not “always” feel *Blossom* to be their *ibasho*, nor do they consistently wish to come. During my

fieldwork, I noticed a boy who typically visited *Blossom* almost every day suddenly stopped appearing for about a few weeks. When he eventually returned, and I casually asked why he had been absent, he responded with complete straightforwardness: “Oh, I just didn’t feel like coming.” Even Mio—who now describes *Blossom* as “unquestionably my *ibasho*”—recalled that during her self-described “dark period” in junior high and high school, she was overwhelmed and emotionally worn down through mutual dependence with peers in a similarly distressed state. Looking back, she noted that during that time she “couldn’t feel *ibasho* anywhere” (Mio, interview by author, 2025) and that this included *Blossom* as well. Even Minato, who did not pursue high school education and now speaks with confidence about having more experience than anyone his age, recalled a period of struggle toward the end of his second year of junior high school. When the end of compulsory education was approaching and he began thinking about what would come next. As others around him at *Blossom* chose to proceed to high school, he felt pressure to conform, explaining that “there was this feeling that I had to be the same as everyone else, like I had to go back onto the same track as them at least once” (Minato, interview by author, 2025).

Therefore, *Blossom* is by no means an *ibasho* for all children, nor is it automatically an *ibasho* for all children experiencing *futōkō*. Even for those children and youths who currently speak of *Blossom* as their *ibasho*, it is not a permanently utopian place. Rather, their relationship to *Blossom* as an *ibasho* can change over time. This fluidity was evident in how Takumi, the deputy director of *Blossom*, spoke about children who stopped coming. He emphasized that such trajectories are common and varied: some children visit *Blossom* only briefly before realizing it is not a good fit and move on elsewhere, while others return to school, either temporarily or more permanently. There are also children who drift in and out—coming for a period, disappearing, and later reappearing with the explanation that they had been attending school in the meantime (Takumi, interview by author, 2025). In this

sense, *Blossom* is not an endpoint but one place among several that children move through while searching for their *ibasho*. For some, it becomes a stepping stone back to school; others continue their search in different *furīsupēsu/furīsukūru*. This understanding was also shared by Aoto, who described feeling that *Blossom* was his *ibasho* from the very first visit, yet emphasized that it would not suit everyone. While he personally enjoys the atmosphere and autonomy, he acknowledged that some children may struggle with *Blossom*'s landscape and stressed that his own favorable experience should not be generalized to all (Aoto, interview by author, 2025).

Examining these observations and accounts through the concept of the otherwise allows *Blossom* to be understood beyond a simple opposition to conventional schooling. As Kehr defines it, the otherwise marks a disturbance in established social, political, or economic orders that sustain normative forms of life, rather than a total rejection of them (2020, 28). In other words, the otherwise does not denote a separate realm that exists outside dominant systems, but rather signals ways of living that unsettle hegemonic arrangements from within everyday life (Kehr 2020, 40). From this viewpoint, *Blossom* cannot be analytically reduced to a mere “alternative” that stands against the conventional school, since it is not legally acknowledged as a “school,” must coordinate with children’s enrolled schools to count the attendance as official, and children often move back and forth between their enrolled schools and *Blossom*. Instead, it represents a mode of being that emerges alongside existing institutions, opening space for different rhythms of education, learning, presence, and sociality without claiming to replace the dominant system altogether.

The concept of the otherwise further cautions against romanticizing *Blossom* as a simple utopian alternative. Kehr explicitly stresses that the otherwise is never a pure or ideal space outside power; it is fragile, partial, and continuously negotiated through everyday labor, relations, and compromises with existing structures (2020, 40). The ethnographic

moments described in this chapter make this tension visible. While *Blossom* offers warmth, recognition, and a sense of home-like continuity, it can simultaneously produce dilemmas, such as prolonged reliance, uncertainty about future transitions, and peer pressures around returning to the school-centered path or remaining. Rather than undermining the significance of *Blossom*, these tensions precisely exemplify the otherwise: it is not as a finished solution, but as an ongoing struggle between what exists and what might be lived differently.

Seen in this light, *Blossom* is not a singular blueprint to be idealized or replicated, nor do I wish to argue that it is the only answer for *futōkō*. Put differently, *Blossom* does not represent “the ideal” alternative school, nor does it present a coherent model meant to resolve the failures of conventional schooling. Instead, it reorients everyday life so that conventional schooling no longer serves as the primary axis around which time, relationships, and values are organized, thereby unsettling school-centered norms. As Kehr notes, anthropologies of the otherwise attend specifically to such minor and often overlooked spaces where dominant arrangements begin to crack, even if these spaces remain marginal and precarious (2020, 31–32). Following this, *Blossom* can be understood as a space where the dominance of school-based norms is softened—not through opposition, but through the normalization of learning and living as the otherwise. What *Blossom* offers, then, is ways of living that are not organized around the singular expectation of being a student.

8.4. Discussion

By centering children’s and youths’ narratives, this chapter has examined how they themselves interpret and make sense of their experiences of disconnection from conventional schooling and their lives within the *furīsupēsu*—perspectives that have been largely overlooked in previous research on *furīsupēsu* and *furīsukūru*. Through the children’s own accounts, becoming *futōkō* emerges not as a deliberate refusal of school, but as the point at which prolonged exposure to pressure, coercion, and emotional distance in school becomes

physically and emotionally unbearable. Children describe how everyday school practices—authoritarian discipline, dismissal of their feelings, and unquestioned expectations to conform—gradually eroded their trust in adults and their sense of self-worth. In line with Freire’s analysis (2005), such repeated evaluations were often internalized, leading children to interpret their inability to attend school as evidence of personal deficiency rather than as a response to dehumanizing conditions. In contrast, children’s narratives of *Blossom* illuminate a relational environment in which they are attentively listened to, accepted, and recognized beyond school-centered measures of value. These dialogical encounters foster what Freire (2005) describes as critical consciousness and praxis: gradual processes through which children become aware of broader issues, reflect on their past experiences, and act, eventually recognizing themselves as capable subjects to transform the oppression. Echoing hooks’ view (2003) that hope emerges when individuals experience themselves as valued and capable, children stressed that they can “be themselves” without fear of judgment, and it resulted in rebuilding confidence and reimagining the futures. Importantly, children and youths do not frame *Blossom* as an alternative school, but more like a home or an *ibasho*—a contingent, relational space where school-centered expectations loosen, making room for different ways of living and learning that emerge alongside the dominant order (Kehr 2020).

The children’s narratives of their experiences in conventional schooling depict their psychological and physical exhaustion at the limits of endurance, as well as the suffering produced by being *futōkō*—dimensions that cannot be adequately captured by MEXT’s vague definition (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, n.d.b) or its generalized enumeration of causes (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2026). Since the 1990s, the government discourse has shifted toward a more sympathetic framing of *futōkō* as a phenomenon that can happen to “any child” rather than as an individual failure; however, the children’s accounts demonstrate that stigma surrounding

futōkō remains deeply entrenched, even amid its rapid increase. As I have illustrated in this chapter, experiences of coercive schooling, repeated teachers' devaluations, and the broader gaze shaped by "*gakkō shrinkō*" ("faith in schooling") and credentialist expectations do not remain external to children but come to shape how they understand themselves. The pain experienced at conventional school and the marginalizing assessments of *futōkō* are gradually internalized, transforming external judgments into self-directed blame. Mio's reflection that she could not become "normal" exemplifies how children come to interpret their school absence as evidence of personal deficiency rather than as a response to dehumanizing relational and institutional conditions. This process corresponds closely to what Freire (2005) describes as the internalization of oppression or self-depreciation, through which those subjected to persistent devaluation and domination come to adopt deprecating views of themselves as natural or self-evident truths. In this way, stigma operates not only as a social label attached to *futōkō*, but also as an internalized structure of feeling that continues to shape children's self-perception long after they have disconnected from conventional school.

What disrupts this damaging cycle is the staff's practice of affirming children's presence, individuality, and dignity while listening attentively to their voices, together with *Blossom*'s stance that there is "nothing one has to do." This relational mode resonates with hooks' critique of objectivist and emotionally distant pedagogies, and her emphasis on engaged relations grounded by love in which individuals are approached as whole persons rather than as problems to be corrected or managed (1994; 2003). In Freire's terms (2005), such relational and dialogical conditions create the possibility of challenging oppression not through instruction, but through critical consciousness and praxis, as children gradually come to recognize social contradictions and their own capacities and through reflection and action. As children are listened to, accepted, and invited to participate on their own terms and contribute, they begin to rebuild confidence, discover strengths, and reinterpret past

experiences not as personal failures but as broader issues. This shift is encapsulated in the phrase “*nantoka naru*” (It’ll work out), which children direct toward their past selves—not as a denial of suffering, but as an acknowledgment that they endured and found ways forward. Importantly, this reorientation does not stop at self-recovery; it extends toward relational orientations to others, including the desire to become an *ibasho* for those who are struggling—a dynamic that Tanaka (2021) and Morita (2022) both describe as central to the generative potential of *ibasho* practices. Thereby, *Blossom* aligns with prior scholarship on *ibasho* as not only a space of comfort but a relational place where recognition and affirmation cultivate resilience, confidence, and the capacity to imagine futures.

The staff’s relational stance generates a sense of warmth at *Blossom* that, at times, leads children to experience it as akin to a home. This affective landscape becomes visible through linguistic signs such as “coming back,” “home,” or “I’m home” as well as through embodied gestures like joyfully greeting one another upon reunion, “like family”—including youths who continue to return to *Blossom* well beyond their school years. While this continuity attests to the depth of relational attachment *Blossom* fosters, it also complicates simple celebrations of *ibasho*: returning does not always coincide with clear movement outward, and staying connected may at times reflect uncertainty rather than stability. For this reason, *Blossom* is not actively framed as a “school” or a “*furīsupēsu*” by the participants, revealing the limits of understanding it through a binary opposition against school. As the children and youths suggested, *Blossom* is experienced primarily as a relational place of everyday life, its meanings emerge through ongoing relationships rather than institutional designation—relationships that can stretch beyond the temporal boundaries of schooling.

Viewing *Blossom* through the lens of the otherwise (Kehr 2020) places a necessary brake on utopian interpretations that assume all children, particularly all *futōkō*, will inevitably find a guaranteed or permanent *ibasho* at *Blossom*. Many children attempt to make

the space their *ibasho* but find it does not fit, leading them to continue searching elsewhere by visiting other *furīsupēsu* or returning to school. Moreover, even for those who do experience *Blossom* as an *ibasho*, such feelings are fluid and sometimes fragile. Mio's account illustrates this fluidity: while she now describes *Blossom* as “unquestionably my *ibasho*,” she also recalled periods when, entangled in negative affective dependencies with peers, she could not feel an *ibasho* anywhere—including at *Blossom* itself. What this demonstrates is that *Blossom* is not a static utopia or a perfect alternative school; rather, its *ibasho* is something lived and continually remade in time, marked by openness, precarity, and the everyday effort through which ways of living not governed by school-based expectations are sustained.

Overall, by foregrounding children's narratives and their experiences, perspectives, and voices, this chapter illuminated the complex realities of children who attend a *furīsupēsu*—realities that have often been overlooked in existing research on *furīsupēsu* and *furīsukūru*. James claims there are more efforts to include children's voices in political discourse after the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but “children themselves may, nonetheless, continue to find their voices silenced, suppressed, or ignored in their everyday lives” (2007, 261). Minato's reflection makes this dynamic particularly clear. Although he has accepted numerous external interviews about *Blossom*, he explained that he has rarely felt able to speak meaningfully in those settings due to their lack of engagement. Recalling a recent interview conducted by the Children and Families Agency, he described feeling that “they didn't really understand what I was talking about,” explaining that the conversation repeatedly returned to an “adults, adults” framing. For Minato, this signaled that children's perspectives were being sidelined in favor of adult viewpoints, leaving him with the sense that his experiences were not genuinely being engaged with. In contrast, he revealed that our 100-minute-long, open-ended interview for this research enabled him to reconstruct and

recognize his own past emotions, realizing “how I felt back then” (Minato, interview by author, 2025). James further emphasizes that research that centers children’s voices exposes “the hidden hurts and humiliations that many children experience and which adults often dismiss as unimportant” (2007, 264). In this sense, by attending to the voices of children who experience *futōkō* and attend a *furīsupēsu*—voices that have long been insufficiently heard—this chapter uncovered enduring school-centered stigma surrounding *futōkō* and invites a rethinking of how children’s experiences, knowledge, and interpretations are valued within both research and public discourse.

9. Conclusion

9.1. Findings

In this thesis, I explored how a *furīsupēsu* in Japan, *Furīsupēsu Blossom*, fosters a sense of *ibasho* for children who have disconnected from conventional schooling, and how these children experience and interpret everyday life within such a setting. Drawing on three-month ethnographic fieldwork—consisting of immersive participant observation and semi-structured interviews—I argue that *ibasho* at *Blossom* is not a fixed feature of its physical environment or a prepared service to use but a dynamic, relational, and continually negotiated process, co-created by children, youths, and adults through everyday practices, affective atmospheres, and modes of interaction that sharply contrast with the dominant educational system in Japan.

A central finding is that an *ibasho* at *Blossom* is continually co-constructed, not provided. Rather than being an inherent quality of the physical space, *ibasho* emerges through the convergence of spatial, relational, embodied, linguistic, and affective practices. Following Low’s framework of “spatializing culture” (2017), I illustrated how material arrangements (the playpark, open access to indoor/outdoor activities), relational and linguistic practices (casual speech, addressing a child by name, the all-day use of “good morning”), embodied routines (shared meals, improvised music sessions, spontaneous play),

and the affective climate (warmth, joy, mutual recognition) together create the atmosphere of comfort, safety, and acceptance. Yet these affordances only become *ibasho* through ongoing relational labor—work that must be renewed as participants, relationships, and dynamics shift over time.

This thesis also reveals that autonomy at *Blossom* is not effortless. Contrary to the common misconception that children in *furīsupēsu* are “just playing,” autonomy here is shown to be demanding, reflective, and relational. Without imposed schedules or predetermined academic goals, children face the ongoing task of deciding how to spend their days, when to join activities, when to study, and how to navigate shared spaces with others. What may appear as unstructured time from the outside becomes, in practice, a space requiring constant self-reflection and negotiation. This invisible but crucial work echoes Fujita’s observation (2002) that autonomy in *furīsukūru* is “surprisingly difficult.” Staff intentionally refrain from directing children’s time, believing that meaningful learning emerges when children encounter their own curiosity, follow their interests, and take responsibility for decisions. This orientation reflects Noddings’ emphasis on attending to expressed rather than inferred needs (2005) and resonates with Freire’s critique of “banking education” that treats learners as passive recipients rather than active participants in meaning-making (2005).

At the same time, the ethnography makes evident that autonomy at *Blossom* is not a stable or uncontested ideal but one that is continually negotiated and sometimes strained in practice. Although the absence of externally imposed structure opens space for children’s initiative, it also creates moments in which autonomy is misinterpreted as boundless freedom—particularly among younger children or those new to the space who have not yet internalized the relational frameworks that long-term attendees describe. These tensions appear in the friction surrounding shared responsibilities, dismissive or aggressive speech,

and reluctance to participate in collective decision-making during weekly meetings. Staff and older peers often work to rearticulate autonomy as a practice that must coexist with others' comfort and dignity, but this meaning does not automatically translate across different ages, experiences, or linguistic understandings of *jiyū* ("freedom"). As a result, autonomy often becomes a site of pedagogical labor rather than a given condition: staff intervene not to reassert authority but to uphold the ethical ground on which autonomy can be shared, while older children attempt to "pass on" the relational interpretation they themselves learned. These frictions do not signal a failure of the model but make visible its fragility—showing that autonomy, far from being a universal concept, must be continually co-constructed, protected, and renegotiated within the everyday life of *Blossom*.

As autonomy unfolds in this lived manner, relationships gain depth and significance. This thesis highlights the centrality of humanizing adult-child relationships at *Blossom*. Staff members work to minimize hierarchical distance, participating playfully, expressing emotions openly, and prioritizing sincerity and presence. Instead of enforcing rules, staff model care by being honest about their feelings, engaging in dialogue, and protecting dignity. Even in incidents such as fights, outbursts, and theft, that may lead to rule-based consequences in schools, *Blossom* staff respond not through punitive discipline but through dialogue that protects children's dignity. These practices embody Noddings' ethic of care (1988, 2005, 2010, 2013), particularly modeling, dialogue, and confirmation, and hooks' vision of engaged pedagogy rooted in joy and love (1994; 2013). Staff's visible enjoyment—wrestling in mud, playing music, laughing during games—functions pedagogically as well, showing children that adults can be present and trustworthy in ways they often had not encountered in school. Importantly, children quickly recognize this feature, contrasting the emotional distance of schoolteachers with the "warmth" and attentiveness of *Blossom*'s staff.

These relational dynamics do more than make the space feel safe; they nurture a shared community in which children grow into active contributors to an *ibasho*. Over time, children who once arrived feeling anxious, insecure, or overwhelmed and repeatedly acted out, gradually take on roles supporting others. They mediate disputes, comfort younger peers, organize games, remind others about hydration on a hot day, and take responsibilities during cleanup or events. This gradual shift—from being helped to helping—is what I have termed as a “cycle of peer-supported transformation.” Mixed-age interactions are central to this process. Younger children learn by observing older ones, while older children practice care, leadership, and perspective-taking (Paradise and Rogoff 2009; Gaskins and Paradise 2011; Maynard and Tovote 2011). These dynamics also cohere with anthropological insights into children’s capacity to generate social worlds and circulate cultural practices among peers (Hirschfeld 2002). Thereby, I argue that at *Blossom*, the community does not rely solely on adult intervention; children themselves help sustain the ethos that defines the space.

The significance of this transformation becomes especially clear when considering the hardships faced by children experiencing *futōkō*. Across the interviews, children described diverse paths into *futōkō*: bullying, authoritarian or even abusive teachers, pressure to conform, disrupted routines, or an enduring sense of misalignment with school. Many persisted until reaching a breaking point, after which their bodies resisted going to school even when they consciously attempted to continue. Once they enter the state of *futōkō*, they struggled with entrenched stigma—both externally, through public gaze and expectations shaped by “*gakkō shinkō*” (“faith in schooling”) (Yoshii 1999; Fujita 2002) and credentialism (Kariya 2010; Cave 2023; Smith 2025), and internally, through feelings of inadequacy or not being “normal.” Children often interpreted their struggles as personal failure rather than responses to harmful environments. These experiences reflect Freire’s notion of internalized

oppression (2005): repeated judgments, coercive interactions, and emotional neglect can sediment into self-doubt and diminished self-worth.

Within this context, *Blossom*'s significance becomes even more visible. The *furīsupēsu* interrupts cycles of self-depreciation by relational safety, echoing Morita's observation in a *furīsukūru* (2022). At *Blossom*, children encounter adults who attentively listen without judgment, validate feelings, and recognize strengths beyond academic achievement, and peers who share similar experiences. Many described the relief of feeling accepted for who they are, or realizing they were not alone in their struggles. Gradually, through everyday interactions—playing games, making friends, participating in music, talking to staff, or taking care of others—children begin to reinterpret their histories and rediscover strengths they had not previously recognized. This process mirrors what Freire (2005) describes as the emergence of critical awareness: the ability to see one's suffering not as personal inadequacy but as a response to broader social conditions. In subtle ways, the daily rhythms of *Blossom* invite a form of praxis, as children start experimenting with new ways of being, acting, and relating that challenge the narratives that once constrained them. They finally become able to imagine futures again: entering high school, pursuing interests, supporting and empowering other *futōkō* children, and creating someone's *ibasho*. Exemplified by “*nantoka naru*” (It'll work out), a recurring phrase by children and youths for their past self, I argue that these forward-looking perspectives, namely hopes, represent not naïve optimism but a renewed capacity to act in the world, cultivated through the everyday practice of care and recognition (hooks 2003).

Across these interwoven dynamics, I also illustrated that *ibasho* is inherently fragile and always in the making. Ongoing negotiations around the meaning of autonomy, broader disruptions such as the pandemic—which led to the loss of older peer role models—and the sudden rise in younger children experiencing *futōkō* in Japan, all reshape the social landscape

of *Blossom*. Together, these shifts profoundly alter everyday dynamics and demand renewed collective effort to sustain an *ibasho*. Staff describe their role as neither “service providers” nor creating an *ibasho* from scratch but as balancing, maintaining, and gently guiding the environment so that it does not fracture. Children likewise feel this responsibility, especially those who have grown up within the space for many years. Thereby, I emphasize that *ibasho* is less a predetermined product than an ongoing ethical and relational process—one dependent on everyday actions, mutual presence and respect, and the willingness of everyone involved to contribute to its upkeep.

Synthesizing these findings, I argue that these findings illuminate the power of everyday relational life to transform children’s experiences of marginalization, challenge deficit-oriented narratives of *futōkō*, and broaden what counts as learning and growth. At *Blossom*, education is not organized around standardized curricula or future-oriented academic achievement, but focuses on cultivating dignity, autonomy, and opening space for imagining alternative ways of living that are not circumscribed by the singular expectation of being a student.

9.2. Contributions

This thesis offers several interrelated contributions to the anthropology of education, the anthropology of childhood, and research on *futōkō*, *ibasho*, and alternative educational institutions in Japan. Grounded in ethnography, it redirects focus from institutional design and adult intentions to the everyday practices through which an *ibasho* and learning are co-created by children, youths, and staff. By centering children’s lived experiences and interpretations, this thesis challenges school-centered assumptions about education and persistent social stigmas against *futōkō*, thereby complicating dominant understandings of *furīsupēsu*.

A central contribution of this thesis lies in reframing *ibasho* through an ethnographic perspective, as a dynamic, co-constructed process rather than treating it as a static “place to be” or a property that a space either possesses or lacks. Drawing on Low’s multi-lens framework of “spatializing culture” (2017), I illustrated how *ibasho* emerges through the ongoing alignment of spatial arrangements and affordances, relational practices of recognition and care, embodied forms of presence and movement, discursive practices, and affective atmospheres of ease, warmth, and joy. Moreover, I showed how seemingly mundane practices—addressing one’s name, greeting with an all-day “good morning,” keeping the office door open, older children caring for younger peers, staff’s joy, and simply listening—actively produce the significance of place and foster a sense of *ibasho*. This contributes conceptually to *ibasho* studies by detailing both macro and micro practices through which an *ibasho* is maintained and felt, and more broadly to the anthropology of place-making by demonstrating how places/spaces become meaningful through ongoing relational efforts rather than through formal institutional design.

Building on this, this thesis advances research on *furīsupēsu* and *furīsukūru* by paying attention to children’s competence and peer cultures within the space. English-language scholarship on those educational institutions has overall remained very limited, and Japanese scholars have often privileged organizational or adult perspectives. By contrast, this thesis foregrounds children’s voices, interpretations, and practices, showing that children are not simply passive recipients of *ibasho* but active co-producers of *ibasho*. Through mixed-age interaction, observational learning, and everyday cooperation, children gradually circulate care among themselves, moving from being helped to helping others. Autonomy is also not taught only through instruction but also learned through participation—by watching older peers, negotiating conflicts, and taking responsibility in shared activities. With what I call a “cycle of peer-supported transformation,” I illustrate that peer relations are not secondary to

adult practices but constitute a central element of *ibasho*. Thereby, this thesis contributes to the anthropology of childhood by reinforcing the view of children as competent social actors who create and uphold their own peer cultures, in contrast to “adults-in-the-making” (Hirschfeld 2002).

Closely linked to these insights, this thesis demonstrates the analytical necessity of taking children’s perspectives, knowledge, and voices seriously—particularly in spaces explicitly designed for them. By attending closely to children’s narratives and everyday practices, this research uncovered experiential dimensions of *ibasho* that would remain invisible if analysis relied solely on adult intentions or institutional ideals. Children’s accounts of conventional schooling as intolerable, of stigma as internalized, and of *Blossom* as a place where they can finally “be themselves” underscore that understanding child-centered spaces requires acknowledging that adult assumptions alone cannot capture children’s lived experiences. This contribution extends beyond the specific case of *Blossom*, offering a broader methodological and epistemological reminder: research on places for children must treat children’s lived knowledge as indispensable, rather than supplementary to adult perspectives.

This thesis further challenges disapproving, school-centered views of alternative education that reduce learning at spaces like *furīsupēsu* as nothing more than “just playing.” Against the persistent assumption that meaningful education requires formal instruction, curricula, and evaluation, I presented that education is actively taking place at *Blossom*—albeit in forms that do not resemble “banking education” (Freire 2005) in conventional schools. Children learn through living: by making choices, discovering their interests and strengths, caring for others, reflecting on their decisions and actions, and gradually rebuilding confidence in their own capacities. Academic learning also often returns later, once children have regained a sense of safety and intrinsic motivation, and when it does, it is taken up on

their own terms. By documenting these processes, this thesis reframes play, rest, and everyday interaction not as the absence of education but as vital forms of learning, thereby contributing to debates in the anthropology of education and critical pedagogies.

Importantly, this thesis is also grounded in my positionality as a researcher who is a former *futōkō*. My own experience of disconnection from school and the transformative impact of attending a *furisukūru* sensitized me to subtleties that might otherwise remain overlooked—how children articulate hesitations, how peer dynamics shape the landscape, and how recognition is felt in small gestures. While remaining analytically cautious not to conflate my past with theirs, this vantage point allowed me to attune closely to the affective textures of children’s narratives and to the ethical stakes of representing them. In bringing this experiential lens into dialogue with ethnographic data, this thesis offers a perspective that is rare in both Japanese and English-language scholarship.

Finally, this thesis underscores the persistence of stigma surrounding *futōkō*, even as the government discourse in Japan has shifted toward more empathetic interpretations and despite the unstoppable rise in the number of children unable to attend school. Although policy language has softened since the 1990s and recent legislation has emphasized diverse learning outside of classrooms, children’s narratives demonstrate that deeply rooted cultural expectations—particularly “*gakkō shrinkō*” (“faith in schooling”) (Yoshii 1999; Fujita 2002) and credentialism (Kariya 2010; Cave 2023; Smith 2025)—continue to frame *futōkō* as deviant, irresponsible, or morally deficient. These stigmas operate not only externally, through public surveillance, peers’ questions, and adults’ gaze, but internally, as children come to interpret their distress as personal inadequacy rather than a response to coercive or dehumanizing school environments. Importantly, while *futōkō* has distinctive historical and cultural particularities in Japan, this phenomenon is not unique to Japan: recent international studies show that school non-attendance has been increasing across multiple countries

(Fredriksson et al. 2023). Recognizing how children who experience *futōkō* encounter and internalize stigma in Japan highlights the significance of listening carefully to the experiences of children who do not or cannot attend school elsewhere in the world. By foregrounding how children describe stigma, resist it, and re-imagine themselves in supportive environments like *Blossom*, this thesis offers a child-centered contribution to debates on *futōkō* and points to the broader need to engage seriously with the struggles of school-non-attending children globally in order to better understand their views and needs.

9.3. Further Outlook

Due to *ibasho*'s fluidity and constant change, future research should continue to pay attention to how its meaning shifts across time. Thus, extending the temporal scope of research is the most crucial next step for deepening the understanding of the fragile, evolving, and relational nature of *ibasho*. While this thesis captures the dynamics of *Blossom* during a specific period, the ethnographic material repeatedly points to trajectories that unfold over much longer timescales. A longer-term ethnography following children and youths across several years would offer even more details on how *ibasho* is sustained, weakened, or even lost and reconfigured through successive life transitions, such as the moments of beginning work, entering high school, or forming new social networks outside the *furīsupēsu*. It would also provide a clearer view of what happens when children and youths leave *Blossom*—whether temporarily or permanently—and how new arrivals reshape the social atmosphere and existing relationships, thereby closely examining how a cycle of peer-supported transformation is transmitted to next generations. Moreover, although I gained trust and built deep relationships with many children, youths, and staff, the limited duration of this research meant that I still relied heavily on interviews. A longer engagement would make it possible to gather more data through natural, everyday interactions rather than semi-structured conversations. This includes observing peer-to-peer talks and frictions, which often reveal

how children themselves create and negotiate each other's sense of *ibasho*. Collecting such naturally occurring interactions would offer a more nuanced understanding of how an *ibasho* is formed in the flow of daily life.

At the same time, the sustainability of *ibasho* at *Blossom* depends also on the often-invisible labor of staff who maintain its relational atmosphere. Throughout this thesis, I illustrated that staff are expected not merely to manage activities but to embody particular forms of presence: to be attentive, emotionally available, and visibly joyful. These expectations do not operate only at the level of individual disposition; they actively shape the overall atmosphere of the space and influence how children recognize safety, openness, and acceptance. A longer-term ethnography could therefore examine how the presence of specific staff members—those whom children rely on for comfort, mediation, or humor—shapes the relational dynamics that constitute *ibasho*, and what happens when these individuals leave or take breaks. Staff departures could transform patterns of interaction: certain children may disconnect, seek new anchors, or renegotiate their sense of *ibasho* with peers. Observing these transitions would shed light on how *ibasho* is co-produced through both stability and disruption, and how the emotional labor of staff becomes intertwined with children's capacity to inhabit the space comfortably. At the same time, these expectations raise questions about burnout, emotional exhaustion, and the long-term capacity of such work, especially when the demand to remain patient and attentive collides with personal limits or parental pressures.

Another dimension that warrants attention is comparison across broader legal and policy regimes. Japan's system of virtually automatic promotion during compulsory education creates a particular temporal landscape in which children can disconnect from conventional schooling without immediately jeopardizing grade progression or certification. This relative flexibility enables spaces like *Blossom* to prioritize present-tense emotional safety, slow forms of re-engagement, and pursue activities that genuinely spark their interests

without the academic pressure. In contrast, in contexts where alternative education is closely constrained by national curricula, standardized testing, or mandatory assessment schedules, the room to prioritize children's immediate well-being may be considerably narrower. As illustrated by the example of "free" or "democratic" schools in Poland (Starnawski and Gawlicz 2021), the requirement to synchronize with state-mandated educational rhythms can pressure both staff and students to align their daily practices with exam cycles and performance benchmarks.

Thus, closer comparative work across such regimes would make visible how macro-temporalities—exam calendars and age-graded benchmarks—quietly but powerfully shape the micro-politics of everyday life in alternative educational spaces. These structural temporalities shape not only how institutions organize expectations, but also how freely children feel they can disconnect, return, take their time, or explore new directions. By situating *ibasho* within these broader temporal and political structures, future research could more clearly demonstrate how children's experiences of *ibasho* are mediated by more than interpersonal relationships alone: they are also shaped by the educational systems that govern their time, choices, and possibilities, even outside conventional schooling. This would highlight how *ibasho* is not only relationally, but also politically and temporally produced.

In tracing how *ibasho* is made and continuously shaped within the daily routines and interactions at *Blossom*, this thesis reframes education as a relational and dialogical practice rather than a curricular sequence or a bombardment of knowledge detached from life. I have shown that autonomy can be arduous, that care is pedagogical, and that children's peer cultures carry the community's ethos forward. These insights matter beyond one site: they ask anthropologists to treat places not as containers but as emergent of ongoing labor, and they invite educators to attentively listen to children's voices, recognizing rest and dignity as preconditions for learning. If school-centered assumptions narrow the ways childhood is

imagined, *Blossom*'s everyday practices broaden the horizon, enabling children who cannot remain in school to still find an *ibasho* and envision and explore alternative forms of living and learning. Attending to such realms does not dismiss schooling; it reminds us that education is larger than the classroom whose ceiling so often limits what children are allowed to imagine.

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